

William N. Brown

The Evolution of China's Anti-Poverty Strategies

Cases of 20 Chinese Changing Lives

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Preface

Throughout the 1980s, I faithfully read *China Reconstructs*' (now *China Today*) to keep abreast of China's war on poverty. I was skeptical but also hopeful because even if China realized only a fraction of its goals, hundreds of millions would escape poverty, and perhaps inspire other nations to follow suit.

After a decade of reading about China's changes, we determined to see them firsthand and in 1988 I moved with my family to Xiamen University to study Chinese. The trip from Los Angeles entailed 50 h on 3 planes and an 18 h boat trip up the coast from Hong Kong. Upon arrival, we were surprised to learn that even in Xiamen, a Special Economic Zone facing Taiwan, roads were still potholed, transportation was poor, electricity and water outages were almost daily, and store shelves were empty. Yet the people were optimistic because life had never been better and they were confident in the future.

After two months of Chinese study, I was asked to teach MBA for one year. Dean Liu Peng said, "We will build one of China's top ten business programs!"

I reluctantly put my Chinese studies on hold for one year and then accepted a second year of teaching, and a third. I've now been teaching, temporarily of course, for 34 years, but still hope to someday resume Chinese studies.

Even though I was confident in China's future, I expected change would take 50 or 60 years—that we were "planting trees for future generations to enjoy the shade." After all, at that time even a landline phone cost me 450 USD and took 3 years to install. No one could have imagined 30 years ago that by 2021, sleepy Xiamen's GDP would exceed 700 billion Yuan.

But the miracle of the China Dream is seen best not in dry statistics but in the changed lives of people across the entire nation.

In January 1989, I made my first trip to see how rural farmers and fishermen lived and discovered that 50 miles from Xiamen were like traveling back 50 years in time. I rode buses, motorcycle taxis, farm tractors, and bicycles, and hiked for hours through rice paddies and up and down mountain trails. Not surprisingly, rural areas were poor, yet rural Chinese were as cheerful and optimistic as the urbanites. They were also openhearted and hospitable.

I stayed two days with a poor farmer I met and marveled at how well they ate. Only months later did I learn they had saved me, a stranger, the treats they'd been saving for Chinese New Year only two weeks away. It's no wonder that I quickly fell for Fujian and its people, but when I wrote articles about urban and rural changes, foreigners argued, "Only the coast is improving, not the hinterlands!"

"How would you know?" I asked. "You've never been there."

"True," they admitted, "but neither have you!"

They had a point. So in 1993, I bought and customized a 15-passenger van and that summer we drove about 20,000 km around Southeast China. It was a grueling drive, but emboldened by our survival, we set our sights on Tibet. In the summer of 1994, we spent 3 months driving 40,000 km from Xiamen to Mongolia in the North, west across the Gobi Desert to Qinghai and across the 5231 m Tangula Pass into Tibet, returning to Xiamen through South China.

At that time, even large stretches of National Highway were dirt or gravel. In Sichuan, we were stuck for 3 days when a downpour washed the national highway down the cliff. In such remote areas, farmers worked dawn to dusk to wrest meager crops from their land, yet their vegetables or fruit often rotted before they could lug them over steep mountain trails to markets. And yet even those remote peoples were also optimistic because China was already investing heavily in rural infrastructure, medical care, and education.

China learned early on that economic development alone is not enough to end poverty because wealth does not simply "trickle" down to the poor. And though aid is needed at first, longterm it can lead to dependency and poverty of spirit. So China aimed to foster self-reliance by providing even the remotest people the infrastructure and support to lift themselves from poverty. "Roads, then riches."

But the secret to China's success may well be that the war has been both top-down and bottom-up. Deng Xiao Ping said, "Those who prosper first should help those who lag behind," and hundreds of thousands of Chinese have volunteered to live in the poorest areas to ensure people understood and seize new opportunities.

After driving some 200,000 km around China, I no longer doubted China's 7-decade commitment to ending poverty. But in 2013, even I was shocked when Xi Jinping told Miao minority villagers in Hunan that he believed China could end absolute poverty in 2020.

I knew, of course, that if anyone understood the challenges, it was Xi Jinping. In the summer of 1988, young Xi Jinping was transferred from Xiamen to Fujian's Ningde, one of China's 18 poorest counties. He was so dismayed by Ningde's poverty that he sent a video to Beijing of such stories as couples so poor that husband and wife shared one pair of pants.

Xi visited every Ningde village and sometimes worked the fields with farmers as they discussed problems and solutions. He took poverty work seriously and did not hesitate to criticize "tinkerers." In 1990, he wrote about officials who displayed awards about work that did not improve people's lives:

Hanging up so many award banners without one for economic development was not very impressive. To put it more politely, it reflected working hard without performing a true service. Working without setting priorities and sticking to the fundamentals is simply tinkering.

It was also in Ningde that Xi Jinping learned how minorities' poverty was compounded by cultural and geographic isolation and language barriers, and even his wife, a famous singer, helped him protect and promote the She minority's heritage and culture.

Yet in spite of Xi's rich experience, I was skeptical of his 2020 goal, so in 2019 I drove around China again to see how much had really changed in 25 years. Thanks to the world's best highway network, in 2019 I finished in 32 days of the trip that took 3 months in 1994—and it was only 20,000 km instead of 40,000. And I saw firsthand that even the remotest Tibetan valleys had benefited from “No one left behind.”

By 2019, the remotest villages' mud houses, which had been death traps during downpours, had been replaced by new homes with concrete roads right to their doorsteps. Farmers now had easy access to markets but thanks to the world's most extensive Internet (reaching even Mt. Everest), many farmers used e-commerce to bypass middlemen and sell quality products direct to customers.

A Ningxia farmer said to me, “We were frogs at the bottom of a well, but now we are free.”

As a business professor, I'm duly impressed by China's economic statistics, but I am most moved not by numbers but by the changed lives—people like Madame Yangying, the maid-cum multi-millionaire philanthropist.

A 19-year-old farm girl with 4-years of education, Yangying dreamed of earning 20 Yuan a month as a Xiamen University professor's maid and sending 10 Yuan a month to her family. She did land the maid's job, but today she's an entrepreneur with 4 international schools, including Xiamen International School, a biotechnology company, real estate holdings—and she has donated hundreds of millions of Yuan to promote education and fight poverty across China.

For 300 years, Dawa Wangdui's family served Tibet's Panchen Lama, who was second only to the Dalai Lama, yet they were as impoverished as other Tibetan serfs. Young Dawa taught himself Chinese, labored for 1 yuan a day, went into business, and today earns millions from his international firms that help preserve and promote traditional Tibetan culture, crafts, and products. After dinner in his home, he played a Tibetan instrument and danced, and then gave me a hearty Tibetan bear hug. “In Old Tibet,” he said, “we envied the nobility, but today average people live better than those nobles.”

I was proud of having driven 40,000 km around China in 1994 until I met in Mongolia the photographer Mr. Zhang Fang. Zhang *walked* 40,000 km across China's deserts to document and raise awareness of the threat of desertification.

Gerile, a Mongolian mother, cried as she shared her family's tragic experiences in earlier years. But thanks to Mongolia's improved infrastructure and environment, she earned enough selling her homemade Mongolian dairy snacks to send her daughter to Xiamen University and graduate school.

Mr. Zhang Jianlong was a migrant worker in large cities but returned to his home in Ningxia, which even a UNESCO official had deemed hopeless, to take advantage of government programs for rural entrepreneurs. This young “Cattle King” now has hundreds of cattle and has helped lead his entire village out of poverty.

Xiamen University alumni Liu Yunguang is CEO of a company whose computer games led the markets of China, South Korea, and Japan. “Overnight, I had engineers switch to educational software,” he said, “because games had such bad influence on children.”

“How did your company survive?” I asked.

He laughed. “We are leaders again, but now we don’t hurt children, we help them.”

Yunnan farmer Xu Lidao, a proud self-made man, learned the truth of Xi Jinping’s warning, “People are fragile. One costly illness can devastate a family and impoverish them for generations.”

At age 28, Lidao built the best house in his village, but then a deadly illness left him bedridden and at death’s door for months. “I had no hope, but our leaders got me the medical care I needed. I owe everything to them.” Today, Lidao is again healthy and confident, but also well aware that “no man is an island.”

Shortly after Jing Xuhua’s husband died in an auto accident, the widowed mother lost her job. After reluctantly leaving her beloved 5-year-old daughter with her family to labor in Japan, she returned to China, moved to Qingdao, and taught herself real estate. “When customers asked me questions,” she said, “I’d have to look up definitions in a dictionary.” Thanks to her success secret, “family love,” her company now has over 200 people. “We show love to both workers and clients,” she said. “People first, then profit.” Her new dream is to start a school where children learn both book knowledge and social skills. “Children need to be human,” she said, “before they can do anything else.”

Wang Zenghao is one of thousands of young Chinese volunteers fighting poverty in West China. “When I was 20,” Zenghao said, “most classmates thought only of marriage, houses, and cars, but I wanted to do something meaningful such as help Tibet.” He prepared by volunteering for 2 summers in poor regions of Guizhou. “I deliberately put myself in difficult situations to develop my ability to endure hardships.”

A Mongolian mother, a former Tibetan serf, a professor’s maid with 4-years education who started 4 international schools, a youthful volunteer embracing hardships in Tibet—these are the Dreamers that helped make the China Dream a reality. Yet even in this prosperous and technologically advanced twenty-first century, poverty and hunger are still widespread in many other nations.

I hope the world can take heart from China’s example, because as a Chinese leader told me, “As long as some are poor, we are all poor.”

Xiamen, China

William N. Brown

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Chapter 1

Mogan Mountain's Tang Hairong



Chinese' Profound Faith in Education

"The Chinese have a profound faith in education. High and low and rich and poor are absolutely of one mind on this point, and if a boy is not sent to school, it is either because the parents are too poor, or because they have not sufficient authority over him to compel him to study. One need not be surprised at this unanimity of opinion, for education is the royal road to the honors and emoluments that the state has to bestow, and it is by means of it that the wildest ambition that ever ran riot through a young man's brain can ultimately be satisfied. In the West there are many ways by which a man may rise to eminence...In China they are all narrowed down to one, and it is the one that leads from the schoolhouse."

—John MacGowan, *Xiamen, 1913* (MacGowan, John, "How England Saved China," T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1913.)

As our van slithered up the road snaking through Mogan Mountain's bamboo forests in 1994, I could see why the enchanting scenery and cool climate of this "Little Switzerland" lured nineteenth century Chinese and foreigners seeking respite from the sweltering summers of Hangzhou and Shanghai. Chinese elites, as well as Western missionaries, businessmen and diplomats, built houses, villas, churches and public buildings, and over 100 villas remain to this day, including one in which Chiang Kai-shek spent part of his honeymoon.

Yet in spite of Mogan's beauty, its prized bamboo forests and treasured high mountain tea, most locals remained mired in poverty back then, so I was delighted to learn during my 2019 exploration of China that even Mogan Mountain folks were finally enjoying the Chinese Dream thanks to visionary entrepreneurs like Tang Hairong, alumnus of Xiamen University (XMU).

Mr. Tang grew up on a poor farm but his childhood was enriched by a passion for books. His love of learning reminded me of ancient tales of youths who, too poor for candles, read books by moonlight reflected from snow or by the glow from lanterns of fireflies. The farm boy's love of learning paid off because as soon as college entrance exams resumed after the Cultural Revolution, he tested into the Shanghai Institute of Building Materials (now merged with Shanghai Tongji University). He graduated in 1984 and worked several years in provincial government agencies before seizing



Fig. 1.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing entrepreneur Tang Hailong in Hangzhou, Zhejiang on July 4, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

the opportunities of reform and opening up by investing in business and establishing the Zhejiang Jinyan Technology Co. Ltd., for which he is chairman of the board.

Mr. Tang's passion for learning has yet to subside. He believes that knowledge is key to changing fate and achieving one's dream, so he took EMBA programs at XMU and Fudan University. Over the years he has not only excelled in business but also obtained a technology patent that he industrialized and which now accounts for most of the company's profits.

Although Mr. Tang epitomizes New China's self-made entrepreneurs, he is quick to admit that he owes much of his success to China's 40 years of reform and opening up.

Mr. Tang grinned as he said, "Those of us in our 60s experienced firsthand China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy. This is what let China leapfrog development. And my generation was lucky. Those just a few years older than us never had the chance to enter university, but we did, and we got good jobs after graduation. You yourself witnessed China's very rapid development in the 80s, Professor Pan (Fig. 1.1)."

"Where do you live now?" I asked.

"I have a factory in Deqing County, 50 or 60 km from Hangzhou. It has very beautiful scenery, and many Europeans are familiar with Mogan Mountain. On weekends, many city people go there, and you see more foreigners than locals — especially Europeans. There are so many bed & breakfasts (B&Bs) there now. It was not at all

like this when I was young, but now the entire country likes to stay there. There are many Europeans, South Africans, etc. and many have opened what we call *yangjiale* — our term for foreign B&Bs. Europeans come, buy a small plot of land, and open a small hotel with a dozen rooms. When locals open this kind of small hotel, we call it a *nongjiale* — Rural B&Bs. We have many of these, and they are very nice thanks to our superior location so close to Hangzhou and Shanghai.”

“But what about your own story?” I asked. “Your own Chinese Dream?”

“My story? It would have two parts,” he said. “One is a dream — the Chinese Dream. And the other is innovation. I was a poor farm boy and became very independent at age 11 because my parents were sick, which forced me to do everything from cooking to washing clothes.”

“Do you have a sister?” I asked.

“I have two elder brothers, one seven years older than me and one nine years older. But my parents have always been sick, and we were so poor that my brothers left home early to seek work, leaving me alone to care for my parents. The state subsidized my studies, but I had to work hard in the summer and winter vacations to earn my tuition and pocket money, but I worked hard to make it through junior high school to high school because we all shared a dream.”

“What dream was that?” I asked.

“Being able to read books was a dream! Most people were illiterate in the old days. Then I went to high school, and I was laboring the very day I got the university acceptance letter. I was so shocked when the postman handed me the letter that I leaped up — and fell heavily! After university, I returned to Hangzhou because of my good grades, and then I studied in Shanghai's Tongji University, which was then called Shanghai College. XMU has always been independent, with few schools integrated into it. But Tongji University was later merged with many schools. After college, I was assigned to work in a government agency where the conditions were not good at first. As our planned economy underwent a social and economic transformation to a market economy, everything was allocated and ration coupons were required to buy anything.”

“I remember that,” I said. “It was confusing to me to have to use flour, vegetable and meat ration coupons even at the university cafeteria.”

“But people's thinking changed after we entered the market economy,” Mr. Tang said. “As the conditions improved, those of us with even some education, knowledge and enterprising spirit saw that we could strike gold everywhere!”

“Yes, others have likened it to the California Gold Rush,” I said.

Mr. Tang nodded in agreement. “When you first arrived in China, the country was still very poor and not developed at all. But anyone with a little knowledge, willingness to work, and readiness to take a risk was certain to succeed — capable and innovative people like me!”

“While working in the early 1990s in the building materials department, I was responsible for many industrial projects, and I developed a patent myself. At that time there were still very few college students. We had more than 200,000 candidates but only just over 10,000 college students. Only a few people from an entire township or county would take the college entrance exams — compared with thousands

nowadays. The opportunity to study was rare but priceless if we could apply the knowledge after graduation. Even with a very backward situation, we knew that if we had a little knowledge and studied harder, things would improve.”

It was perfect timing for Mr. Tang. “It takes a big investment nowadays to create innovative technology,” he said. “But at that time everything was so outdated, and society needed such change that all we had to do was go abroad, visit our professional counterparts, and get ideas for adapting new technologies. But today it is different.”

“Yesterday, and last month as well, I talked about Ren Zhengfei’s example because Americans are trying to suppress others. But it doesn’t matter. In our new era of sharing, technology is borderless. For example, some companies may create a new tech but they may license it to other companies to produce it, and they may also produce the other company’s patented tech as well. Both companies benefit and even the patent fees can be offset. You give me your products, and I give you mine. But in today’s world, many people ignore the spirit of cooperation.”

“China is developing fast but it is no threat to the world. China’s development has made many achievements — our convenient travel by high-speed rail, for example. Many people think our bullet trains are Siemens but they are actually based on Japanese technology that Chinese evolved to far surpass that of other countries. This is not stealing technology. At first, we simply cooperated, but other countries’ technology was stuck in the 1980s, so we Chinese innovated and developed even better technology.”

“I’ve seen this myself,” I said. “Chinese used to send engineering students abroad, but today the world is sending its engineering students to China.”

“Yes, many Westerners mistakenly think Chinese are not innovative, but that’s not true,” said Mr. Tang.

I thought of Joe Biden, who in 2014 said that the US was innovative but China had not developed “one innovative project, one innovative change, one innovative product,¹” and even in 2019 he said that China was no competition for the US.

“China has developed very fast,” Mr. Tang said. “My classmates and friends who settled in the US returned home after two or three years and were astonished. The speed of China’s development was unimaginable for them, and some of them now regret emigrating. They were all top talents with deep academic foundations, and they settled abroad because they thought China was so backward and foreign countries were so good. But later, after seeing how so many people created great wealth during China’s rapid development, they regret squandering such a great opportunity.”

“You certainly seized the opportunities,” I said. “Even with your childhood poverty, and having to care alone for two sick parents, you worked hard anyway to change your destiny and enter college. What motivated you?”

Mr. Tang smiled. “We have an old saying, Carp Leaps the Dragon Gate (鲤鱼跃龙门).”

¹ Roberts, Dexter, “Biden Makes a Habit of Dissing Chinese Innovation,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, May 28, 2014. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-05-29/biden-makes-a-habit-of-dissing-chinese-innovation>.

“Yes, in the old days, those who passed the difficult imperial exam were said to be like the carp that leaped the dragon gate on a legendary mountaintop above a waterfall. I suppose your generation did that.”

“Life was difficult in my youth,” Mr. Tang said. “But if you have hope, you redouble your efforts. Today’s children are very happy, and many don’t care to hear stories about the old days that are so different from now. When college entrance exams resumed at the end of the Cultural Revolution, college became our only way out. And it is very equitable to this day, even though it is exam-oriented, because it is the only hope for children from poor families. In high school, I lived on campus and lights were turned off at night, so we read with flashlights. But though we were poor, we knew we could change our thinking. There is an old Chinese saying that the poor are always thinking about change.”

“You were obviously very motivated,” I said. “But so were many others, yet they failed the entrance exam. What set you apart from others?”

Mr. Tang didn’t get my point because he replied, “Unlike today, with its abundant educational resources, there were few resources back then. Many people were poor, but if you worked hard and paid the price, you would be rewarded.”

I pressed on, determined to find out what really made him tick. I said, “My point is that your conditions were even worse than other people’s. You were not only poor but your parents were both sick — how did you stick with it?”

“After high school, we had to decide on either furthering study in a college or in a technical secondary school,” Mr. Tang said. “Technical school was easier to get into, and for those of us able to test into college, going to a technical school would have been easier. But many of my teachers thought that if I worked hard, I could take the college entrance exam, and only the top students entered university. My Deqing No. 2 Middle School had only 16 students reach the cut-off score.”

Now I was getting somewhere. So many others I’d met, such as Professor Hu Min, CEO of New Channel, had told me that the turning point in their life was a teacher’s influence or intervention. “Even though your family was poor, your parents sick, and college entrance exams were hard, you pressed ahead because many of your teachers believed in you. This I can understand. But what makes you continue to excel to this very day?”

Mr. Tang was silent. It occurred to me that he had probably never thought about why he stood out from the herd. “Well, it must have been because of my own efforts. Suffering mountain children’s only hope to change their fate was the college entrance examination. As I’ve told my daughter, knowledge can change destiny. Knowledge widens your horizon. It’s the same with technology. If you have a keen mind and a level of knowledge, you will certainly master something new. But practice is very important — especially now with China’s rapid development. In the future, China will have even stronger capabilities in technology and innovation. As I go forward, I’ll discover my shortcomings and improve myself. Innovation in China is everywhere, and development involves all aspects. As long as you keep learning and growing, you will discover new shortcomings — and you must keep correcting them. If you see your own shortcomings, you will correct them. Many innovations were not conjured out of thin air. When China was poor and had nothing, we had to create from nothing.

But today it takes practice to see deficiencies up front, and as knowledge grows, we improve upon our creations.”

“This is the case in China, and perhaps Japan as well. The US may have more people doing scientific research and innovation than us, and its innovation foundation is very strong, but China is innovating through practice in many areas, and I think this is very good. If the world remains peaceful over the next two or three decades, in the next 20 or 30 years, China’s development prospects are boundless.”

“What do you think have been the greatest changes in your company and China over the past 25 years?” I asked.

“I started my business from scratch in 1994, exactly 25 years ago,” Mr. Tang said. “I started with RMB300,000 but I could not sell my patented technology. I thought it was very good but the companies I visited paid no attention to me. I had to wait for a research and development organization to appear before my innovations could be transformed into industrial products. It was very difficult to promote and industrialize my patented technology. I tried for half a year but no one accepted it. I was loath to give up what I’d worked so hard for, so I resigned from the agency, which was a very good job with good conditions and an apartment given to me, and started my own business. Then I hit on the idea of telling chemical companies that they could use my patent for free but they had to purchase their materials from me. Sales of these small materials generated tens of millions in annual sales, and with excellent technology, profits doubled. I promoted my technology in this way until I eventually had 100 percent of the entire national market for cities.”

“It was very good technology but by 2008 my industry had peaked and it was no longer the latest technology. Sooner or later, new technology would replace mine, so since 2008, my main focus has not been on my production and products but diversifying in finance and banks. But now my 15-year patent has expired, so since last year, I have been thinking about withdrawing entirely from the market and how to smoothly turn the factory over as a base for my children who are doing cross-border e-commerce work—and then I will retire!”

As Mr. Tang’s factory is being rebuilt, he is expanding into foreign trade—and he feels he is luckier than the students who later went abroad. “Our generation was lucky to experience China’s great reform and opening up. Students who went abroad did not get to witness the huge changes. My experience is much richer than theirs, and my life has been more colorful. Premier Li Keqiang called for ‘mass entrepreneurship and innovation,’ but in fact China has been innovating ever since reform and opening up began. We work hard but we are low key — this is the style of Zhejiang businesspeople. And Western countries now feel threatened by China’s rapid development.”

“But China’s development is not a threat to the world,” I said.

“China has never initiated a war overseas,” Mr. Tang said. “The Chinese love harmony and peace. For example, in China, we are never afraid to walk about at night, but many countries cannot understand this. The West does not understand China, there are many misunderstandings. Professor Pan, you have felt the peace in China.”

“Yes, I have, but people in other countries are not so peace-loving, and they fear China because they think Chinese are the same as they are.”

“Many people have different perspectives,” Mr. Tang said. “They have not witnessed how China has developed. In fact, China is a very peaceful country, and it has had more development opportunities and faster innovation than any other country. But for the sake of peace, globalization and sharing, we are now hiding ourselves. We do not show our edge — people such as Ren Zhengfei, who we call a ‘spare tire.’ Some time ago, I saw our *COMAC C919* take off. Many people say that the future of aviation will be ABC, which means Boeing, Airbus and China. In my opinion, China’s development has no hidden agenda. We have only one purpose, which is to do our own thing, devoting our efforts to innovation and enjoying the fruits of development.”

I appreciated Mr. Tang’s frank comments on China’s relationship with the rest of the world. I hope that China will continue to “do its own thing” — and, through the Belt and Road Initiative, continue to help empower other developing nations to do the same.

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Chapter 2

Liu Yunguang: An Entrepreneur with a Passion for Youth



I've met XMU alumni all over China, and even in many other countries, but never any one like Mr. Liu Yunguang, chairman of Guanghui Interactive Group. He claims to have been a poor student, yet he excelled in his studies in the Department of Scientific Engineering, Xiamen University (XMU). At the same time, his small department (only 36 students) defeated all other departments in sports. He also helped bring about changes at XMU that influence the school to this day, including overcoming considerable opposition to help my old friend Professor Ji Yuhua to start the XMU English club in 1984—four years before I myself arrived on XMU's scene.

When Professor Ji was denied permission for the club, Mr. Liu asked to be made president.

"Why would you want to be president when you didn't even speak English," Ji asked (Fig. 2.1).

Ever confident, Yunguang said, "Because the school won't allow you to start the club — but I can get them to agree!" And true to his word, young Yunguang lobbied school leaders, explaining why an English club would be so helpful to XMU, and he won many decision makers to his cause.

Yunguang continued to hone his persuasion and communication skills by helping to print *Xiamen University Youth* magazine, which had a cover color—a rarity at that time.

In 1984, Yunguang became vice chairman of the XMU student union, and later served as chairman of the graduates federation. He also played a part in bringing about *Youth*—the first XMU sculpture that was not of a human figure.

XMU already had many sculptures but all were of famous people such as Lu Xun, Tan Kah Kee and Luo Yangcai. Liu helped lead the charge to erect a non-historic figure sculpture in 1988, but XMU refused for three reasons. One, the sculpture was not a human figure. Two, the students had no money to build it. And three, given Yunguang was a senior, leaders doubted he had time to finish the project.

Although the leadership was almost unanimous in its disapproval, Yunguang was unperturbed and lobbied the leaders even as he had lobbied for the English club. As



Fig. 2.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing entrepreneur Liu Yunguang in Nanjing, Jiangsu on July 4, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

Xi Jinping likes to say, even drips of water will eventually penetrate rock. The school eventually conceded.

“I was bold,” Yunguang said. “I asked the Finance Department to ask all of the 1,700-plus graduate students to donate RMB2 each and for the School of Economics to also donate, but they indignantly argued, ‘You want to make a sculpture, and donate it to the school but then force every student to donate for it? You are obsessed with this!’”

When the School of Economics Party Secretary called Yunguang to his office, the youth was not cowed. “We will build this sculpture, and engrave the names of all participating departments in its base,” he said. “The School of Economics does not need to participate. Please just confirm this, and I will remove your college name from the base.”

“To avoid being left out, the school not only participated but even increased its contribution,” Yunguang said.

I wondered where Yunguang got his assertiveness, and was not surprised to learn that both of his parents, who are now in their nineties, were soldiers—his father a well-known general who later served as the dean of one of the Academy of Sciences.

“The atmosphere in our military family was very strict,” Yunguang said. “I had to study hard. I originally wanted to study architecture at Tsinghua University but my mother balked at this because one of my two sisters had already studied this. Happily for me, I still have opportunities to pursue my youthful dream of architectural design

today because I'm in charge of church design in Nanjing. My staff are architectural designers and I often oversee their church designs and volunteers in the church."

After his mom refused to let him study architecture, Yunguang applied to study engineering at XMU. "I met my wife right after I entered XMU—a beautiful girl from Gulangyu of Xiamen who, like me, was also a good student. At that time, XMU banned dating between the students, and a foreign language classmate was expelled for having a relationship. I was not expelled, though. While others met their dates in secret in the woods, we hid in plain sight in the lighted basketball court. We married two years after graduation."

"What do you think have been the greatest changes in China?" I asked.

"Chinese look at China's changes differently from foreigners," Yunguang said. For him (as for me, actually), the greatest changes were not those that could be easily seen and quantified but the invisible changes. "When I graduated from XMU, it was hard to get permission to stay in Xiamen, but since my wife was from Xiamen, in 1990 the school leaders helped me to get a good job in a Taiwanese-funded company. Companies from overseas were popular back then because even though the work was hard there, the salaries were also high, so inland people vied for jobs in Xiamen, Shenzhen and other coastal cities. That was phase one — the preference for overseas companies."

"Going to Sea"

"After working for the Taiwanese boss for six years, I realized I was not going to be promoted soon. I capitalized upon the rapidly developing economy to start my own business. Entrepreneurs had many opportunities as China's economy transitioned from planned to market. The phrase 'Go to sea' (*xiahai*) became popular as many officials and academics, including those at national level, left their careers to go into business or run industries. This was phase two."

As if these opportunities were not enough, along came the stock market! At first, opportunities were limited because foreign exchange accounts were strictly controlled, which made international business difficult. Yunguang also had to contend with foreign trade quotas. To save costs, his brother moved his company to Jordan, which was able to export products to the US and Europe tax-free, which of course gave their firm a big edge over less savvy competitors.

"Another challenge was that private companies had far less access to bank loans than the large state-owned companies, and China's private companies at that time paid some of the highest taxes in the world. Half of our income went to taxes. The two major problems for private companies were lack of money and high taxes. But in spite of the challenging environment, China's private enterprises were still able to make money. And we were extremely competitive when we went abroad. We Chinese are hard-working, and sales from our company in Irbid, which at its peak had 8,000 Chinese workers, exceeded the GDP of the entire country of Jordan. My brother of course had a very good relationship with the King of Jordan."

"As Chinese became more confident abroad, we moved labor-intensive industries overseas and at home we focused more on high tech. But private enterprises still face many challenges. A government friend said that of RMB800 billion earmarked

for economic development, only 10 percent was for private enterprises. But China is implementing many new policies to help struggling private enterprises.”

“You have a fascinating story,” I said to Yunguang. “But what really intrigues me is why, when private enterprises have such formidable challenges, you suddenly moved from your very profitable business of making games to producing education programs. What was your motivation, and how has it affected your profits?”

“We were leaders in games in China,” Yunguang said. “And even in Japan and South Korea. But after I became CEO, I decided to drop games because of their bad influence on children. We switched to education — and not just the math, physics and chemistry of the college entrance exam but the four courses of music, art, sports and technology. Our company is now leading yet again, but this time we are helping children, not hurting them, and the education bureau is using my products to teach children singing and painting.”

His four courses reminded me of Confucius’ curriculum some 2600 years ago. Westerners often question the “practicality” of the ancient Confucian curriculum, but China’s scholar bureaucrats were actually quite creative and pragmatic and able to solve the nations’ problems. And as Western research has shown, scientists who have hobbies such as music or art are more likely to become Nobel Prize laureates.¹ Root-Bernstein’s research revealed,

Nobel laureates were almost three times as likely to have arts and crafts avocations as Sigma Xi members and the US public, and about 50 percent more likely to have such avocations than Royal Society or National Academy of Sciences members.

This insight is nothing new. Almost a century earlier, in 1911, E.L. Thorndike² wrote,

Artistic ability, as in music, painting or literary creation, goes with scientific ability and matter-of-fact wisdom. The best abstract thinker will be above the average in concrete thought also.

While I admired Yunguang’s courage in going cold turkey and switching from gaming to education, I wondered if it was financially feasible. “Was it hard to switch from gaming to education?” I asked.

“No, because our programmers are amazing. The technology is the same for either games or education. In fact, games have much higher technological requirements than education, and it was quite easy to shift focus. But while games are played by millions of people at a time, fewer people at one time use educational software — except of course near exam time.”

“You’ve shared about changes in the economy, and the challenges facing private businesses, but what other changes have you seen?” I asked.

“There are so many. The large-scale infrastructure and transportation improvements are obvious, and people enjoy vastly better clothing, food and housing. But it

¹ Root-Bernstein, Robert, et al., “Arts Foster Scientific Success: Avocations of Nobel, National Academy, Royal Society and Sigma Xi Members”, *Journal of Psychology of Science and Technology*, Volume 1, Number 2, 2008, Springer Publishing Company.

² Thorndike, L. M., *Individuality*, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1911.

is also very important to note the changes in education and culture. Now that Chinese understand the West better, we no longer blindly worship the West. It is now obvious to us that the West also has many shortcomings, and there are many things we must learn for ourselves. We no longer need to have such low self-esteem and look to the US as so powerful and No.1 at everything. The US is also facing very big problems. And no matter how powerful the US is, China will soon overtake it, and by 2025 China will be the leading power, primarily because of technology but also because China is serious about solving many social problems.”

“And how will China do this?”

“President Xi Jinping is very smart,” Yunguang said. “He has many ideas that are obviously correct. One is the Chinese Dream; another is the Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese Dream is to let us all have goals and to once again be the world’s No.1 as we were during the Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties. We have 5,000 years of unbroken history, and our self-reliance will allow us to become No.1 again. In addition, the Belt and Road Initiative is using Chinese methods to positively influence the world. China’s method is infrastructure construction.”

“Yes,” I said. “Thirty years ago, the Chinese said, ‘If you want to prosper, first build roads.’”

“Only good infrastructure can facilitate trade,” Yunguang said. “And people can move. As the old Chinese saying goes, ‘Trees move to die, people move to live.’ When people can move, things improve. With good roads, high-speed rail and bridges, trade grows, we can make money, and the world will continue to improve. Chinese are good at this, but some other countries are not. I drove a highway to the Los Angeles airport and it has needed repair for decades. And the hi-speed railway from Los Angeles to Francisco can’t be finished.”

Planning for this Los Angeles to San Francisco hi-speed railway began in 1992 but only in 2015 did actual construction begin after having spent US\$650 million in planning. The 2029 deadline was extended to 2032, and then in 2019 California’s Governor Newsom admitted publicly that it could never be completed. As I ask my graduate business students, “What hope would China have had if the nation had built its infrastructure in this manner?”

“Such problems show that some things cannot be solved by American democracy,” Yungang said. “The Communist Party of China also speaks of democracy, but some things can only be done when all parties work together in unity, avoiding quarrels. No nation can compare with China at this, and this is why we are No.1 in the world.”

Yunguang is thankful that he began his business career just as reform and opening up were taking off. He prospered, but “now I want to use my remaining years to do something meaningful. So, I and my business friends decided to do only three types of business. The first is education—real education, not just for making money. The second is environmental protection and organic food. Xiamen Yuanchu Food was started by a good friend, and he began by importing and exporting food. I asked them, ‘Why can’t we sell such quality food to Chinese consumers?’ When they explained it was 20–30% more expensive than other foods, I argued that people would still pay a premium price because they were worried about pollution in the air and ground. And sure enough, the business is doing very well and will be listed soon. The third

type of business my friends and I do is medical care and retirement facilities. China has many retirees, so my wife is building a nursing home now. We can build more, so that we can offer cheap or free care for the elderly, but we need to find people who know how to run them.”

Yunguang was excited not only about the transformations in China but also about the great changes in XMU, his alma mater. “XMU has not only changed but it has become much bigger and has had many firsts such as XMU Malaysia — China’s first overseas campus. And teaching has changed — mostly good but also some not so good. I want to cooperate with XMU but it must focus more on real research and not just writing articles. Everyone wants to make money and become a professor but not many want to do the hard work of scientific research. And I hope that XMU will not only excel at technology but also be a university of warmth. XMU has 10 times more alumni than present students, and it should think about how to involve us more.”

“You obviously still have strong feelings for XMU,” I said.

“My time at XMU was the happiest of my life. I met my wife there and we’ve now been together for 35 years. Some people have told me that I can’t work with my wife but we’ve worked together very well.”

“I have a last question,” I said. “You’ve shared many changes in China but what do you think will be the next change or opportunity?”

“Huawei is a good example,” Yunguang said. “Huawei is the future, but not just Huawei. Huawei represents China and Chinese enterprises such as Xiaomi. Although Tencent, Baidu and 360 are very large companies, I don’t like what they do. They are all big companies but not good companies. But Huawei is not only a large company but also a good one. More companies like Huawei will appear in China, and they will have good influence on a global scale. China already leads the world in some technology, and as more Chinese companies lead the world, our country will become stronger. Examples include controllable nuclear fusion. This technology, which we will realize by 2050, will make electricity very cheap. And we already lead the world in graphene, and quantum communication. There are many other examples.”

China is indeed beginning to lead the world in more and more ways, but fortunately for the rest of the world, throughout history China has sought peaceful cooperation, not domination, even 1000 years ago when China’s economy, technology and military were far more powerful than those of any other nation. And over the past three decades that I’ve witnessed the growth that Yunguang discussed, China has continued to grow and innovate. But given my own military experience, and the West’s five centuries of ceaseless warfare, I’m thankful that China to this very day seeks prosperity only through peaceful means.

I hope that this does not change.

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Chapter 3

Jing Xuhua—A Loving Mother Triumphs at Home and in Business



Qingdao has always evoked for me images of Bavaria. Although the Germans only occupied this coastal city from 1898 to 1914, there is a surprising amount of German architecture, including the iconic St. Michael's Cathedral. And Chinese today prize beer from the Tsingdao Brewery, which was started in 1903 as Germania Brewery, and is now China's No. 2 beer producer.

But since July 2019, Qingdao would forever bring to my mind how a widow mother's love and passion not only helped her save her family but also start a very successful real estate business. She knew nothing about real estate and had to read books to understand buyers' simplest questions. Today, the 52-year-old entrepreneur has over 200 employees and her next goal is starting schools to help the next generation (Fig. 3.1).

"I came from a common family," Xuhua said. "They were all railway workers, and my grandfather drove trains for the Japanese when he was young. After graduation from high school in 1986, I was very proud to become a conductor on our local railway and wear the conductor's uniform and cap. But when I married two years later, I left the railway to have children and take care of my family."

Xuhua worked for a year at an army guesthouse's front desk and then sought a job at a new dry-cleaning center. She worked there a couple of years after her training in Nanjing on the new technology. "Life was good," she said, "until my husband was killed in a car accident and I was left alone with a five-year-old daughter."

While still reeling from losing her husband, she also lost her job. "Many companies were reducing staff, and since I was taking care of my child, they laid me off."

Xuhua was completely broke and at her wits end when, as a last resort, she left her beloved five-year-old with her parents and sought work in Japan.

"Life in Japan was so hard," she said. "I was far from home and missed my daughter so much. The language was very hard, and my Japanese was poor." In 2001, Xuhua finally returned home, only to discover she could no longer cope with the harsh winters of northeast China, so she moved to Qingdao when a friend told her that its climate and weather were similar to Japan's.

“It was very hard for an unskilled widow with a child to find a job, so I started my own business. A friend who built houses let me sell them, even though I knew nothing about real estate — not even the most basic sales and technical terms — I read a lot of books, so that people would think that I knew what I was doing.”

“One client asked me about the internal area of a house,” Xuhua said, laughing. “I had no idea what that meant. But I was sincere and honest, and I was careful to tell my clients both the advantages and disadvantages of a property, the location, etc. My sincerity won their trust, and they bought from me. Today, my employees receive professional training from around the country. None are trained in-house. But I’m like the company’s mother and I myself make sure that they learn morals and ethics — how to be humans.”

Xuhua has been doing Qingdao real estate for two decades, and her daughter, now 28, also lives with her. “I started with a team of four sales people,” she said. “And as we made money, I slowly expanded to 20 people, and now have over 200. I’ve come to love this industry — especially once I learned what I was doing! I learned a lot not only from developers and builders but also from my teams’ energetic young people. My life has been hard, but I have had rich experiences.”

“You seem very passionate about real estate,” I said.

“I am,” she said. “In addition to the profits, there are many intangible benefits.”

“What sort of benefits?” I asked.

“Friends, for one thing! I had only one phone contact when I moved here. Today, I have 4,700 people — all of whom have become my friends.”

“Your clients are all friends?”

“Yes, because unlike many other companies, ours is truly family-oriented sales. Our goal is of course to sell as much as we can but not at the expense of our clients’ interest. For example, some clients want to buy many houses in one area but this is very risky. Even though we’d make big profits selling them, we first did a risk assessment before we agreed to sell them. Customers were moved because they saw we didn’t just push sales blindly but tried to protect their interests. Over time these customers have become our friends.”

“It sounds like you have a mother’s heart for your clients too!” I said.

“Yes,” Xuhua said. “Although we are not as professional as some large companies, we are studying hard. We have a unique sales concept, which is family love. This is why I fell in love with this industry. We’ve made some small achievements, but money cannot buy such joy, and the longer I do this, the more I like it.”

“Over the past 20 years, China has changed a lot, and you’ve changed with it. What do you think of the future?”

“The future will be even better,” Xuhua said. “Because we keep evolving and expanding. At first we sold only new homes but now we also sell or lease pre-owned homes. Our team is divided into several sections and branches, with more than 230 branches in Huangdao, and we have special teams for real estate planning and marketing.”

“Do you think you will ever go to other places or stay here in Qingdao?” I asked.

“So far, we have more than we can handle right here,” she said. “Qingdao is a tourist city and its rapid development, especially on Huangdao, creates so much business.”

Although Xuhua was optimistic about her economic future, she had some qualms about how China’s newfound wealth had brought about some changes in values, especially among the youths.

“When I was young, we were just ordinary people with a traditional education,” she said. “But we were united and everyone helped each other. Neighbors were very close. If you needed soy sauce while cooking, you could borrow it, or anything else you needed, from a neighbor. When I went abroad, I found that neighbors did not help each other, or even talk to each other.”

“It’s not the same today?” I asked.

Xuhua sighed. “Some families still pass on fine family traditions, but some youths seem more self-absorbed today. They bolt their doors and don’t care about others. But today’s youths are certainly not lazy! Chinese are very energetic and keen for the future. They have a clear vision and work hard to achieve it. They know you reap what you sow (种瓜得瓜). Even the son of a wealthy friend does his own chores instead of letting the maid do it. I asked why and he said, ‘In this fiercely competitive society, I have to learn not to rely on my parents.’”

“Why are Chinese youths so competitive?” I asked.

“Good policies,” she said without hesitation. “If policies are good, hard work pays off and you can improve your life. Even some state-owned companies have changed by giving workers shares in the company to motivate them. In other words, as long as you use your abilities to the full, you can lead a happy life.”

Xuhua paused, and said, “Maybe you think I am preoccupied with money? But for youths today, if their salary increases a little this month, they will be very happy, and next month’s work status will improve. Money is now the economic foundation. The mechanisms and systems have changed, people are motivated to work hard — unlike the iron rice bowl days when everyone received income whether they worked or not. Before the iron rice bowl days, the older generation in northeast China used to say that ‘the bolder people are, the more productive their land!’”

“I’m glad that Chinese youths are so competitive, but what about their lack of concern for those around them? The entire world faces this problem with youths. How do we solve it?”

Xuhua brightened. “Well, one of my dreams is to start a school — and youths need much more than just book knowledge. Parents tend to focus on exams and grades but other things are also important. They need social skills. They need to learn to be human before they can do anything else.”

“How do they learn these skills?” I asked.

“I think the priority is people skills, a great part of which they can even learn from teacher-student interactions,” Xuhua said. “And learning about Chinese traditional culture. We must improve education, so that it imparts more than just theory, which can stilt a child’s growth. For example, a book can only portray an abstract concept of politeness, but thanks to our Chinese tradition, many people have known since

their youths the principle of respecting the old and loving the young, and this has been passed down from generation to generation. I think this is critical.”

“I hope you do start your school,” I said. “It’s interesting that many of my Chinese friends who have risen from poverty to riches are also using much of their money for education. From this perspective, China has not changed in centuries, because Chinese have always valued education.”

Xuhua nodded in agreement. “It’s a big dream to start a school, and I don’t know if I can achieve this, but I’ll do my best. I have spent four years gaining a preliminary understanding of the education industry’s market and statistics. My dream is a school that emphasizes children’s moral education, intellectual education and physical education. And I’m asking my UK friends to help. I’d like to hire UK teachers to share their rich experience here, and by coming here they can better understand China.”

“I hope it works,” I said. “As Xi Jinping said 20 years ago when he was our Fujian governor, ‘We need to do a better job of telling China’s story because Chinese have come to know the world but the world still doesn’t know China.’”

Telling China’s Story to the World.

“I hope to help the world better understand China,” Xuhua said. “When I went to Japan in 1995, even though I was from a very common family, my life had not been as bad as the Japanese imagined. A Japanese showed me a piece of candy, and asked if I’d ever had any, and others asked if we had electricity in our home! They said much of what they learned about China was from CCTV documentaries, many of which were about China’s impoverished and remote areas. They quite naturally assumed all of China was like that. I finally asked my family to mail me some photos, so that Japanese people could see what China was really like. They were surprised to learn that by the 1990s, many families even had TVs and refrigerators. They thought China was still a very poor and dark place.”

“How can we help the world better understand China?” I asked.

Xuhua laughed. “For me, I feel like writing to CCTV to ask why their programs so often show foreigners the darker side of China — the poverty, the need for Hope Schools, etc. We need more programs to reassure the world about such things as Chinese integrity in business.”

“I agree,” I said. “The world needs to see China is changing. But many people are afraid of a prosperous, rapidly changing China?”

“Yes, China’s rapid development frightens many people,” Xuhua said. “Perhaps because their own countries are not changing! I have visited many countries, including the UK, Australia, Canada and so on. Even as a child, I imagined that life in those countries must be good — like heaven — so I was not surprised by what I saw. But when I visited again years later, almost nothing had changed because they were complacent. China is different, though. While foreign countries’ lack of change shocked me, foreigners are shocked by China’s rapid changes. But we enjoy such change because our leaders give priority to improving people’s livelihood. They give us much support, especially in business, and we Chinese seize these opportunities.”

“But should China’s big changes frighten foreigners?” I asked.



Fig. 3.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing entrepreneur Jing Xuhua in Qingdao, Shandong on July 5, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

“I think there is nothing to be afraid of,” Xuhua said. “Chinese are very friendly and practical. If we become strong, we will help foreigners hand in hand; if foreigners are strong, we will humbly learn from them. Either way, we will work together.”

I agree. And if China continues to produce entrepreneurs like Xuhua, I’m confident that the world will be glad to work hand in hand with Chinese.

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Chapter 4

Ye Nan Brings a Bright Future to West China



When Wenzhou's Ye Yongjie published New China's first Chinese science fiction novel in 1961, *Little Smart Roams the Future*, he would have never imagined his futuristic dreams would inspire young Chinese like Ye Nan, a Xiamen University (XMU) graduate from an impoverished mountain area of Zhejiang Province, to transform science fiction dreams into reality! (Fig. 4.1)

Zhejiang Province is certainly not a place you'd expect to find poverty. Zhejiang is home to cities like Hangzhou, dubbed by Marco Polo as the earth's greatest city. Even today, this coastal province is often called "China's backbone," ranking fourth nationally in GDP, and is home to famous business people such as Jack Ma. If even wealthy Zhejiang has struggled with poverty in isolated mountainous areas, just imagine the challenges in ending poverty across China when almost 70% of the nation is mountains, hills and plateaus—all crisscrossed by more than 5000 rivers.

Thankfully, China's poorer regions now benefit from comprehensive national policies evolved over seven decades. And they are also blessed by help from people like Mr. Ye Nan, who after graduating from XMU, committed himself to helping not only his own hometown but also impoverished areas in west China.

"Given you come from a poor area yourself, what moved you to help even poorer regions in west China?" I asked.

"In junior high school I was able to visit Wenzhou," Ye Nan said. "And a man who enthusiastically helped poor mountain children like me gave us many books to broaden our ideas about the rest of the world. I think that for a child, a book or even a conversation may change his thoughts or perspective. I'll be forever grateful to this uncle who opened my eyes to the world by giving me the science fiction book, *Little Smart Roams the Future*."

The novel was written in 1961 by Wenzhou native Ye Yongjie but not published until 17 years later because the optimistic depictions of a future city with flying cars, robots and video phones jarred with the harsh reality of the natural disasters China was facing. When it was finally published in 1978, it was China's first original science fiction novel published after the Cultural Revolution, and it has delighted and inspired young and old alike for decades. I'm sure that the author, who died in



Fig. 4.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing teacher Ye Nan in Beijing on July 8, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

2020, would have been gratified to know that one of his young readers was so moved by his work that he committed himself to helping even poorer students share in New China’s hope.

“I returned home from Wenzhou,” Mr. Ye said. “With a fervent desire to study even harder, so that I could get a better education and help more people, and I was fortunate to test into XMU.”

Mr. Ye’s desire to help the poor was bolstered further when he learned that XMU’s founder, Mr. Tan Kah Kee, had donated all his life savings to Chinese education. The apple of his eye was XMU, which has fostered the Tan Kah Kee spirit to this day.

“What most moved you to help the poor,” I asked. “Given that you yourself came from a very poor area?”

“My extracurricular activities helped expose me to the needs and broaden my vision. During all four years of my business studies, I also worked in the *Xiamen University Youth Daily*. I learned a lot about what was happening around China. But the biggest influence was a video, *Yellow Sheep River Town* (黄羊川), by a Taiwan entrepreneur, Wen Sayling (温世仁).”

As a child, Mr. Wen’s family has been so poor that he captured fireflies each night to study by their light, but his poverty paled in comparison to what he witnessed in Gansu’s arid Yellow Sheep River Town. “Tears streamed down his face,” when he witnessed their hardships, and he invested US\$50 million in the Town and Talent

Technology Company, Ltd. (千乡万才科技有限公司) to help 1000 poorest towns in west China by training 10 million youths from 1000 schools to prosper right at home through remote employment at software design.

“I was so shocked and moved by Mr. Wen’s dedication,” Mr. Ye said, and so he decided to go to west China directly after graduation. “He was the biggest influence on me. And in my junior year, I attended a bazaar held by a senior who had taught in west China in the Gobi Desert, near the Mao Wu Su Desert. It had virtually no water and when I saw that those children’s living conditions were far worse than mine as a child, I determined to help them in some way.”

In his junior year, Mr. Ye signed up for the XMU Support Team, and spent his senior year with several classmates as a teacher in rural Ningxia in west China. “We thought we had prepared ourselves psychologically but conditions were far worse than we could have imagined. With virtually no rain — only tens of millimeters each year — tractors had to haul in water each week. Rain was so rare that locals called it ‘sky sweet water’ Well water was called ‘bitter water’ because wells are so deep that the mineral content is very high, which makes the water bitter.”

“The lack of water made both agriculture and industry impossible. Yet in spite of such abysmal conditions, the children were very optimistic. There was such a great shortage of teachers that I had to teach not only all liberal arts subjects but also biology and even physical education. But that was a very happy year for me because I drew strength from the children’s optimism!”

But young Ye was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the needs and lack of resources. “Hundreds of children needed help, but I was only a college student with limited abilities and resources — I decided to write online to let the rest of China know about their needs.”

China’s Internet was flourishing by 2005, so for the entire year Mr. Ye posted his daily experiences—hundreds of thousands of words by year’s end. XMU teachers then led him to compile his experiences into a book that was published in 2007.

As Mr. Ye signed a copy of his book for me, I asked, “Is this book your diary for that year in Ningxia?”

“Yes,” he said. “Most of it was from that year. After university I taught elementary and junior high school students until 2017. My students went on from junior high to high school and then to university. I have watched them grow up and face and overcome hardships. The book actually covers the entire 12 years between 2005 and 2017.”

“After I returned to XMU, I kept in contact with many students from Ningxia. One student almost dropped out a number of times, but we kept urging him to stick it out. He did, was admitted to a university in Nanjing, and after graduation he founded and chaired a Nanjing non-profit organization (NGO) that is an incubator for more NGOs. His dream is to help others who want to start NGOs, and he’s doing very well. I’m very proud of him.”

“How did you keep up with your students?” I asked.

“At first by letters, but later the schools had telephones. And nowadays it is very convenient to use QQ and WeChat video calls. And I have visited them twice. All

the children I taught had graduated but there are new children, and the school has changed a lot.”

“How has it changed?” I asked.

“Well, when I taught physical education, the playground was covered in cinders, and students were bloodied when they fell on it. It was especially hard in the winter when the temperature was below zero. The children were so lively that it did not seem to faze them, but even so it was difficult. And the only sports equipment was a whistle. But thanks to a generous person who donated RMB5,000, we bought lots of balls and built a cement table tennis table. And when I returned in 2010, everything had improved! The school had a professional sports track and all kinds of sports equipment.”

“Have there been other changes in the school?”

“Yes, they now have better drinking water. They used to have no phone, and no signal for mobile phones, but now they have hi-speed Internet. They also have new classrooms. And students used to wear clothes handed down from their older siblings, but in 2010 they were wearing new school uniforms. And they seemed much happier than before.”

“Why were they happier?” I asked.

“Three reasons,” Ye said. “First, for over 10 years, China’s economy has been developing and changing, even in the areas I was helping. Second, decades of poverty alleviation have indeed achieved remarkable results. And third, there are many like me from the mountains who study in the cities and then return to our hometowns to help however we can. The boy who started the Nanjing NGO is an example. Or the girl who after university graduation designed software for IBM in Dalian but missed her hometown so much that she gave up life in the beautiful coastal city to return home and work in Ningxia. And one student graduated from a normal university and returned to teach fulltime in the Ningxia school where I had taught for one year. Of course, this is easier to do now that transportation is convenient.”

“I too have met many people like this,” I said. “Even XMU teachers in the early 1950s gave up comfortable positions to teach in Gansu, Tibet and other west regions that were then very poor. Ye Xueyin (叶雪音), who entered XMU in 1950, spent four months on the trip from Beijing to Tibet in 1951, walking for weeks with little to eat on the last stretch from Gansu to Tibet. They crossed freezing rivers on ramshackle bamboo or wood bridges, or on yak leather coracles that the raging rivers tossed about like fishing corks. She wrote her parents when she reached Lhasa, and it took an entire year to get her father’s reply!”

“Today China has the best highway and railway networks in the world — as well as the most extensive Internet. Chinese in the remotest region make video phone calls — just like in *Little Smart Roams the Future!*”

“Yes,” Mr. Ye said. “China’s infrastructure, especially in telecommunications, is helping poor children in so many ways. In 2005, I told rural students I’d come from Xiamen, and they thought I meant Macau. They had no idea they were two different places. But today these children’s knowledge and vision are no different from what you’d expect from city children. They watch TV and surf the Internet just like the rest of us, but only 10 years ago all they had was newspapers, and those were often

delivered to villages only once a month — so news was a month old! But today with 4G, and 5G on the way, many schools broadcast multimedia materials.”

“Students are now very aware of what’s going on in the world,” Mr. Ye said. “In 2005, if you asked students their dreams, they would give vague answers because they really had no idea. They dreamed of getting any job they could to survive. But nowadays they are very clear about their future. Like a student I helped last year — he wanted to be a painter. I am grateful they now understand society and the world, and that they can play a part in it.”

“What are your plans for the future?”

“Actually, I say that Xiamen is my second hometown, and Ningxia is my third hometown. I have deep feelings for Ningxia and have kept in close contact with the children there for over 10 years. I think that to grow up in a balanced manner they need help not just materially but spiritually. In west China, there are many left-behind children, for example, who grow up all alone. I want to help them somehow.”

“When I studied business at XMU, I engaged in NGO research for my master’s thesis. Perhaps I will do something with NGOs in the future, because I have many friends doing charity work. This is good because helping others helps us grow up ourselves.”

“I have been very moved,” I said. “As to how Chinese of all ages help relieve poverty, I interviewed a high school girl yesterday who tutors rural children online in math. She said, ‘Our family is not that well off, but we’re better off than those children, I should help them.’”

“Yes,” Mr. Ye said. “Information technology really helps us to help others!”

“It seems that more and more young people are willing to engage in such activities,” I said. “Why do you think that is, apart from the Internet that makes it easier?”

“Actually, I think public welfare is part of China’s traditional culture — whether in old China or in New China. Lei Feng is the most famous example. But thanks to much government support, standardized public welfare, NGOs, etc., have become common in the past 10 years. My work in Ningxia, for example, was organized and supported by XMU. This kind of education support activities started in 1999, and as of last year, about 1 million college students have supported education in west China. Given that each student can teach hundreds, I’m sure that millions of children have been helped. This is an accumulation process, from quantitative change to qualitative change.”

“And legislation helps, with new voluntary service regulations helping to bolster support for voluntary service. And historical events such as the Wenchuan earthquake tragedy have involved many volunteers. It was such activities that motivated the student who created the Nanjing incubator for NGOs. These organizations can draw lots of people to volunteer work like moths to a flame.”

“Yes — and also books like yours about west China!” I said. “I look forward to reading it.”

My time with Mr. Ye ended too quickly. I was heartened by his passion for helping those less fortunate than himself, and I took to heart several lessons. First, even a few words, or a book like *Little Smart Roams the Future*, or a video like *Yellow Sheep*

River Town, can make a big difference in helping to set someone's course for life—be they a child, a university student, or perhaps even an older person like myself.

But passion is not enough. It was XMU's support programs that helped give wings to Mr. Ye's vision. And, happily, China's vast highway and railway network and sophisticated telecommunications make it easier than ever to reach out to the poor—or even to serve them online. Opportunities are greater today than ever. Who knows—when I retire from XMU maybe I too can teach in west China!

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Chapter 5

Yang Ying—From House Maid to Millionaire Philanthropist



I've met dozens of amazing people while traveling around China but some of the most memorable stories are about people right in my own backyard—people like the teenage country girl whose dream was to be a Xiamen University (XMU) professor's maid earning RMB22 a month, so that she could send half home to help her little brother study. She achieved that dream—and today that teenage maid with only four years education is a wealthy philanthropist who has started an international school in Xiamen, Beijing and Shenzhen, owns a biotechnology firm, has several real estate ventures (including a RMB1 billion project in her hometown), and has donated hundreds of millions to fight poverty, improve education and help every retiree in her hometown. And in her copious free time, she serves as the chairperson of the Beijing-Zhangzhou Chamber of Commerce.

Ms. Yang donated RMB60 million to the Pinghe Charity Fund, and gave RMB5 million to help build Guangzhao Middle School, as well as RMB68 million to the China Children's Fund. She's built roads and bridges to help lift remote villages from poverty. And though she had never been to Ningxia and Tibet, when she heard children from the areas could not afford books, she sent funds to buy them.

Ms. Yang is not one to “watch the fire burn from the other side of the river”. She inspects villages onsite to help discover the unique causes of poverty and to help implement unique solutions. And she supports all 700 people aged over 60 in Gaoji Village, as well as 690 retirees in Donghuai Village, in Pinghe County, Zhangzhou.

“What motivates you to help so many people in so many ways?” I asked.

“I am a farmer's daughter,” Ms. Yang said. “And it is my duty to care for the disadvantaged. Wealth comes from society, and you must be willing to give it back to society.”

Selfish with Self, Selfless with Others

I first met Ms. Yang at her home in the 1990s, when the Xiamen municipal government asked me to help start Xiamen International School (XIS). Yang Ying smiled and said, “Since you were coming, I dressed up a bit. I even put on a bit of make-up!”

For Yang Ying, ‘dressing up a bit’ meant neat but casual, and David Wei, vice headmaster of XIS, pointed out that she was still wearing the same RMB20 shoes she’d had for years. She smiled shyly (she still comes across as a country girl), shrugged, and said, “Well, as Buddhism and Christianity both teach, ‘selfish to self, generous to others!’ I don’t waste money like some wealthy people. I spend very little on myself, and when I eat out, I bring home a doggy bag.”

I could understand the doggy bag, of course, because Ms. Yang has known her share of hunger.

From Fields to Fortunes

The oldest of five children, Yang Ying was born in 1963 to a farmer’s family in Gaoshi Village, Shan’ge Town, Pinghe County (Lin **Yü-t’ang’s** hometown). Her mother could speak only the local dialect, and both her parents worked the fields. Yang Ying had to go to school with her baby brother strapped to her back with thin rags, which the baby often wet, leaving her back raw and sore. The teacher made her sit by the door, so that she could go outside when the baby cried, which was often. Yang Ying said, “Study wasn’t easy, that’s why my *pinyin* is so poor.”

Yang Ying left school in the fourth grade to labor in a sweltering brick factory for RMB1 per day, from which she had to pay for meals. She often went hungry, not only at the factory but later, while working as a maid, or *baomu* at XMU. “The XMU teachers treated me fairly, but they did not know that peasants who worked long hours needed more to eat than sedentary people. I often went hungry because when they asked if I’d eaten enough, I was too embarrassed to say no, since I’d already had more rice than them. Today, I make sure my employees don’t go hungry. My Ying Cai School cafeteria is non-profit, and food is half the cost of other places.”

Oysters and Fish

The XMU teachers who hired Ms. Yang as a *baomu* refused to give their child soft drinks, so every day after school the “little emperor” would extort it from Yang Ying by refusing to go up the apartment’s six flights of stairs, until she bought him a soft drink. “It was not easy for me on only RMB22 a month, but I had no choice — until I learned that people earned RMB8 to RMB10 in one day selling oysters in the market!”

Yang Ying wanted a job where she could eat her fill and dress warmly, she abandoned her *baomu* career to sell oysters, which earned her as much in two days as she did in a month caring for a juvenile soft drink addict. But to her dismay the oyster season ended right after Qingming Festival that falls on every April 5. She then tried selling dried fish. “But I was as ignorant about fish as oysters. The fish I bought were for feeding cats, not people. I lost my RMB10 that day and went home and cried.”

Yang Ying moved to off-island Haicang and sold noodles until she met and married a butcher. “He worked from sunrise to sundown slaughtering, butchering and selling. It was a lot of work for such a small return, so I suggested we sell wholesale. We moved to Lianban in 1986, setting up a meat cooperative, and soon handled 70 percent of Xiamen’s meat trade, but I had a grueling schedule.”

Although Yang Ying was “the boss,” she worked from 2:30 am until midnight and slept with the 40-plus workers housed in two rooms slapped together over some planks placed across the muddy, stinky pigsty. “The pigsty had row upon row of mosquito coils that were strong enough to kill people as well as insects. My friends said the conditions were inhumane — but we did what we had to.”

As Yang Ying’s toil bore fruit, prosperity brought trouble of its own. Her newly rich husband began squandering time and money with young girls. Yang Ying eventually divorced him, letting her husband walk away with all but RMB3 million.

In 1990, Ms. Yang founded the Xiamen Congying Corporation, entering the commercial and residential real estate industry. In 1993, she started the Xiamen Yingfa Economic Development Company, and then set her sight on the financial industry. “Back then, opportunities were endless, but no one had capital to exploit them,” she said. “On April 8, 1994, I started Xiamen Wanda City Trust Agency, a credit cooperative that I ran until the government took over commercial banks in 1996.” But by this point she had accumulated enough capital and credibility to expand further into real estate, education, and biotechnology industry.

Education and Sleeping Pills

A friend then told Yang Ying that China’s rapid growth would strain the resources of state-run education, creating a great need for private education. So, on September 1, 1995, Yang Ying started the K-12 Ying Cai School. “This school was not a money maker. The location in Xinglin was very remote, and we only had 300 students; we lost RMB50 million from 1995 to 1999.” But Yang Ying knew the importance of education, both for children and for the city, she not only refused to give up but expanded her education investments.

In 1997, Xiamen Mayor Hong Yongshi asked Yang Ying to start the Xiamen International School to provide education for expat’s children. Yang Ying said, “We lost RMB20 million during the first three years, but the campus I’d built was not useful for anything else, so I kept going because if I gave it up I’d have lost hundreds of millions. I didn’t have a car and lived in a poor home, but I never missed paying my teachers.” She paused, and then added, “but from 1997 to 1999 I had to use sleeping pills every night.”

In spite of her financial woes during the Asian economic crisis, Yang Ying refused to follow the practice of other international schools to raise tuition, fearing this would hurt foreign investment in China. She not only kept the tuition as before, but also gave a 25-percent tuition discount to Korean students to help maintain investments from that country.

The Real Pay-off

Even when Yang Ying had over 3000 students, it was still hard to turn a profit. She barely recovered her capital investment. “But even so the schools are important for me,” she said. “Firstly, we need good schools. Secondly, my success with schools gives me credibility with government and business, and makes it more likely that people will trust my business sense and work with me.” Ms. Yang Ying grinned and added, “And thirdly, consider the long term! If children enjoy and appreciate their

few years at my schools, 10 years from now when they become leaders, maybe they will do business with me. Our alumni are already scattered around the planet like the stars in the heavens!”

China’s Model International School

Yang Ying’s high standards in hiring and compensation are paying off. In 2005, a Ying Cai student landed Fujian’s highest score for the national college entrance exam, and in 2006 another Ying Cai graduate earned Xiamen’s highest score. “We already have alumni at Harvard and Yale,” Yang Ying said. “Imagine what our school’s 30th anniversary will be like!”

XIS became one of China’s first schools with an International Baccalaureate (IB) program, and had the lowest tuition of any accredited international school in China. The school is not only fully accredited with WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) in the US but also with NCCT (Curriculum and Textbook Development Center under China’s Ministry of Education. After visiting XIS, an NCCT official noted that “XIS is a model school for all international schools in China,” in terms of complying with Chinese accreditation standards for accounting, human resources practices, and the laws, etc.

Well reputed as an innovator in education, though, Yang Ying said, “I don’t interfere with the daily running of my schools because the administrators are professionals and I am not.” Vice Headmaster David Wei appeared to disagree, however, suggesting that her input is far more valuable than she realizes or admits.

Worries about Education

Ms. Yang is enthusiastic about education but also worries that today’s youths may put the wrong emphasis upon it. “So many young people think they should start out making high salaries just because they are highly educated. And they complain that they can’t find jobs, but the real problem is they just want to start at the top. Look at all the rural towns and peasants that need the help from college graduates. Start there and work up.”

“My motto is ‘Diligent First, Smart Second.’ If a job applicant brings up the subject of salary too quickly, I don’t hire him. I want them to first show what they can do for me. And I start them relatively low but reward well those who can prove themselves. For example, one man’s salary doubled in only one year.” But Ms. Yang learned this lesson the hard way. “A few years ago, I paid an employee RMB500,000 a year for a job worth only RMB100,000. I eventually had to fire him, and he has still not found another job because no one is willing to pay him what he thinks he is worth, and he is not willing to start low and work up. I’m more careful now.”

Graduates and Undergraduates

“One of my workers was a graduate of Qinghua University, and another was a vocational education school graduate. The vo-tech graduate did not have such a prestigious degree, but he knew what he was doing and worked hard, which to me was most important. I promoted him rapidly. But the Qinghua graduate worked hard only at what interested him, and sloughed off at other tasks. I let him go.” She added,

“Sometimes undergraduates outperform graduates. Graduates are too high in their own eyes, whereas undergraduates are still learning and growing, and can learn the most important lessons: One, how to suffer (‘eat bitterness’), and two, how to work. I now think the best approach is to hire good undergraduates, let them prove themselves for three or four years, then send them to graduate school at the company’s expense. Those are the kind of graduate students we need!”

Not Reasons but Results

“I want results, not excuses,” Yang Ying said. “You can blame the rain for being late for work, or you can see it is raining and leave home early. It’s your choice. And everyone falls. Just get back up again. If you’re hurt when you fall but try to get up, a relative or friend can help you up. But no one can help a person who does not even try to stand. The keys to success are: One, seize opportunities, two, bear hardships, and three, be honest.”

Facing Life

Yang Ying fears that today’s youths lack the ability to bear hardships (*chiku*). She shared the story of a 12-year-old whose parents urged him not to play on the Internet but to study. The child said, “If you try to control me, I’ll make sure you have no one to carry on your name. I’ll jump off the roof!” This threat would hit a nerve for any Chinese parent having only one child — and he did jump. He didn’t die, but broke his legs and made his point. Ms. Yang said, “Some children are selfish and spoiled. Many have committed suicide nowadays. It’s easy for them because they’re not around to see the aftermath and their family’s suffering. We need to teach kids to face problems instead of running away, to develop persistence and stand on their own two feet.” Yang Ying’s son, a student in England, complained that other Chinese kids had tens of thousands of dollars in their bank accounts, while he had less than US\$500. She remained unmoved.

When Ms. Yang’s son joined the military, friends encouraged her to visit the base and make some connections, or *guanxi*, to grease the wheels for her son. “People criticize me because I don’t interfere, but I tell my son, ‘You need to rely on who you are, not on who your mother is! If you have ability, you don’t need my help. If you don’t have ability, I’ll bequeath everything I have to society because you can’t handle it! Stand on your own two feet!’”

She reminded me of the great Chinese patriot, Lin Zexu. I played Britain’s Captain Elliot in the TV series about Lin’s life and the first Opium War. My favorite quote from this brilliant man is “If my descendants are like me, why would I need to leave anything for them? And if they are not like me, why would I leave anything for them.”

In other words—they need to either stand on their own two feet or fall!

Ms. Yang is proud of Chinese young soldiers. “One reason our country is safe is because of our army’s attitude. Look at the news. Whether flood, quake, or SARS, the military is there first to help.” This is why she has given millions for the military’s relief efforts. She is intensely patriotic — but she keeps her patriotism in perspective.

Filial Piety and Patriotism

“Some people have skewed notions about patriotism. They say ‘Country first, family second.’ But will people who don’t care for their own parents care for their country? A man from my hometown visited me, looking for a position for his son. I asked him if he helped his mother and he said, ‘I don’t need to. You give her RMB150 a month.’ ‘But she’s in her 60s!’ I said. ‘RMB150 is just enough for her to get by!’ The man hurriedly left.”

Ms. Yang helps charitable causes throughout the country, but her goodwill begins right at home. Her 4-storyed home’s elevator was not installed as a luxury but for her aged father to use. And she treats workers like family. When she learned that I have had the same *baomu* since 1988, she beamed. “I respect you more for that than for anything else!” she said. “I’ve had my *baomu* since 1990 and don’t want to ever replace her. I bought her a house, and her husband works at Yingcai School. Many of my workers have been with me for decades. People’s performance depends on how you treat them.”

Other People’s Shoes

Yang Ying visited the XMU president to find the best teachers for Yingcai. “I seek the best persons, whether I want a *baomu*, worker or teacher,” Yang Ying said. “I treat them fairly and pay good wages because my success depends on them. I always try to put myself in other people’s shoes. When I built the school, I looked at it from a parent’s perspective — what kind of environment will my child have? I consider it from a teacher’s perspective — what will it be like to work here? I provide for them the best I can, and in return I expect them to give me their best. But I want them pressed, not repressed, *yali* but not *yayi*. A tired body is okay, but not a tired heart!”

Soul Mate

In 1999, Ms. Yang remarried. Her new husband has a master’s degree in architecture from Qinghua University. “My husband is like me: diligent and frugal. Every night from 9 pm to midnight he reads and studies. We both know that whatever you do, diligence and persistence are the key to success.”

“And he has a very compassionate heart. One night he roused me from bed so urgently that I thought he’d found a snake in the house. Actually, he had been moved by the plight of a woman who had lost four children to leukemia, and was pleading for help for a fifth child. She needed RMB200,000, so we immediately sent her RMB150,000. But that’s what Buddhists and Christians should do — care for others, not just for ourselves. Selfish to self, generous to others. I’ve heard that you Christians say that one must give 30 percent to others or you don’t see God?”

“I thought it was 10%!” I said. “If it is 30%, I doubt many people will see God any time soon!”

Ms. Yang said, “Although I’ve given much money to help the poor and sick, I don’t think I could do like the Christian workers who go to poor countries and help people face to face. That would be too much for me.”

I politely disagreed, because I can't imagine anything being too difficult for this amazing lady.

Ms. Yang has slowed her pace a little since her remarriage. "No more long days for me," she said. She spends mornings at the office making calls and plans and checking up on her projects. After lunch she runs the treadmill for an hour — "Three days on, one day off — I don't want to overdo it!" And she spends more time now with family.

Success Secret

Just before I left Yang Ying's home, I asked her again to divulge her success secrets, but once again she insisted that the only secret to success was to set a goal, work hard, and never quit. She said, "I was shocked to hear that half of Qinghua graduate students had no goals! What do they think they will do? Goals and attitude are everything! In 1982 my goal was to make RMB22 a month, so that I could give RMB10 to help my brother attend school. Today, two of my brothers have attended university. Now my biggest dream is to start a blood marrow bank." Ms. Yang has lofty visions—and she thinks China is the perfect place to transform her visions into reality.

China—Land of Opportunity

Yang Ying said, "Although I often travel abroad, I will never obtain a foreign passport, and I don't invest overseas. I made my money in China, and my money stays in China. I'll help my children study abroad, but I will not support them staying there because China has greater opportunities than anywhere else on earth. We have a large, growing market, stable government and society, and inexpensive land and labor. Startup costs are low. Taxes are lower than those in Europe. I cannot see why our youths want to seek their fortune abroad when the entire world is coming to China! China has far more opportunities than Europe or the US. To seize them one need only set goals, work hard, bear hardship, and never quit."

"And China is safe!" she said. "Chinese are being kidnapped in other Asian countries, but I can walk the streets in China without fear. And our news doesn't center on problems, filling people with anxiety. No wonder the world is fearful, but China is safe, and peaceful. No other country can compete with us on this."

"And China is now pretty much a market society," she said. "In Jinjiang and Yiwu, for example, 90% of the enterprises are private. Nowadays people can buy planes, boats, ports — just about anything they can afford to pay for."

After a long and rewarding afternoon, I took my leave of Ms. Yang, but before I left, she presented me with some fine tea—although she herself drinks only water—and a promise. "Professor Brown, when your grandchildren are old enough for school, I'll pay for their tuition at XIS!"

My youngest son and his wife are doing volunteer medical work in Africa, I doubt their children will be attending XIS any time soon. But Shannon plans to return to China with his Xiamenese wife Miki after he finishes at Harvard—and I hope to someday take Ms. Yang up on her offer!

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Chapter 6

Gerile—Making Snacks to Put Her Daughter Through College



When our family drove through Inner Mongolia in 1994, it seemed the entire region had but one color—mud. I called it “Mudgolia” because the fields were mud, the deeply rutted roads were mud, the roadside houses and stables for the stout local Mongolian ponies were mud. By the end of day one, our white van was mud-colored; by day two, so were the passengers.

Inner Mongolia was truly like a time machine, whisking us back a century or two or 10. I’d have not been at all surprised if Genghis Khan’s descendants had ridden over the horizon and swooped down upon our van.

The steppes of Inner Mongolia are mythical in their expansiveness, but in 1994 the sun-scorched grass was dead, and I wondered how either people or animals survived. I could have never imagined that China’s vast infrastructure project would within two decades transform even this region and provide the locals with the means to self-sufficiency and even prosperity.

I compared photos I’d taken in 1994 with those I took in 2019, and they were worlds apart. Highways as beautifully designed and landscaped as those in my own Fujian Province have replaced the deeply rutted mud roads. Even more amazing—both sides of the highways, and often the center median as well, are now blanketed in lush grasses and local flowers and shrubs. And in Inner Mongolia, as in the rest of China, enterprising locals have taken full advantage of this infrastructure to not just survive but thrive and prosper. But I was most deeply moved by the Mongolian mother who shared with me how she went from grievous poverty to prosperity, and earned enough from making and selling traditional Inner Mongolian snacks to pay her daughter’s Xiamen University (XMU) tuition!

Mrs. Gerile was waiting for us as we pulled off the highway and drove past the rows of mock Mongolian yurts of wood or cement built for tourists who wanted the Mongolian experience without having to actually rough it. Mrs. Gerile waved and grinned as if we were long lost relatives—though I’d experienced this same hospitality around the entire country even back in 1994. The Chinese’ open-heartedness has never ceased to amaze me.



Fig. 6.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing herdsman Gerile in Xilamuren Grassland, Inner Mongolia on July 10, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

Mrs. Gerile invited us into her concrete home with its large windows that opened onto the grasslands. After she'd laid out bowls of the inner Mongolian snacks that are her stock and trade, she shared her story. At several points she wiped away her tears as she recalled her struggles, even as she smiled, putting a brave front on her story. At a few points I felt like crying myself (Fig. 6.1).

"Such big changes over the decades," she said. "Our family had a flock of sheep when I was a child. It was a large flock, but it belonged to the country. We gained work points in return for herding them. At nine years old, I became a shepherdess and helped my father, but from age 14 I did it alone. Winters were freezing [averages of -10 to -23 centigrade] and my thin clothes were threadbare...."

She stopped, lost in thought, then looked up and saw us waiting. She grinned and said, "But life is very good now! Policies are very good — much better than before."

"Why are policies good now?" I asked.

Mrs. Gerile laughed. "I am illiterate but even I can see China's improvements. So much has changed since I was a child."

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?" I asked.

"My parents, who live only 30 km from here, had six sons and three daughters. I'm now the oldest because my two older brothers have passed away. One sister who worked in the Hohhot Railway Bureau is retired, and the other sister married a teacher in the Siziwang Banner of Inner Mongolia."

"My brothers, and all but one of my younger sisters, went to school but my parents did not think I really needed an education because girls could always just get married.

My brothers didn't have enough to eat at school, so when I was only nine, not only did I help herd the sheep but each day I'd ride a donkey eight km to the school to give them steamed buns and pancakes. I was so small that I never dared dismount the donkey by myself, because I'd not be able to get back on. My father would put me on the donkey at home, and after I'd delivered the food at school, my brothers would put me back on the donkey for the return trip. It was a difficult trip, and I did it every day. And once I was home, I had to help care for the other children, and help herd — but the difficult conditions taught me to work hard!"

"What made conditions so difficult?" I asked.

"Living under the centralized system was very difficult," she said. "We worked daily to earn work points, and if at year end the entire collective earned money, one work point would be exchanged for about RMB1 or even less, but if the collective lost money, work points were useless."

"Only 20 years ago, we still lived in a small earthen house, but I built this house when my son was 20, and I've been here 19 years now. My son was very frugal and saved all he could for this house and to get married. At first, it was just bare walls — not even any windows. But then my son had an accident and died." XMU teacher Jie handed Mrs. Gerile's a tissue to wipe her eyes, and it was a few moments before she could continue.

"I had two children, but my son passed away unexpectedly in junior high school when he was 20; he would be 39 years today had he lived."

"His accident was in the winter, and my daughter's vacation was only days later. And before the school was to restart at New Year, I had spent every penny I had on my son's 20 days in the hospital. I tried borrowing money from everyone, and finally got RMB900, with which I sent my daughter to school in Baotou. I was worried she'd not pass the high school entrance exam because her brother's death hit her very hard, and she cried every day. But she told me, 'I've cried for an entire week. I must stop now.' And she did. She buried her head in the books and passed the exam."

Just as Mrs. Gerile's daughter entered university, a son of her aunt also died in an accident. He had been closer to her than anyone but her brother, and once again she was devastated. "She had a hard time going off to college. She is very diligent and frugal, never spending money. But when she went to XMU, our family condition improved. I had already started selling inner Mongolian traditional snacks. Because my products were very authentic, customers who tasted them snapped them up."

"What motivated your daughter to study so hard?" I asked. "As you said, it was not easy for her to enter university."

"Two things, perhaps," Mrs. Gerile said. "One, I encouraged her strongly. And two, I never let her know that we had no money. When her cousin died, I didn't even have enough money to buy 50 steamed buns for the New Year, so I tried to borrow from other herders, but they only earned RMB300 to RMB400 a month from grazing sheep. School restarted March 1, and I had no money at all for tuition. I went to an uncle who had a job and earned RMB1,000 a month. He loaned me RMB900 to send my daughter to Baotou, but wealthier people would not help me because they thought I could never repay them. You could say that, in effect, those wealthier people regarded me as worthless. I know I should not say this but I can't help it."

“And to this day, the poorer people are, the more I love to help them, because I understand what they are going through. I’ve been there myself. When I needed help, the wealthy people just looked at me as a 44-year-old woman without a son and no prospects in life, but the poorer people helped me out.”

“This reminds me of our family’s *baomu*,” I said. “When she was young, Lixi wanted to study but was not allowed to go to school. Later, she made money to buy pencils and paper, and tried to teach herself. And years later I found that even though we did not pay her a very big salary, she used some of it to help her family back in her Anxi hometown — even though her own family had treated her so badly!”

“My parents also said I could study by myself,” Mrs. Gerile said. “But they did not buy pencils or paper. And what would I write, anyway, when no one would teach me? Besides, I had to spend so much time each day on a bicycle picking up my brothers and sisters who did go to school.”

“Life was so hard back then — not just for me but for everyone, especially because people had so many children. Only with my generation did ethnic minorities begin having fewer children. Life now is generally very good.”

“It looks like things are much better off now,” I said, as I looked around at the large, modern home, the motorcycles in front, and the mock Mongolian yurts for tourists.

“Our town has rich people now. Not me, of course!” she said, laughing. “But we work very hard. I love to work, and I keep at it. I have but one wish — that children can learn some knowledge. I am uneducated, and I envy educated people who can read. My daughter loves learning.”

She reminded me of my old friend Ms. Yang Ying—a woman from southern Fujian Province who said she is uneducated because she had only four years education. Her dream was to earn RMB20 a month as a XMU professor’s maid, so that she could send RMB10 a month home, but today she owns international schools across China, a biotechnology company, and has donated hundreds of millions for education and to help fight poverty. Like Gerile, Yang Ying claimed to be uneducated but I know many highly educated people who have far less culture, and heart, than these two ladies.

“Policies are very good now,” Mrs. Gerile continued. “My husband and I are both over 60 years old, we receive a monthly pension.” She also explained that the state had restricted grazing because of the degradation of the environment, but provided them a subsidy of RMB5,000 per person per year. “At least our basic needs of food and clothing are met, though I am doing other things to supplement our family income.”

Her daughter has finished graduate school and is married to a man working at China National Radio (CNR) in Beijing. “He was a shepherd from west Inner Mongolia,” Mrs. Gerile said. “And he had just started working in Hohhot’s Federation of Literary and Art Circles when he was recruited by the CNR. He passed the exam and was accepted.”

“You are living on the grasslands this summer but where do you live in the winter?” asked Dai Ying, our school’s Party secretary.

“We live here all year round now,” she said. “We have *kang* stoves to keep warm.”

“What do you eat in winters?” Dai asked.

“The town is only four or five km from here, we can ride there on a motorcycle if snows are light. If it snows heavily, I can’t drive the car — I’m 60 now. But we store plenty for the winter — potatoes, radishes, noodles and beef and mutton. Chopped meat and potatoes make a tasty stew, and we boil noodles, steam buns or bake cakes. I think that nowadays we eat as well as you do! We can even eat rice and stir-fry — though our dishes may not be as tasty as yours.”

But as we discovered at lunch, she was a superb cook—which should not have been surprising given the popularity of her homemade inner Mongolian treats.

“I was 23 when I came here, and we were so poor that no one had any money, and people got used to eating from the ‘big pot of rice’ [iron rice bowl]. At least we weren’t starving. But when I was 25, households were contracted to raise over a dozen sheep, though we could no longer just graze them anywhere as in the old days. In summers we grazed them a few dozen miles from here in Xiayingpan. Some people were worried when they started the household system. Each person in a family was allowed three sheep, and our family of three had eight or nine sheep on a few acres. We had no tools nor money to buy any. We could only borrow from each other. A family with a cow would help a family with a plow. And as we worked together, things improved each year. Then I started making traditional inner Mongolian snacks from milk and promoting them myself, including giving free tastes to sightseeing groups. But then some tour guides asked for a commission.”

“Did you pay it?” I asked.

She laughed. “I told them, ‘Some customers make purchases, but many who eat my free samples buy nothing. If I give you a commission, who should I ask to pay for the free samples? If you give me money for the free samples, then I will give you a commission!’”

Although Mrs. Gerile’s products are handmade, they are highly regulated and packaged professionally to ensure quality, hygiene and safety. “Supervision is very strict,” she said. “I make snacks because of the restrictions on grazing. In west Inner Mongolia people can still live a nomadic lifestyle on the vast grasslands, but our grasslands here are much smaller, and we have had nine droughts in the last 10 years. So grazing is limited lest the grasslands are destroyed beyond hope of recovery. Here, we still rely on the sky to eat. If it rains, we have hope, but none when it does not rain. Even though our grassland is small, there is no way for us to manually irrigate it.”

Fujian photographer Mr. Zhu Qingfu said, “Grassland desertification is very serious in some parts of Inner Mongolia. How about here?”

“Since ancient times this place has been pastureland, not desert,” Mrs. Gerile said. “But it is not as good as it used to be when we had fewer people and livestock — some 30 households and 1,000 sheep in a township. Today, each household has 80 to 100 sheep, which is far more than our limited pasture can sustain, so the state gives subsidies to compensate for restrictions on grazing.”

“How much can a sheep sell for now?” asked Mr. Zhu.

“I’m not sure,” Mrs. Gerile said. “Sheep and cattle are very expensive now. Last year, some of my sheep sold for over RMB2,000 each. I only have a few dozen sheep now — those corralled just outside my front door. I rarely sell them except

to my daughter's XMU classmates. They don't like the taste of lamb raised in pens and given commercial feed. They think ours taste much better because they are free range."

"The US is like this too," I said. "Animals are pumped full of hormones to speed their growth and pumped full of antibiotics to prevent disease in the cramped, unnatural environment. Modern meat is full of chemicals."

"Yes, that's why my sheep are so popular. Last year, one of my daughter's classmates wanted to buy some mutton, but I'd run out of it. I called my daughter's mother-in-law, who also raises sheep, and she sold one of hers."

Mrs. Gerile gave us a tour of her modern, spacious kitchen and then whipped up a lunch fit for a king—or a khan. And as we drove off, she stood on her porch waving until we were out of sight.

I was deeply moved by how she'd sacrificed to put her daughter through high school to XMU and even graduate school, never letting on that they were virtually penniless. I've interviewed many students and, without exception, their stories are also inspiring. I'd love to compile a few dozen of these dreamers' tales into a book.

I'm thankful to spend so much time with China's youths because this generation is helping to bring about the Chinese Dream. But that dream may have been stillborn had it not been for the sacrifices of selfless and courageous people like Mrs. Gerile.

In closing—a quick word about the nomadic lifestyle. Many foreign media reports have bemoaned the changes in the nomadic lifestyle across China. And yet the very same media also criticizes China's environmental degradation which is largely due to over-grazing—especially in the highlands of Tibet, home to many of the world's greatest rivers, and it can take decades for a patch of grass to regrow. This problem is not uniquely Chinese, of course—nor is it new.

In the 1800s, people wrote of the US state of Arizona's vast grasslands, with grass as high as a horse's belly. But over-grazing transformed it to desert. Until recently, scientists thought such desertification was irreversible, but nature is resilient if given half a chance. Grassland has recovered—but only after banning or at least restricting grazing.

Even though the cultural impact on the nomadic lifestyle is unfortunate, there is no choice. I met Mongolians who persist in their nomadic lifestyle, but the land is dying, their livestock are dying—and their children are leaving for better pastures.

Fortunately, China has tried to find ways to protect both the environment and livelihood—and culture as well. In Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and the deep valleys of west Yunnan, home to the musical Lisu tribe whose slash-and-burn agriculture had devastated the environment, the government has hired tens of thousands of the very people who helped destroy the environment and taught them how to protect the environment as forest rangers or river conservationists.

Flora and fauna are both making a comeback—including many endangered species that were thought to be beyond hope. And these former nomads are not only thankful to have a more comfortable and secure life but also feel pride in becoming "environmental experts." After all, although these nomads led simple lives, they were not at all ignorant. They could see for themselves that, especially with climate change, their lifestyle was not sustainable. Today they take pride in protecting their

ancestral lands while at the same time giving their children a happier and healthier future.

In my eyes, this is win–win both for the people and for the planet.

China has made mistakes, of course, but thanks to its systematic approach to problems, whether environmental, economic or health, it learns from mistakes and presses forward. Hopefully, the rest of the world can learn from China’s experiences.

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Chapter 7

Zhang Fang—Documenting Inner Mongolia’s Environmental Fight



Every filmmaker has at least one story that he or she is born to tell. For me, this is it. It has been an immensely meaningful journey.

—Dan Krauss, Director of Oscar-Nominated short documentary, *The Death of Kevin Carter: Casualty of the Bang Bang Club*.

If every filmmaker was truly born to tell one story, the photographer Mr. Zhang Fang was certainly born to document China’s desertification. His passion and persistence drove him to walk some 40,000 km across China’s deserts, living with the people whose lands and livelihoods are being destroyed by the encroaching deserts. The problem of balancing economic and environmental initiatives while preserving, as much as possible, traditional lifestyles, is so daunting that Mr. Zhang said at times he felt as depressed as the photographer Kevin Carter, who took his own life in despair only four months after winning the Pulitzer Prize for his photograph in Sudan of a culture waiting for a young child to die (Fig. 7.1).

Yet even after two decades of documenting the problems and potential solutions, he remains optimistic, and keen to share his insights on the desert and the people struggling to survive from it.

“Can you share what you’ve witnessed?” I asked Mr. Zhang. “What motivated you to press for ecological protection?”

“I began a photographic record,” Mr. Zhang explained, “because it seemed sand and dust are everywhere — even reaching Beijing. But where is the sand coming from, and why is it spreading? So I did a sociological survey of the literature, and my inspiration was from Fei Xiaotong.”

Fei Xiaotong was China’s most famous sociologist and anthropologist. He first majored in medicine but, like Lu Xun, who also started out in medicine, concluded that China’s greatest problem was not medical but spiritual. In a 2002 *China Daily* interview he said, “I abandoned the lifelong aim of treating people’s physical diseases, and went after the greater goal of curing social illnesses and injustice.”¹ Fei turned to the study of sociology and politics, and from the 1930s emphasized rural development. In 1939, he published “Peasant Life in China: a Field Study of Country Life” in the *Yangtze Valley*, his Ph.D. thesis about a village near his birthplace.

¹ https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-04/27/content_437888.htm.



Fig. 7.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing Zhang Fang in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia on July 10, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

“I work for the Photographers Association in the Inner Mongolia Federation of Literary and Art Circles,” Mr. Zhang said. “In the year 2000, I obtained a three-year leave, so I could go deep into the field and interview people facing this problem. And I did this at my own expense. At that time, I earned only RMB600 a month [US\$100], so the Publicity Department of the Party Committee of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region wrote me a letter of introduction saying ‘Comrade Zhang Fang is going to the desert area to conduct interviews, and that all agencies and units are requested to provide strong support.’ Had the Department of Agriculture, Forestry, Animal Husbandry and other units not been so supportive, I would not have even had a place to live there.”

“I obtained transportation and even a desert guide, but once I got there, I found that the pace of pastoral life was even slower than I could have imagined. It was very challenging to nail people down for appointments. I’d set a time for three days later, only to find they’d totally forgotten about it.”

Mr. Zhang placed a large pictorial book on the table between us. “I did finally compile this book on desertification, beginning at the Yellow River and ending at the Great Wall. It has not been published but I have held two exhibitions featuring the problem — one in Beijing and the other in Hohhot.”

Mr. Zhang pointed to a photo and said, “This was in Dengkou County, about 350 km from Hohhot. This old man’s place originally had a very good environment but the encroaching desert forced him to move three times until eventually he was driven to the very edge of the Yellow River. If this continues, they will literally have

no place to live. You can see his sheep in the photo but there is no grass, so they are gnawing on broken branches and bark. Behind his house — nothing but sand. How can he survive? How can we halt the desertification, so that he is not forced to move a fourth time?”.

I was astounded at the scope and detail of how desertification is destroying land and livelihoods across Inner Mongolia. “Local Mongolians asked me, ‘What can we do?’” Mr. Zhang said. He himself was no expert, but he hoped that his meticulous documentation would get the attention of decision makers who could invest in tackling the problem.

Mr. Zhang said. “This book tells the problem of desertification through photographs and stories. In the last section I explained the causes and made suggestions to solve it. I got many of these ideas when I shared my findings with ecologists. But the man paying most attention to desertification is not an ecologist but a scientist, Qian Xuesen, who was indispensable in China’s development of atomic bombs and missiles. He is very concerned about our country’s grasslands. This photo shows that Inner Mongolian grassland used to be very lush but it was destroyed by the trampling and gnawing of livestock. And we didn’t have good roads then, cars just went everywhere, destroying the turf beneath them. Now every village has good asphalt roads, so at least that problem is solved.”

“You compiled this book almost 15 years ago,” I said. “Has there been any improvement since then?”

Mr. Zhang said, “The good thing now is that everyone is aware there is a problem. Back then, people were just focused on survival. Today, the destructive traditional grazing has given way to modern animal husbandry. But it is not realistic or sustainable to simply ban herders from breeding and have them rely solely on the state for their livelihoods. Herdsmen must have their own source of survival and be self-sufficient. The country has now realized this. As you can see in this photo, the pasture had been badly damaged, but later it was covered in dense grass.”

“How was this pasture restored?” I asked.

“The biggest influence has been President Xi Jinping’s emphasis on promoting people’s welfare while also protecting nature,” Mr. Zhang said. “But even though everyone is aware of the problem and wants to solve it, we can’t do that without systematic, detailed investigation and research. The fact that some places have improved suggests desertification may be manageable. The problem is how to protect the ecology while at the same time helping to provide people with livelihoods that do not destroy fragile environments.”

“Yes, this is a problem even in my own Fujian Province,” I said. “Many areas now forbid pig raising because of environmental concerns. But what can local Mongolians do instead of raising sheep?”

“Tourism development is an option,” Mr. Zhang said. “If 50 people in a village of 200 engage in tourism, they can earn much more than grazing their sheep, and desertification can be reversed. For lands facing desertification, national law only allows one sheep for 108 mu (666.6 sq meters). More than this is unsustainable and leads to desertification. I worked hard to investigate and confirm this.”

"I believe it," I said. "Arizona, in the southwestern US, is now a desert, but 150 years ago a cowboy wrote in his diary that the lush, tall grass reached his horse's belly. Overgrazing by sheep destroyed it."

"Yes, it is the same in any country," Mr. Zhang said. "An Australian ecologist said their desertification is purely the result of greedy ranchers who won't leave a place until their livestock eat the last blade of grass and the desert drives him away. Australia now limits the number of sheep. And the Dust Bowl in the 1930s led the US to restrict grazing."

America's infamous Dust Bowl showed that improper farming was as dangerous as overgrazing to a fragile ecology. Farmers who didn't understand the need for "dryland farming" on the plains, much of which received less than 10 inches of rain per year, used machines for deep plowing of virgin topsoil. This destroyed the native deep-rooted grasses that had trapped moisture even during droughts and windstorms. The droughts of the 1930s turned the soil to dust, and "black blizzards" that reached even to New York City reduced visibility to less than 1 sq meter on the plains. The "Black Sunday" dust storm on April 14, 1935, displaced up to 300 million tons of topsoil from the prairie. The Dust Bowl affected 400,000 km², and by 1936 losses to farmers reached US\$25 million per day (the equivalent of US\$460 million in 2019).

Sadly, even after such a disaster, giant US agri-businesses continue to this day to destroy the land with ecologically unsustainable farming.

"A man from the China Agricultural University visited me," Mr. Zhang said. "He said, after thorough discussions, 'Mr. Zhang, you were able to answer all of my questions. But if even after three days and nights you have still not even finished describing in detail the problem, this really is a big problem indeed!'"

"Mr. Zhang, I'm curious as to why you persist in this?" I said. "Many people are now aware of this problem, yet they haven't devoted their energy and money to it like you have."

"Actually, even in my youth I was very curious and liked to explore problems," Mr. Zhang said. "As for why photograph all of this? Around 1995, while on official business, I would often see lots of fat sheep on the prairie in the autumn but by winter they were all dead. I asked the herders why they died, and they always blamed bad sheds and bad fodder, but I investigated this, and found they'd mainly died from cold and starvation. Sheep, just like people, struggle with Inner Mongolia's bitterly cold winters. It's not only cold but there is nothing to eat, so sheep eat the grass roots as well, which means there will be no grass the following year."

"During a photography exhibition, a colleague said to me, 'If you have a truly original story, and it is truly gold, you will always shine.' I have always wanted to do something big and make a difference — but on what topic? When I witnessed the fragility of these herdsmen's lives, I knew that if I did not shoot this topic, I would regret it for the rest of my life. Once I had this idea, I could not sleep for a month, although I did not dare tell anyone because I had to first think out clearly what I would shoot, and how, and how to post it and where?"

"I shared my idea with my leader, who passed it up to the ministerial leader in charge. He said, 'Other photographers go in groups of 50 or 60 to shoot something like this but CoMr.ade Zhang Fang wants to go alone, live amidst the people and

explore and document the causes of this problem. It's commendable, and I support everything needed.' After this, everyone knew there was no turning back for me."

"When I told a good buddy who has a photo agency that I wanted to shoot desertification, he paled and went silent. 'What's wrong?' I asked him. He said he too had wanted to do the same thing but kept delaying it until he had enough funds. 'Go for it!' he said."

"So you see, many people have such ideas, but then don't actually carry them out. This man gave me a motorcycle key and said, 'Get on the bike and get financial sponsors, otherwise how can you do it?'"

"What was it like filming this?" I asked.

"Well, I really suffered," Mr. Zhang said. "The nomads on the grasslands lived in yurts but they would not let me stay with them. They said they had a small house for me in the back — but it was a donkey shed! I kicked the donkey out so that I could sleep. And some locals did not trust me, thinking I would give exposure on their lives. The lack of funds was not my only problem."

"Did you win their confidence?" I asked.

"I did! I borrowed an old car, and then bought it for RMB7,000. When I set off alone from Hohhot, I wore the same kind of old tattered clothes as the herdsmen. Otherwise, I'd never be able to get close enough to them to truly understand their conditions. I met with them by day and by night I stayed in small hostels for just RMB2 to RMB3. But I was also in pain both physically and emotionally. After I finished the project, and the Beijing photographic exhibition was over, I was a little depressed and just didn't want to think about it anymore. You asked why I'd not published the book yet. I spent nearly 10 years on this, and probably felt like Kevin Carter who committed suicide at age 33, only four months after winning the Pulitzer Prize for his photo of a vulture watching a starving Sudanese child."

"This must have also taken a toll on your family. Do they support you?"

"My family has truly invested a lot in helping me. But I am an adult, and was a soldier for three years. I didn't want my family to spend money on me. I did it all by myself. What pains me is that no matter how much I promote it, people still don't grasp the scope of the problem. And some local leaders feared that revealing the problems would reflect badly on them. People's misunderstandings and lack of objectivity hurt me emotionally. I don't fear suffering or hardship, but I am troubled by people's thinking. The crux of the desertification problem is still people. I boldly proposed not to put desertification management in the forestry department but to set up a grass industry department. Now China has established the National Forestry and Grassland Administration, which was originally meant for serving economic construction."

"Since ancient times, Chinese have valued trees over grass. Words related to grass, such as 'grass mustard,' 'wall top grass,' etc., don't have good meanings. I think the Ministry of Civil Affairs should oversee the department of ecological management because the problem is closely related to population layout and management. For example, people in pastoral areas mainly rely on meat. The state needs to plan on how to respect ethnic minorities' eating habits while producing food."

"Do people listen to your suggestions?" I asked.

Mr. Zhang shrugged. “Many people feel this is not my concern. As a photographer, I should just take photos, publish them and forget it — but I can’t. To document this problem, I have walked over 40,000 km, and really did settle down and became one with the herdsmen. I walked back and forth from Hohhot, sometimes four or five times, going as far west as Gansu Province. I interviewed Ren Fengming, a genuine sand control man. He contracted 450 *mu* of land, and made enough income to send his three children to college. He earned RMB100,000 from that land. It’s truly magical. He’s smart, and thoughtful, and knows the key issue in the desert is water, so he invented the ‘plum blossom well.’ And to limit grazing he used earth and rocks to keep animals out, and the grassland gradually recovered. Later, he planted reeds, and a year later he planted fruit trees amidst the reeds. In the fall, he cut the reeds and sold them to factories, earning RMB50,000. After much trial and error, he has transformed his sandy land into a fertile, life-sustaining oasis.”

“How on earth did he come up with these ideas?” I asked.

“He was forced to innovate to survive. He had no choice but to keep trying.”

“Are others learning from his example?” I asked.

Mr. Zhang shrugged again. “Very few, he said. ‘People all say, ‘If the government gives me the money first, I’ll try.’ But Ren Fengming is a real hero.”

“How did you find people to interview?” I asked.

“The forestry department found some people,” said Mr. Zhang. “But after I learned more about them, I didn’t feel any were worth the interview. Most only did a little work on their own and then relied on heavy government funding. But Ren did not have anyone’s support. He did everything by himself. He once said, ‘Israel is great in desertification control. If we had 10,000 people like me in China, our desertification control would definitely be better than Israel.’”

“How should China combat desertification?” I asked him.

“The problem is not technological but human — a problem of human consciousness. In the final analysis, desertification is still a sociological problem. Two years ago, Ren Fengming told me, ‘I am old now and can’t continue, but my children are all in Xi’an and other places. They are doing well, and young people’s thoughts are different from mine. They want to build a villa on my place.’ I told them that this too was progress, because the ecology would be maintained, and their children want themselves to be comfortable in old age.”

“Do you think your work will have any long-term impact?” I asked.

“I’ve worn out my shoes visiting government departments in Beijing to draw attention to desertification. I was so determined to make everyone aware of the problem that I even fought with some departments. This can only be solved if everyone works together — not just one or two people or departments. Some Xinhua News Agency friends who read my photographic report said it should be sent to leaders across the country. And CCTV Channel One News once reported my work. CCTV did not report much about Inner Mongolia back then, and I remember that my project was reported right after some news reports about the King of Jordan.”

“My work has influenced Inner Mongolian leaders to adopt some new policies, and now the entire country is concerned about working on ecological protection. At

least some people now understand the problem and such strategies as enclosing to prevent overgrazing.”

“What are your plans for the future?” I asked, because it did not seem like Mr. Zhang was ready to give up his fight yet.

“I’m thinking of waiting until I retire and then retracing my previous trips and documenting the changes. But then I want to publish a book with short stories about people and culture — not any more books like this one. This is too political.”

Desertification is indeed a great political issue, but frankly, I can’t imagine a man who has trekked 40,000 km through desert to ever give up the fight entirely. As Dan Krauss said, “Every filmmaker has at least one story that he or she is born to tell.” And I think it is fate, or *yuánfèn* for Mr. Zhang and for the rest of us that he was born to enlighten us on this growing global problem.

I admire Elon Musk for his vision and courage to tackle so many disparate issues—electric cars, solar energy, underground tunnels for transportation. But when he talks about devoting his entire fortune to colonizing and terraforming Mars, I can’t help but wonder why people like him don’t devote their talent and wealth to terraforming our own little planet. They act as if the earth were hopelessly doomed, and yet restoring deserts would take a fraction of the resources needed to get people to Mars and restore the dead planet’s atmosphere. In addition to the costs, the red planet has only 1 percent as much water as earth, and radiation is deadly. And given that terraforming Mars is estimated to take 1,000 years—why not fix our little home planet now?

Fortunately, some have begun thinking this way. There is even talk now of terraforming the 8.6 million sq km Sahara Desert—a desert almost the size of the US. Although some doubt it can be done, many say that China has given the world hope with its successful Kubuqi Ecological Restoration Project in Inner Mongolia, which over 30 years greened one third of the Kubuqi desert with 70 different plant species. *TIME* magazine noted the UN Environment Programme estimates this project will be worth US\$1.8 billion over 50 years, and French President Macron declared after the UN Paris Climate agreement, “Now China leads.”

“[China] is the world’s largest renewable-energy investor [nearly US\$90 billion last year], and employs 40 percent of the sector’s global workforce, aiming for 13 million jobs by 2020.”²

I know of course that some have warned restoration of the Sahara could harm the Amazon basin, etc. Global climates are complex. But regardless of complexities yet unknown, desertification is too grave to ignore. I hope governments, and people like Elon Musk, will learn from China’s lead and Mr. Zhang’s vision, and try terraforming our home planet before they spend trillions to terraform long dead planets.

² Campbell, Charlie, “China’s Greening of the Vast Kubuqi Desert Is a Model for Land Restoration Projects Everywhere,” *Time* magazine, July 27, 2017.

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Chapter 8

Zhao Xuan, A Retired Teacher from Xi'an



Even at 82, retired teacher Ms. Zhao Xuan still has more energy than I do. I was excited to hear her story because Xi'an had changed so much since I'd first visited in 1990 for an international management conference. "Can you share how life has changed since your childhood, how you became a teacher — and what accounts for China's big changes?"

Ms. Zhao said, "I was born in 1937, and my family's situation was good because my father ran a textile factory. We are from Hebei, not Shaanxi but after the Lugou Bridge Incident of 1937, my father moved to Xi'an with his family and everyone in the factory."

The Lugou Bridge Incident, also known as the Marco Polo Bridge or Double Seven Incident, was a battle between the Chinese and the Japanese troops, considered a landmark event in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. Tensions between China and Japan had risen ever since 1931 when Japan invaded northeast China and created the puppet state of "Manchukuo." (Fig. 8.1)

"Our family was in Xingtai, Hebei Province, when the Japanese occupied northeast China. After the Lugou Bridge Incident, the war quickly spread to my hometown, so we moved to Xi'an. I spent half of my youth here in Xi'an, studying in middle school and the Northwestern Polytechnical University. After graduation, I was assigned to Beijing and later went to the Xinjiang Institute of Technology. Later I was transferred back to Xi'an because my father lived here. As I studied mechanical engineering, I first worked at the Shaanxi Institute of Mechanical Engineering, and then the University of Petroleum until I retired. My life is very ordinary. Basically, I've just been a teacher all my life."

"You said your home conditions were good when you were young, but how about the general situation in Xi'an at that time?"

"Xi'an was relatively backward," she said. "Not very developed. The roads were dirt and gravel. People's lives were very poor, and the economy was badly off. Even 10 years ago it was not that good but in the last few years Xi'an has developed extremely fast."

"Why has it developed so fast this past decade?" I asked her.



Fig. 8.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing retired teacher Zhao Xuan in Xi'an, Shaanxi on July 13, 2019. *Photo by Jie Shangfeng*

“Not just Xi'an but the entire country has developed rapidly in the past 10 years. Our national policies are very effective.”

“Even farmers have said that to me,” I said. “Many have told me that China has changed so much during the past decade thanks to the good policies, and also because the government understands their needs. But what has made this one decade so special?”

“The Belt and Road Initiative has helped Xi'an. Busses and other transportation are very good now, it is now very convenient for us to go out. But northwest China will always develop. Although north Shaanxi was very backward, this is where the Chinese revolution was born and the people are resilient to this day. North Shaanxi is now developing very well, with industry developing in the entire Xi'an High-tech Zone. The revenue of the high-tech zone accounts for a big part of Xian's GDP.”

“My University of Petroleum is a school managed by Shaanxi Province, but in recent years many schools run by Xi'an are developing even better. Xi'an schools' salaries are even higher than ours because Xi'an's economy is better than Shaanxi's, so Xi'an schools are richer. But I think Shaanxi Province should not only manage universities in Xi'an but also help universities in other cities that are even poorer.”

“When you were young, did you see many differences before and after liberation?”

“China was relatively backward before liberation,” Ms. Zhao said. “We didn't have much. Our situation was fine during the 1950s when China advocated 'advance

through science,' but it was not good during the Cultural Revolution, when we had our twists and turns. But development has been rapid since reform and opening up."

"What have been the biggest changes in Xi'an after reform and opening up? Xi'an was completely different when I first came here in 1990."

"In the early days of reform and opening up, northwest China lagged behind the coastal areas. Coastal cities such as Shenzhen and Xiamen developed relatively well, one of my children went to study at Xiamen University. Although Xi'an had many universities, their conditions were not as good, and it was not easy getting news from the rest of China. But since the establishment of the Xi'an High-tech Zone, development has sped up a lot. Moreover, China has relied on itself to develop, unlike countries that relied on attacking other countries to develop."

"China was certainly capable of bullying other nations had it wanted to," I said. "I'm amazed by the advanced weapons invented by China over the past 3,000 years."

Ms. Zhao agreed that ancient China could have conquered the world had they cared to, "But I think Chinese people are more loyal and honest, and we believe in the golden mean," she said.

"Yes, I agree. Balance. For example, many people think foreign trade is Xi Jinping's only goal for the Belt and Road Initiative, but it is also important to help China's western regions to develop."

Ms. Zhao smiled. "All our trains now go to Europe. Next time we go to Europe, we don't need to take a plane. We can go there by train."

"How long would it take?" I asked.

"Well, it would probably take a long time," she admitted.

"Today we can take a train from Hong Kong to Beijing in only 10 h," I said. "But in the mid-1990s the drive from Xiamen to Shenzhen took me 18 exhausting hours, and trucks threw rocks on Shenzhen's gravel road right through my windshield. Today, expressways connect even the remotest corners of the country."

"Yes," Ms. Zhao agreed. "China's roads are very well maintained."

"When I drove through Xi'an on my way to Tibet in 1994, many of the roads were still dirt — or mud if it was raining. But today China has the best road and rail networks in the world — which is why Xi'an and other cities are now prospering."

"I took an American train from Chicago to Los Angeles," Ms. Zhao said. "When I visited my eldest son and eldest daughter in the US in 2009 and 2015. They bought me a sleeper ticket, but that sleeper was very small and the air-conditioning was very cold. It was freezing cold, and it was hard to breathe because the air was not circulating. That sleeper was very backward compared to Chinese trains."

"I hope American trains can catch up with China's someday," I said.

"The Belt and Road Initiative seems very popular in many countries," Ms. Zhao said. "When President Xi proposed it, he said that we had One Belt from Xinjiang, China to Europe."

"I think Xi Jinping got his idea for the Belt and Road Initiative 20 years ago, when he was in Fujian, because he knew Fujian was the ancient start of the maritime silk route."

Ms. Zhao poured some more tea, then said, "Much has changed over the years, but in reality, my standard of living all along has been okay — though of course

conditions are much better now. My retirement salary has been raised 11 times, and though not big, it continues to increase. Given how many people are in our country, it is incredible for everyone to improve even a little.”

“Yes, I agree,” I said. “I saw an elderly man walking on the side of the road this morning. In fact, I saw many retirees out walking. They walked slowly, but they seemed healthy.”

“Medical care is continuing to improve,” Ms. Zhao said. “Not long ago, few Chinese lived past 40 or 50 years old. Nowadays, there are many in their 80s or 90s, and even some over 100.”

“Just a last question,” I said. “You said your living conditions have been acceptable, even in the past. But how was it for ordinary people?”

Ms. Zhao shrugged. “I’m not very familiar with this. But in our area, farmers seem quite affluent because they live in the suburbs. I went to get a haircut and met an old lady who was no longer farming, and I asked her how she is doing now. She said that farmers like her were relocated and given new homes, and they easily earn RMB10,000 to RMB20,000 a month in rent — much more than I make! Of course, that’s for the entire family, but even so, farmers in the suburbs are well off now. The rural areas may not be as good but state policies give rural people advantages, because President Xi has insisted that no one be left below certain levels. China’s population is too big — much bigger than the US. But that can also be good. We are not afraid of the US blockade because our domestic market is huge.”

I said, “What really interests me is that China has changed so much over the past few decades but the changes in your own life have not been that big.”

“Actually, my life has changed a lot,” she said. “My salary is much higher. When I just graduated from university, my monthly salary was only RMB48.”

“What do you think the future holds for China?” I asked.

“I think China will be very good in the future,” she said. “Many new things appear, and very quickly — things like WeChat. I can’t understand much of it, or keep up. I’m outdated, because there are so many things on the Internet and smart gadgets that I think are too difficult to use — and not really that useful! Changes are so fast that they are overwhelming. Youth can keep up but not old folks like us! I told a former colleague a few days ago that maybe old folks should just buy self-driving cars because now we don’t even know how to drive and getting around is inconvenient.”

“Actually, I’ve only driven our car about three times in two years,” I said. “And then only for the annual car inspection. It’s much easier to order a Didi car, and I don’t have to worry about finding a parking place.”

Ms. Zhao nodded. “I don’t know what the future holds — but there is hope. We all hope the future will be even better.”

“I agree. Everyone talks about the Chinese Dream, but in fact everyone in the world shares the same dream.”

“Yes, everyone in the world simply wants to live a good life. But Trump said that the life of Chinese is too good. Does he have a brain disease?”

I laughed. “I remember that even Chinese beggars were using mobile phones before American businessmen had started using them. Nowadays, beggars display

QR Codes so that you can donate to them with Alipay or WeChat! But in Western countries most people don't even know what a QR code is."

"Yes, many foreign countries do not use WeChat payment. In China, even farmers selling vegetables accept pay by WeChat — even for a purchase of only RMB1!"

We had another cup of tea, took some selfies together, and then I bid my host goodbye. Her story was quite different from others I had heard. Even in the old days, life had not been that bad. But even so, like virtually every other person I've met in China, she has seen great changes in the nation as a whole, and her own life was much better than 20 years ago. And she was not only well aware of the changes in China but in the rest of the world as well, and was proud of what her homeland had accomplished when so many other countries were even worse off than 30 years ago.

I think Ms. Zhao should come out of retirement and teach the younger generation about the Chinese Dream, because I think many of them really have no idea how fortunate they are to live this day in this country.

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Chapter 9

Bu Wenjun: Inheriting Wei-Family's Brick-Carving Craftsmanship



Countries the world over struggle with balancing modernization while preserving traditional practices and philosophies—and no nation on earth has more to preserve than China. Every inch of this country is steeped in history and heritage. I remember climbing a remote mountain and feeling I was a trailblazer, perhaps the first person ever to ascend that steep cliff. And then I came across granite steps that I learned had been built there 1000 years earlier by monks at a temple on the peak.

Tan Kah Kee, the founder of Xiamen University (XMU), known as the “Henry Ford of Asia,” was so concerned with preserving Chinese culture that when he built XMU in 1921, he ensured the architecture was a marriage of the East and West to remind future generations that China should embrace modern international education while at the same time preserving traditional Chinese morals and ideals.

Thankfully, now that China is prospering, governments across the nation are investing in preserving their rich past. Many city governments have created textbooks on local culture, and children can learn to make traditional Chinese paper cuts or perform with puppets. But a young puppeteer told me it would take five years to master just the basics of a 19-string marionette and few young people are willing to put such effort into a skill that won't earn much of a living.

Preserving and perpetuating ancient practices and customs is such a challenge the world over that it requires bottom-up passion, as well as top-down initiatives. Fortunately, across China I have met people like Mr. Bu Wenjun, who has turned his passion for cultural heritage into a profitable profession that helps fight poverty by providing skills and jobs.

“Why are you so passionate about the Wei brick sculpture?” I asked Mr. Bu. “I’ve seen similar brick sculpture even in south Fujian, but I know little about it.”

“I married into it!” Mr. Bu said, laughing. “I love culture, and I married a girl in the brick-carving family in my own village — literally right next door.”

Wei Xiaozu, the patriarch of the Wei-Family Brick Carving, learned his craft near the end of the Qing Dynasty, when he helped build Gansu Province's Luojia Temple. He became a master brick carver by serving as an apprentice to three master brick carvers from Hebei Province. Wei Ziaozu and the second-generation carvers



Fig. 9.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing Bu Wenjun, the inheritor of the Wei-family Brick Sculpture, in Longde, Ningxia on July 15, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

were illiterate, which hindered their advance, but Wei Shixiang, the third generation and Mr. Bu's father-in-law, had studied in a private school, he appreciated Chinese culture—especially opera—and when he was 13, he began learning the craft from his father. Thanks to his passion, the Wei-Family brick carving became famous in Ningxia and nearby regions for its exquisite detail.

“Wei Shixiang told me he feared the art might be lost,” Mr. Bu said. “I felt it was a wonderful heritage that needed to be protected and perpetuated, even though it seemed difficult to learn.” (Fig. 9.1).

“So, you told him you’d pass it on?” I asked.

“Actually, I didn’t say much to him because the Wei family would only pass their secrets to a son, so that it stayed in the family. They feared that if they passed the tradition to a daughter, she would marry outside the family and take the Wei-family secrets with her. The problem, though, was that he didn’t have a son — only a daughter! I often told him times had changed and that he needed to change with the times, because it would be a shame to lose a craft that had evolved through three generations.”

“And he agreed?” I asked.

“Well, no. He was actually a very stubborn person. In 1988, I asked Zhang Guoqin, deputy curator of the Longde County Cultural Center, to persuade him. But even with both of us working on him, he refused.”

“I understand his feelings,” I said. “All across China I’ve met old-timers in mountain villages who jealously guard their secrets. Fujian, for example, is home to

Southern Shaolin Kung Fu, and it seems that every Fujian village boasts having the most lethal martial arts, and they won't share them with outsiders. But I'm curious how you eventually persuaded your father-in-law to divulge his secrets to you, an outsider?"

"Well, the day he refused, he could not sleep the entire night. After brooding over it until dawn, he met me and said, 'I see it clearly now. And since the government is supportive of this, I can't let the craft die in my hands. I will pass this family's brick carving craft on to you.'" And a signing ceremony was held to officially bequeath the craft to Mr. Bu.

"I had long assisted my father-in-law at the manual work but after he officially designated me as his successor, he taught me every detail of the entire process — how to mix the mud, carve, build a kiln, and fire the final product. And that's why today I am a master brick carver."

"But what has driven you to embrace such a difficult craft?"

"First of all, I have loved it since I was a child," Mr. Bu said. "I visited the craft site many times and saw this was truly a very Chinese craft, and the more I knew about it, the more I felt it could not be lost. In 1989, while I was laboring at another area, a TV station interviewed my father-in-law, but that was when he was still opposed to passing his secrets outside of the family. When I saw that interview, I was more determined than ever to master brick carving, and when I returned, I put all of my energy into it.

"In Hubei Province, I saw a maser clay block craftsman, but I was certain we could do much better than him. But it was not as easy as I had thought."

"Did you get discouraged?" I asked.

"Yes, at times. I've persisted for over 40 years now, but I've had so many difficulties. I dug nine earth kilns, but the kilns were destroyed when they built roads and houses. Other villagers tried to master brick carving, but they lacked the knowledge and perseverance, and gave up. Another barrier was the poor economic situation. The government would not loan more than RMB50,000, so I borrowed some money from relatives and friends."

"I purchased just enough production tools to get started and slowly built up the process. But after some government officials visited my site, they enthusiastically supported our development. As we improved, I actually turned a profit, which I used to refine and expand production. But some of our villagers opposed us. They tried to shatter my confidence by saying we just worked all day with mud and dirt, for a while even my wife was unsure of this! But I believed this brick carving was very meaningful and worth doing, and I persisted."

"Over time, not just China but other countries began to pay more attention to intangible cultural heritage, and we continued to improve. Now, looking back over 40-odd years of development, I encountered many unimaginable difficulties, but I continued to develop and innovate."

Mr. Bu's innovations have helped double productivity. In making the mud, for example, he replaced animal hair with cotton, which helped reduce cracking during the firing process. He has also been creative in meeting the evolving demands of his

expanding markets. He now has over 300 types of products that are sold in many nearby provinces.

“As I innovated, I realized that this could not only be an intangible cultural heritage but also a profitable, sustainable cultural industry that could help local farmers prosper and in turn allow us to expand even further.”

The Wei-family brick carving has indeed gained official respect for both preserving ancient culture and helping to fight poverty. In 2011, Mr. Bu invested RMB500,000 to establish the Longde Wei-family Brick Carving Company, Ltd. He employs over 30 workers, including handicapped people. In 2016, Longde County invested in building the Guyuan Brick Carving (Liupan Wei-family Brick Carving) Heritage Protection Base. After its completion in 2017, they invested more than RMB1.8 million for a poverty alleviation project. Yuhe Village's Wei-family's Brick Carving Workshop for Poverty Alleviation can produce 600,000 blue bricks and 5000 brick carvings each year.

“But what drove you to persevere for over 40 years when you encountered such difficulties, villagers scoffed at you, and even your wife had her doubts?”

“Well, for one thing, it was also a hobby,” Mr. Bu said. “The other is that I really believed it had promise. The demand for brick carving today is very large, and we are accepting more and more orders.”

“Yes, I was surprised a few days ago to see elegantly carved bricks in a beautiful Bed and Breakfast right beneath the Great Wall. Some of our team members thought they may have come from your factory. So business is doing well now?” I asked.

“Yes, but we have two main problems. One is that there are still few people with talent. And the other is that the economic situation is still not particularly good.”

As Mr. Bu gave us a tour of their facility, which included fascinating dioramas of the process from extracting the raw materials to the final carving and firing, I could see why they have difficulty finding talent. As with the Quanzhou puppeteers, Dehua porcelain craftsman or Hangzhou silk makers, it is hard to find youths willing to invest their years in mastering a craft that will probably never earn them enough profit for a living. But there is hope. Over the past decade I've met many Chinese youths who have shown pride in the past, and are willing to sacrifice to master and perpetuate their cultural heritage.

As a child, I loved visiting colonial Williamsburg and other historic areas in the US. The US of course only has 250 years of history versus China's 5000 years, but many American cities pay people to master traditional crafts such as quilting or blacksmithing or silversmithing. They work in real shops much like those of 300 years ago, and tourists can watch them produce crafts that are sold in the shops or to museums. In many cases, these artisans have helped generate enough tourism revenue to cover the costs.

It does not take that many people to preserve a traditional art—just enough for whom an interest becomes a hobby that turns into a passion—people like Mr. Bu. I hope Chinese schools will continue to expand heritage textbooks, as well as give students opportunities to try their hand at various crafts. This may kindle their passion, and the perseverance needed to ensure that these cultural treasures do not die out. Mr. Bu is working to kindle youths' interest in this craft. His company has become

a practice base for Longde County students from primary and secondary schools upward to learn about their intangible cultural heritage.

Today, the Wei-family Brick Sculpture is not only on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, but—and this really excites me—five of the sixth-generation “inheritors” are foreigners!

Now I know what I can do after I retire from XMU!

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Chapter 10

Zhang Jianlong—From Migrant Worker to Cattle King



Mr. Zhang Jianlong, Longde’s “Cattle King,” grinned as he showed me around his modern cattle facility at the Tenglong Animal Husbandry Cooperative in Zhangshu Village, Shatang Town, Longde County, Guyuan of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.

A cow mooed softly and nuzzled my palm contently as I scratched its chin. The cattle stalls were clean, and the landscape outside reminded me of a garden rather than a farm or ranch, with a broad variety of trees, shrubs and flowers alongside the buildings. Zhang’s beautifully tiled home is a marriage of traditional architecture and modern conveniences—and several times the size of my own home in Xiamen!

“For someone who could not get into university, you’ve done very well!” I said, “How did you end up with such a successful enterprise?” (Fig. 10.1).

“When I realized I could not get into college, I became a laborer in other provinces — Xinjiang in the far west, Hebei, etc.”

“What kind of labor?” I asked.

“I began as a laborer on construction sites, and over time became a skilled laborer. Some other young people in our village created a labor team. Jobs were plentiful around 1999 and 2000 but then slowed down, and since 2010 or so, such work was unreliable, so we returned home. China is vast and has abundant resources. We have lots of peasants and lots of land. Waves of migrant workers led many people out of their homes over the past decade and, after seeing the opportunities, many didn’t want to return home. But a few like me chose to come back home.”

“But why leave opportunities in cities to come back home, given Ningxia’s poverty?” I asked.

“Even though our home is poor and arid, we still saw development opportunities. We first tried starting an insulation board factory. Winters in northwest China are very cold, but insulation boards can save heating bills. I first saw insulation boards while I was working in Hebei. They were very good but no one made them here in Ningxia, even though it gets very cold in the winter, so we set up the first factory for insulation boards in Guyuan. Since 2008, these insulation boards have become very popular.”



Fig. 10.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing farmer Zhang Jianlong in Longde, Ningxia on July 15, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

“But how did you go from insulation boards to raising beef cattle?”

“Well, China had developed, and I saw a report that China’s higher living standards had created a big consumer market. I also learned that Chinese were eating more beef, which was then in short supply, and was mostly imported from Brazil, Australia, the US and some other countries. With many young people in the cities, and the elderly unable to till the land, much of the farmland was being wasted. We used techniques imported from abroad to plant corn and grass for cattle feed. As a native Ningxia farmer, I saw that the state subsidies for raising cattle, coupled with vast swaths of idle land, made raising cattle a perfect way to develop our village and help fight poverty.”

In August 2010, Mr. Zhang bought over 50 Simmental calves to fatten up, and four months later he sold 20 head for a profit of RMB20,000. Within only two years, his cattle profits earned him enough to pay off the RMB3.6 million loan he’d incurred starting the project. At his peak, he had over 400 heads of cattle, and helped lift many villagers out of poverty.

“How much can a couple make from raising cattle?” I asked.

Mr. Zhang smiled. “If a husband and wife raise 10 cows and plant 50 acres of land, they can earn about RMB100,000 a year, and the average person can earn RMB50,000 a year. I told my fellow villagers that right here at home they could get an average urban salary for doing farm work. They would not have to live in the big city but would still be able to stay home and enjoy our country life. Although we can

handle urban life for a time, we can't live there for our entire lives. Sooner or later, we must return home."

"Compared to 1994, when you first drove through Ningxia, people's lives have really changed drastically. Although our scale is not particularly large, we strictly follow the national food safety and quality requirements. Our beef is fresh, pure and natural, without any additives, it is tasty and tender. Imported meat, by comparison, is frozen."

"And I've seen that you have cooperated with Xiamen University (XMU)?"

"Yes, the Ministry of Education paired XMU with the county of Longde, and since 2016, XMU has chosen talented people to serve as our village's first Party secretary. Now we have a deep relationship with XMU. We also have medical support from Xiamen, with the Xiang'an Hospital sending many experts to consult at our Longde County People's Hospital. The Ophthalmology Hospital in Xiamen has also promised to perform 500 operations here in Longde within the next two years. Patients can see a doctor for free."

"You've certainly been taking advantage of all of this support," I said. "Do you have more plans for the future?"

"Yes, we do!" Mr. Zhang said. "We plan to make beef jerky for a village collective that will send it across the country. Another goal is to give priority to sending outstanding talents to study at XMU, with which we have a close emotional affinity. Our county of 180,000 people is well known for being so impoverished, but one advantage of having no industry here is that we have no pollution!"

"Thanks to our rapid development in recent years, our per-capita income has already exceeded RMB10,000. When you visited in 1994, we still struggled for food and clothing, and the best means of transport around was a bicycle. Our entire village had only one TV set—a black and white one—so everyone crowded around to watch it. There were almost no other electrical appliances of any kind. And at that time, we certainly didn't eat beef. Only on Chinese New Year did we eat meat. The rest of the time I ate noodles, and very little rice. My only vegetables were those I could grow myself. But today every home has a refrigerator, and we can eat meat anytime we want it. Not only does every home have a color TV set but many people also have a car and can travel at their will. And every house is well furnished—like mine! In a word, people's lives are getting better and better."

After leaving his house, I met a few locals in the village park, which has outdoor tables and benches, sculptures, and beautiful paintings on the walls. One of the farmers asked if we could exchange WeChat contacts.

"You have WeChat?" I asked.

He smiled shyly. "Of course. We use WeChat all the time, and buy and sell online with Taobao."

What a different world from the dry, dusty place that in 1994 the UN claimed was impoverished beyond hope. By UN standards it may well have been hopeless, but it seems no place is beyond the reach of Chinese Dream pursuers and migrant workers-turned Cattle King like Mr. Zhang.

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Chapter 11

Xin Baotong—Helping the Helpless to Dream Again



If life in China's impoverished regions was difficult for healthy people, I can't imagine what it was like for those with illnesses or physical or emotional challenges. I'd sure many have felt like my wife's friend in Shenyang, Dr. Zhang Xu (张栩), who, after a diving accident in Africa, became a quadriplegic and wanted to kill himself because of his burden on family and society. But he stuck it out, and today runs the Anshan Bethesda Rehabilitation Center, which he started to help others like himself, and to train their families how to care for them. I've marveled as I've watched him type emails on his computer by blowing through a straw in his mouth. Such passion!

But in Ningxia I met yet another man whose story was just as moving! (Fig. 11.1)

Mr. Xin Baotong zipped to greet us in his wheelchair, a grin on his face as he welcomed us to their care center for the handicapped. Once a healthy, happy-go-lucky youth full of ambition and dreams, his dreams were shattered when he almost died from a disease and was invalided—but today, thanks to local Party leadership's compassion and encouragement, he is chairman of the Disabled E-commerce Association and has not only risen from poverty but also helped some 1600 other disabled people in his county!

He said that when he fell ill, "My world became a blur, and I felt disconnected from reality, weighed down by both financial and mental pressure. I felt I was at death's door, and even dreamed that I was in a world of nothingness and that an elderly man who had just died was inviting me to join him. It was so painful."

Mr. Xin was in Sichuan when he fell ill and ended up in a hospital for an entire year, from January 1 until December. "My three brothers were in school, so our family finances were already very tight. We had no money for medical care. Even with large loans from relatives and friends I could not keep paying the bills. I had to leave the hospital and return home with over RMB300,000 in debt. Our entire family felt helpless and hopeless."

As if things weren't bad enough already, his father had a car accident in May 2015, while out working to pay off his son's debt. Brain damage left him bedridden, unable to move, and the family sank even deeper into debt.



Fig. 11.1. Prof. William Brown interviewing Xin Baotong, a promoter of charity programs for people with disabilities, in Longde, Ningxia on July 15, 2019. *Photo by Jie Shangfeng*

“I had always been very easy-going and cheerful,” Mr. Xin said. “My personal desires were modest, though I always tried to do all things well. I never thought about attitude, but after I got sick, I made an effort to be optimistic and happy for my parents’ sake. But my father’s car accident hit me very hard because I felt I’d caused his accident by not taking care of myself.”

The already hopelessly indebted family could not afford the father’s hospital fees, but a doctor who knew their cousin agreed to perform the urgently needed brain surgery. “Our relatives helped me raise over RMB100,000 in donations and loans,” he said. “But now we were over RMB400,000 in debt.”

His sister had just graduated from Inner Mongolia Normal University when he was struck down by illness. She cared for him until a year later, when she was admitted to Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University as a graduate student.

“We had no money at all, and without government subsistence allowances and services, we’d have never survived. I stayed at home, never going out, feeling worthless. But in 2017 our township’s Party secretary began visiting me and reporting my condition to county leaders, who also came to visit me, and the Party secretary said the county was building a care center for the disabled and that I could live there. I was skeptical, and even thought he might have been lying to me! He made this promise in January 2017, and I waited and waited and then messaged him asking why it had not been built and when it would be built. He replied, very patiently, that I would be the first to know when it was finished. On August 23, 2017, he came personally to my house and said, ‘Get your things ready because tomorrow you and your father will move to the new center’ — and the very next day they took us both to the center!”

“What did you think of your new home?” I asked.

“It was a brand new building! But there were very few people because I was in the first group to live here. Upon my arrival, I saw a brand new building. There were very few people at that time, because I was among the first group of six or seven to move in. There was nothing to do at first, but after about 10 days they set up a workshop where we began making artificial flowers. It felt good to do something useful!”

I visited the workshop and watched half a dozen physically challenged residents making the flowers. Given their physical limitations, I’m sure this venture is not efficient enough to make a profit, but each person was cheerful and proudly showed me their creations—they were so happy, like Mr. Xin, to contribute something back to the society that had done so much for them.

I watched one paraplegic doing graphic designs on a computer. I was amazed at his skills given his limited range of physical motions. I thought of Stephen Hawking, and his brilliant mind trapped in an immobile body. It is easy to assume that people who are physically challenged are also limited emotionally and mentally—but not here. These people were also dreamers.

“After I’d made flowers for about 10 days, the center’s director said he’d heard about my experiences and education background, and he asked if I’d like to work in the office. I was delighted. I earned about RMB1,600 a month and my mother also made about RMB2,300 a month making artificial flowers. After about a year, in December 2018, when the disabled e-commerce service center was established, I was asked to be the chairman of the Disabled E-commerce Association. I balked because I did not think I could do it. It was a big responsibility for helping local disabled people to throw off poverty and prosper, but I had only a year’s relevant experience before I got sick. I was afraid that I could not do a good job, which would hinder the poverty relief work. But when I told them my concerns, the leaders said they would provide assistance, and send people to assist us in such areas as sales and products. So I agreed.”

“Was it as difficult as you feared?”

“In the beginning, I spent a long time each day learning the various details. But now, thanks to the E-commerce Employment Association for the Disabled, I earn

over RMB4,000 each month. This was life-changing for both me and my family. I went from huddled at home and penniless to earning a very good salary. And I owe all of this to the care of the Party leaders and the government. Had there been no government-led poverty alleviation efforts, I could have never done so much in only two or three years on my own strength. I am very grateful for their care and help. Between my mother and me, we now earn over RMB6000 a month! I repaid more than RMB100,000 of our debt last year, and I am confident that I can also pay off the rest. It will take a while, though, but I'm not worried. Even if I owed RMB20 million, I am sure I could do it. I'm very confident in the future now, because we have such strong support from the leaders who have proven their care for us."

"At one point I could not even imagine ever escaping poverty," Mr. Xin said. "But not only have I prospered but profits from the disability e-commerce platform have helped some 1600 of the county's disabled people. I feel very honored to be able to do this."

And I, myself, feel very honored to have met such a dreamer as young Xing Baotong. His story is a good lesson for other poor nations fighting poverty. They can adapt China's targeted poverty alleviation measures, but even the best policies are not enough unless the leadership can instill hope and passion within the poor, and reawaken the dreams that all of us are born with but few have the hope of achieving.

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Chapter 12

Wang Zenghao—Young Volunteer Working in Tibet



There were no trains to Tibet in 1994, so we drove to Lhasa from Qinghai. Both the van and its passengers struggled for breath as we crested the 5200-m Tangula Pass into Tibet. Today, however, Tibet not only has excellent highways but also trains, so in 2019 we decided to take the train from Qinghai to Tibet rather than drive.

I was surprised at the steady stream of traffic on the highways we passed—especially the express freight trucks that were hauling e-commerce goods both into and out of Tibet. Even villagers in China’s remotest areas now buy and sell online.

But the best part of the train trip was the people I met—especially the children. And to my delight, I shared a cabin with Mr. Wang Zenghao, a young man from Xining of Qinghai Province who had just graduated from Fujian’s Huaqiao (Overseas Chinese) University and volunteered to serve in Tibet with the Tibet Program of the West China Volunteer Project (Fig. 12.1).¹

Since China launched the University Student Volunteer Service Program for West China in 2003, thousands of college graduates have volunteered for Tibet and over 1500 of them stayed on in Tibet to work longer term.

The program benefits not only Tibet but also the volunteers themselves, as they cultivate their character, compassion and talents, while performing grassroots service in education, health, agricultural technology and poverty alleviation. To prepare these youths, Tibet has created preferential policies and provided specialized training in high-elevation health care, Tibetan history, etc.

“Why volunteer for such a difficult place as Tibet?” I asked.

Mr. Wang smiled broadly, “I visited Tibet in the summer of 2016 and had a special encounter. When the train arrived at the Nagqu train station, I saw a Tibetan herder who thought he had bought a ticket to Lhasa but the conductor told him it was only to Dangqu. He had bought it from a ticket vendor, he was illiterate and could not speak Chinese, and the conductor told him he had to get a new ticket. This story really touched me deeply because I suspected that there were many other people like him in Tibet, and we should find ways to help them. Once I arrived in Lhasa, I took

¹ <http://xibu.youth.cn/zt/xzxxxd/>.



Fig. 12.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing young volunteer Wang Zenghao in Xining, Qinghai on July 19, 2019. Photo by Zhu Qingfu

a bus that was very crowded, and after two or three stops, two Tibetan grandmothers boarded. Many people stood up to give them their seats, but they didn't just sit down immediately. They carefully chose which seat was most convenient. And the bus driver waited patiently until everyone was again seated safely or gripping a handhold before he started off again. I was impressed by the Tibetans' respect for the elderly and their friendliness. I also liked the colorful Tibetan costumes that people on the streets wore, and how the Tibetan grandfathers would nod and smile at me. Their optimistic attitude toward life was so appealing to me."

"You made your decision then to help Tibet?" I asked.

"Well, I taught previously in Guizhou during two college summer vacations. Those experiences also impressed me deeply. I helped support education in a village with many 'left behind' children. They did not lack money, but they lacked the care of families who were working off home. I think all of us should visit such places to see what life is like for so many people."

It's one thing to visit Tibet but quite another to live there, and I wondered how this city boy would hold up, but it turned out he was well prepared. "During my four years of university," he said, "I deliberately put myself in difficult situations because I wanted to develop my ability to endure hardships. I was only 20 at the time, and I felt that to only think of such things as marriage, a private car, housing, etc. was of little value. I wanted to do something meaningful, such as helping Tibet. But my teachers said it was not worth it, and even my own family did not support me—but I was determined to go."

Once he arrived in Tibet, he was temporarily assigned to the Tibet Autonomous Region Federation of Trade Unions as a clerk, but “I wondered if they’d consider reassigning me. I hoped to go to the villages, meet face-to-face with herders and farmers, and experience the ups and downs of their lives. I wanted to go and take a look, and if possible, apply for grassroots work.”

“How long will you be in Tibet this time?” I asked.

“At least one year,” he said. “If it works out, I’d like to stay here. When I came here in 2016, I really liked Lhasa. My parents are both young now, and they don’t need me around to take care of them all day, so I want to do something meaningful when I am young.”

“When I drove to Lhasa in 1994,” I said. “It was very poor, and life was very difficult. Do you think it has improved very much since then?”

He nodded yes. “In fact, by Tibetan standards, people in Lhasa are relatively wealthy, but in some remote places, especially pastoral areas, their lives are still not very good. It is not as easy to carry out some policies in the remotest areas. I want to visit those places. In Lhasa, after all, development is very good because the state and central governments are concentrating on supporting this autonomous region capital.”

“In a place as big and inaccessible as Tibet, I’m sure it is difficult to implement policies in all areas,” I said.

“Yes, that is true,” he said. “But the country is doing its best to take care of this place. And during my two summers teaching in Guizhou, I gained a better understanding of the operation model of the teaching support team, I wanted to bring this teaching support model to Tibet. The education here is okay, but it still needs teaching support to supplement it. I want to find a suitable place to do that. This kind of support is not just to teach Chinese and mathematics during the winter and summer vacations, but a high-quality support that can help overcome some shortcomings in local education.”

I said goodbye to Mr. Wang at the Lhasa train station, but I hope to meet him again soon to see how he has fared. Even since the 1950s, China’s fight against poverty has relied on compassionate volunteers serving for years and even decades in the most remote places—people like the Xiamen University (XMU) graduate we met in Lhasa in 1994.

When Sue and I married in Taipei in 1981, the pastor gave us as a wedding present a signed copy of the book he’d written about his experiences when he rode a horse into Tibet in the 1940s. In 1989, Sue loaned that book to a Chinese student, who then loaned it to another student—and we never saw the book again! Though I did not complain, I was not happy about losing the book.

Five years later, the day after we drove into Lhasa, a young man ran up to us and said, “Are you Professor Brown? I am a XMU graduate, and I volunteered to serve here in Tibet because I read your book that a friend loaned to me!”

Yuanfen! I was amazed—and also ashamed that I’d been upset about a book when, as it turned out, it had spurred this young man to serve in Tibet—and given the conditions in 1994 were not that good, even in Lhasa!

And, happily, when we shared this story with the book’s author, he gave us another signed copy—his last copy. I still have it to this day as a reminder of just how much Tibet’s development has depended upon courageous and compassionate young Chinese volunteers.

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Chapter 13

Dawa Wangdui: A Tibetan Serf-Turned Entrepreneur



When I drove to Tibet in 1994, what most impressed us was the Tibetan's outgoing and hospitable nature, but I had never had a bear hug like that from the exuberant Mr. Dawa Wangdui. After serving a sumptuous Tibetan banquet in his beautiful home full of Tibetan cultural artifacts, he danced and sang as he played his long-necked Tibetan lute.

I was keen to hear how Dawa went from laboring for RMB1 a day to making millions as the head of several international firms. "What makes you so optimistic about Tibet?" I asked (Fig. 13.1).

He laughed and said, "It is simple! For a long time, we Tibetans suffered under Tibetan feudalism—the so-called dark system. Like almost all Tibetans, our family was very poor, even though for 300 years we served the Panchen Lama, who was second only to the Dalai Lama. But now I live in good times! We used to talk about the life of the nobility but today's ordinary Tibetans live better than the nobles of old Tibet!"

While Hollywood and Western media romanticize old Tibet as a Shangri-La, in reality it was truly a dark system for centuries. As Sorrell Neuss wrote in the *Guardian*,¹

Popular belief is that under the Dalai Lama, Tibetans lived contentedly in a spiritual non-violent culture, uncorrupted by lust or greed: but in reality, society was far more brutal than that vision....

Until 1959, when China cracked down on Tibetan rebels and the Dalai Lama fled to north India, around 98 percent of the population was enslaved in serfdom. Drepung Monastery, on the outskirts of Lhasa, was one of the world's largest landowners with 185 manors, 25,000 serfs, 300 pastures, and 16,000 herdsman. High-ranking lamas and secular landowners imposed crippling taxes, forced boys into monastic slavery and pilfered most of the wealth—torturing disobedient serfs by gouging out their eyes or severing their hamstrings.

"Under feudalism," Dawa said, "the hierarchy was very strict and serfs had no rights at all, but since reform and opening up, the sense of material and spiritual

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/feb/10/tibet-china-feudalism>.



Fig. 13.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing Tibetan entrepreneur Dawa Wangdui in Lhasa, Tibet on July 21, 2019. Photo by Zhu Qingfu

gain, security, and happiness of the Tibetan people is a miracle that has not existed in thousands of years.”

“How did this miracle come about?” I asked.

“The leadership’s good policies,” Dawa said without hesitation.

“But even with good policies, few have had success such as yours. How have you done differently?”

Dawa grinned. “In addition to good policies, I am also a very hardworking person. I did not read books as a child, even in first grade, but I am a very strong and thoughtful person. I worked hard and suffered a lot. But even hard work and persistence are not enough. I’ve succeeded mainly because I was born into a good era created by the state’s good policies. Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes ‘benevolence’ and that we must be grateful and respectful. I am very grateful to our leadership for giving us the environment in which hard work can pay off. In old Tibet, we also worked hard but were still impoverished.”

Dawa’s hard work has certainly paid off, with enough accomplishments and official positions for several lifetimes, including vice chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region Federation of Industry and Commerce, chairman of Tibet Litai Industrial Co., Ltd., former executive member of the 11th All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, a representative of the 10th People’s Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region, an Outstanding Builder of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics of the Tibet Autonomous Region, vice chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region Chamber of Commerce, executive vice chairman of the Tibet Shigatse Prefecture Chamber of

Commerce, and executive deputy general manager of Tibet Gangjian Development Corporation.

Dawa has prospered, and now uses his experiences to help tackle Tibetan precision poverty alleviation. "I go to the grassroots every year. My company has spent tens of millions on poverty alleviation projects. But the common people, although they see the improvements and enjoy the benefits, don't understand who has given them such happiness. This is because for a long time Tibet was under the theocratic political system, and the uneducated people had no understanding of it."

"Can you give me specific examples in which Tibetans' lives have improved?" I asked.

"The biggest factor has been good policies to care not just for Tibetans but for all ethnic minorities. Such a whole set of policies would have been completely unimaginable in the old society. But if you tell Europeans about Tibet's earth-shaking changes, they don't believe it at all, because such changes are unimaginable to others."

"You were poor in your youth," I said, "but now you are very successful in business. Can you tell your story?"

Not surprisingly, Dawa said, "It's very simple!" For Dawa, everything seems simple and straightforward, but as the saying goes, "Still waters run deep."

"I always wanted to get out of the mountain village and do something," Dawa said. "At nine years old, I learned carpentry and became a craftsman. I was happy to earn RMB1 a day to help feed my family and raise my brothers and sisters to help them go to college. Now my younger brothers and sisters have worked as civil servants, serving in important positions in the country, and have made great contribution to society. The success of our good policies is inseparable from our own efforts."

"But how did you go from carpentry to becoming a businessman?"

"I was 14 when the spring breeze of reform and opening up hit Tibet. We were in a commune, working for two or three points a day. When I heard that I could earn RMB1 or RMB2 a day, I set out to make my fortune! It was a dream come true."

"But how did you go from RMB1 per day to where you are today?" I asked.

"Simple!" he said. "At RMB1 a day, I earned RMB30 a month, and had RMB20 left over after deducting food and drink expenses. At first, I sent all of my money home because they were so poor. But later, I decided to develop myself. So I started a business and worked my way up from RMB10 to RMB100, and then RMB1,000, RMB1 million, RMB10 million!"

"I found that today, even though we were poor, we still could do great things. The old society also had people like me, with ideas and dreams, but there were no policies or opportunities."

"But even with such good policies, few have done as well as you. Why is that?"

"Happiness comes from struggle," Dawa said. "And luck is summoned by hard work. In doing business, I suffered a lot. But it is impossible for a person to rely solely on luck without the heart to work hard. If given the opportunity, we must make unremitting efforts. As the oldest of six children, I began finding ways to earn money for our family even at five."

When Dawa was 12, he learned carpentry from a village woodworker. It was hard and tedious, but he quickly mastered the basics. That same year he helped build a

power plant and the Xietongmen Post Office. By age 15, he was in demand as a local master carpenter, Tibetan house architect and Tibetan furniture designer. But he slowly began to realize that his prospects were limited unless he learned more about the world around him. When he saw a friend's Tibetan-Chinese dictionary, he shyly asked, "Can I learn Chinese with this?"

"It's possible in theory," his friend said, "But I doubt you could persist at it for years."

But Dawa did persist. For five years, he worked hard by day and by night. He made his way through the entire dictionary, writing notes in Tibetan when he could not understand the Chinese characters. "After hours of reading each night with a diesel lamp, my nostrils were full of black smoke," he recalled.

The first Chinese character that he learned was "you" and his first sentence was "hello." He explained, "I reasoned that these would be useful anywhere."

Dawa also helped his younger siblings with their studies, and under his guidance his three younger brothers were all admitted to Tibet classes, and later to key universities, after which all three took up official positions and helped Tibet to prosper.

As reform and opening up began in the late 1970s, Dawa left his village to seek his fortune, but there were few industries then. "I did not want to be a woodworker for the rest of my life, so I considered related industries." In 1980, when urban Xigaze began transforming the old city, Dawa began designing and constructing Tibetan-style residential houses. His reputation grew, and in 1987 he met the 10th Panchen Lama, who helped establish the Tibet Gangjian Company, based in the Tashilhunpo Monastery, so monasteries could afford to maintain temples themselves and lessen the economic burden on the state. Gangjian is today a highly diverse business group handling trade, tourism (including starred hotels), catering, and ethnic handicrafts such as Tibetan Thangka paintings, furniture and carpets, etc.

The Panchen Lama prized young Dawa's carpentry skills and sent him to Beijing to learn more advanced wood processing, furniture design and management knowledge. "The 10th Panchen Lama had high hopes and expectations for young Tibetans," Dawa explained.

After the 10th Panchen Lama died in 1989, many of the company's talented staff then left, and the company business stagnated, but Dawa stuck it out, and under his encouragement the Gangjian Company gradually prospered. Dawa also sought to capitalize upon tourism and catering service, and encouraged production of Tibetan handicrafts, such as Thangka paintings, sewing and silversmithing. After he became the company's executive deputy general manager, Dawa began traveling across China to learn from more experienced companies like his. When he learned that Tibet development lagged behind the rest of China, he expanded the import and export trade of his company's Shenzhen branch, which earned over RMB10 million annually in profits from trade on Tibetan products. Although other foreign trade companies were losing business, Gangjian Company thrived as Dawa continued to hone his management and business skills.

Many people with such success under their belt might have been content to rest on their laurels and enjoy life, but Dawa often thought hard late at night, "What else can I do?" He then recalled an architect telling him that steel construction was the way of

the future, because earthquake-resistant buildings could be built more cheaply and quickly with recyclable steel. Dawa wanted to start a steel structure company, but he could not find people with the right skills. He sought talent outside Tibet, but no one was willing to work in the high altitudes of Tibet. In 2004, Dawa finally established Tibet Litai Industrial Co., Ltd., the first private steel structure company in Tibet, “It was like holding my newborn child!” he said.

The firm struggled at first, but Dawa encouraged his workers, “Nothing is impossible if you are willing to work hard.” He sent his best employees to receive advanced training. In 2009, he built Tibet’s longest pipe truss project at the Century Court of Lhasa Hotel, even though large cranes could not reach the construction site. That same year, upon hearing the government urgently needed help to resolve local electricity shortage, Dawa and his team braved extreme cold and altitude to help build a power station—and in record time. In 2012, Dawa’s company worked even through the harsh winter to help Lhasa ease traffic congestion by building nine large pedestrian bridges in the city.

Dawa has come a long way from RMB1 a day to millions, but not surprisingly, he said, “It’s simple! I just changed from carpenter to steelworker, but the road ahead is still very long. I just try to give my best back to society.”

Dawa has donated millions to local alleviate poverty, especially in his hometown. One of his biggest priorities has been education—perhaps because his own education was curtailed so early. The man who did not read books even in first grade—yet later spent five years devouring a Chinese-Tibetan dictionary—has subsidized dozens of poor students, many of whom have gone on to college for further study.

Dawa also likes to promote Tibetan culture. To promote Tibetan culture and sell ethnic arts and handicrafts, he established the Tibet Thangka Culture and Art Development Co., Ltd. in Beijing in 2009. His dream is to spread Tibetan folk culture not only throughout China but also to other countries.

Dawa showed us old black and white photos of Tibet, and many of the priceless Tibetan cultural artifacts he has collected. As he played his *dramyin* (扎木聂), the beautiful long-necked Tibetan lute, I said, “I play the guitar and the sitar. I’d love to play your Tibetan *dramyin*.”

“It’s simple!” he said. But after a few minutes of failing to produce even his simplest melodies and rhythms, I found it was not nearly as simple as he claimed. In fact, nothing about Dawa’s life is as simple as he makes it out to be—except the fact, perhaps, that he has a simple faith and optimism in the future. As he said, many times, “Today, even the average Tibetan lives better than the noblemen of the old Tibet. With good policies, hard work and persistence, success is simple! And for that, I’m grateful to our government.”

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Chapter 14

Xia Jiangping—Greening the Roof of the World!



We desired to learn how it is possible, after 20 and perhaps 30 or even 40 centuries, for their soils to be made to produce sufficiently for the maintenance of such dense populations as are living now in these three countries. We have now had this opportunity and almost every day we were instructed, surprised and amazed at the conditions and practices which confronted us whichever way we turned; instructed in the ways and extent to which these nations for centuries have been and are conserving and utilizing their natural resources, surprised at the magnitude of the returns they are getting from their fields...

— King, F. H., D. Sc., “Farmers of Forty Centuries, or, Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan,” University of Wisconsin, 1911

“When other people see dung,” Ms Xia said. “They pinch their noses and pass on by, but when I see dung, I see gold! I can look at dung and tell if it is from a duck or cow, and the quality of its organic matter content.”

I laughed. She reminded me of Feng Yougen, the richest entrepreneur in Xiangtan of Hunan Province who, as an impoverished child of a flower grower, told me, “As a child, I searched the mountains for orchids. Orchid made money—and I could smell them!”

Ms Xia gave up prospects of making a bigger and faster fortune in finance and other fields to tackle humanity’s most pressing problem, food, by perfecting the science of revitalizing depleted soil, so that it can eventually yield rich harvests without pesticides or chemicals. And she chose not just any soil but that of Tibet, one of the most hostile environments in the world.

A century ago, Western agricultural scientists marveled at how Chinese maintained such high yields without depleting the soil for thousands of years. If Ms Xia can green even Tibet, she too will benefit not only China but the rest of the world as well. And I’ve no doubt she’ll reach her goals. First, like me, she learned strict discipline and persistence growing up in a military family. And second, she’s a marathoner, and as she said to me, “Running a business is also a marathon.”

“My father named me Xia Jiangping after the Yangtze River, so my brother was named Xia Changping—the other part of the river’s name. When we first started



Fig. 14.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing entrepreneur Xia Jiangping in Lhasa, Tibet on July 22, 2019. Photo by Zhu Qingfu

doing business, some customers saw our names and joked, ‘Your family already has the Yangzte River. Is the Yellow River still there?’”

Ms Xia was born in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, when her father served in the Navy’s East China Fleet. “My name is like a boy’s,” she said. “From my childhood I had a boyish personality. I walked fast, talked fast, was very capable—and had a fierce temper. Perhaps it was because of my father’s strict upbringing.”

“I can relate,” I said. “My army dad made me spit shine my shoes like his soldiers!” (Fig. 14.1).

“After Ningbo, we transferred to Miluo of Hunan Province,” Jiangping said. “My mother is from Pingjiang, also in Hunan, so my father then transferred from Miluo to a small county seat in Pingjiang. He must have done it for love because, back then, small town life was not like it is now. Still, I was happy to live there, although I love fast city life today. But because my father was relatively high ranking, there was no position for him in the army unit, so he was assigned to the ‘121 Mine,’ a military factory. I spent the rest of my childhood within that isolated, small factory compound. We had our own school, canteen and cinema—like an island society. Only in middle school did I go to a regular school and meet locals. The locals admired us ‘children from the compound’ but they were also a bit jealous of us, and sometimes spiteful, so we became good at fighting! When I tried to play basketball or skate, some bigger children would tell me to go away, I would fight them, and my brother would have to

intervene. I was carefree but I hated bullies—whether the victim was me or someone else. Brought up in an army men’s families, children from the compound all had a strong sense of right and wrong, as well as a desire to uphold national security and justice. And this preoccupation with safety and security has influenced me to this day—including my work with soil rejuvenation.”

While visiting the world’s fourth largest securities market in Chicago in 2019, Ms Xia asked her host if they keep international data. “I thought it was very scary when I learned they have,” she said. “Consider food as an example. If the world’s transaction data are controlled by this Chicago platform, this platform is also inseparable from national control. People cannot survive without food. China’s 1.4 billion people cannot eat energy and foreign exchange, so food trading is crucial for national security.”

People in Chicago were surprised at her unease with one country controlling such data. “It should be an open platform,” she said. “Perhaps China could build such a platform so that people the world over could trade safely. Although I’d like China to have all of the data, the only way to ensure world peace is for every country to have all of the data, or else for every country to have only part of it. When people asked why I cared, as it had nothing to do with my business, I explained that I’d been preoccupied with national security and data security since my military childhood. And no matter how much money China has, without food we will die.”

“So given your upbringing, how on earth did you end up in Tibet?” I asked.

“Many people say I’m stupid and crazy for coming to Tibet!” she said. “With so much money, I can make a fortune in real estate in Xiamen. Instead, I come to Tibet where I suffer from attitude sickness. But we children from the compound also learned to face difficulties and to be loyal. Many of them are now very successful in society. Myself—I don’t necessarily work that hard but I am daring, loyal and patriotic. If we lose our nation, all the wealth in the world won’t matter. Even if we took our money to other countries, we are still Chinese, and if China is weak, others will look down on us. So, I do business not just to make money but because I enjoy it—and I have status. Status is not just from money. No matter how much money you have, if you’ve not done something worthwhile, there is no status, and one’s life is vain and meaningless. You can’t take your money with you when you die, but your contributions will be remembered for many lifetimes, and you will feel a sense of accomplishment.”

She hadn’t answered my question about why she came to Tibet, so I asked her again, “What have you done to gain a sense of achievement—other than make a lot of money?”

This question she answered quickly and frankly. “Deeds, not money, bring status. Our status is not just from donating lots of money, but from forming a strong benign ecosystem in our industry. I’ve strived for a responsible corporate culture that assures employees of a high quality of life, and allows them to play their part and grow spiritually. We continually seek sustainable development and set ever higher goals. As the founder of a company, the happiest thing for me is that employees are proud to work for our company because of what we do.”

“But I must be patient. If I wanted overnight riches, I’d do finance, which is faster and easier! No worries about factories, R&D, employees, brands, development—and I could work from a beautiful office. But in this business, I face many problems, such as planning the factory, buying land and equipment, developing and promoting the product, and of course many worker issues. Business is not easy. If you want an easy life and quick money—don’t do this industry!”

“But you did not start out in soil restoration, did you?”

“No, I was recruited by a state-owned enterprise even before I started college. They accepted only the best students, and there were many veterans working there, which was good for me. Later I went to a college in Hunan and majored in finance. But maybe it’s due to my personality—I don’t care for finance—so my father suggested my transferring to the military, but my eyesight was bad, and there was no corrective surgery back then.”

“After graduation, I once worked as a general manager, but I did not like that; then I worked in a TV station but did not like that, either, so I quit my job. My dad was very angry, he got me a new job in procurement. He was actually trying to punish me; he had never expected I’d enjoy going to the countryside to check ore quality and interacting with so many different kinds of people. But I loved it, and learned a lot from this. I was devastated when my dad died suddenly from a cerebral hemorrhage. I had learned so much from my parents, not just from school. This is why I emphasize family education, because parents are their children’s first and most important teachers.”

After her father’s death, Ms Xia moved to Fujian where she had an uncle in the Fujian Air Force, and also because one of her two largest markets was Fujian’s Jinjiang. “Fujian was my second start in life!” she said. “I came here in 1996, and got married here later. My husband studied for an MBA at Xiamen University, and Xiamen became my home. I was very successful the first few years as a factory salesperson, but struggled with how women were treated. Even though I cornered 40 percent to 50 percent of the entire Jinjiang market, people did not respect a girl in sales. Many laughed at me, and because I was single, some suggested I could make much more as a bar girl. It sometimes drove me to tears, but to make the sales I kept a positive face, smiling in public while scolding them in my heart. This ‘Ah Q spirit’ supports me to this day.”

“Do you regret that time in Jinjiang?” I asked.

“No! That time in Jinjiang was the most painful in my life, but I persisted, and it was a turning point for me. It is much harder for women to be in business. Some 98 percent of my customers were men, and I had to avoid personal contact, even having meals with them, especially when I was still single, otherwise there would be gossip. I showed them that though my father was gone, his greatness lived on through his daughter. And slowly, my personality, quality, professionalism and service attitude won the respect of local entrepreneurs, many of whom are now my good friends and regret having laughed at me in the early days.”

“When did you start your own company?” I asked.

“In 2003,” she said, “just on the side, because I could not survive on just RMB500 monthly salary. Later, I started exporting and met people doing international trade,

including a friend from Israel. I shared with him my concerns about China's agricultural security, even as we prospered economically—and then my husband quit his MBA program and began to do ecological engineering and soil erosion engineering.”

“He made little money because he wasn't like others who just wanted to finish a project quickly and collect a profit, regardless of the future consequences. As with other engineering projects, he methodically analyzed and solved problems. He hasn't made much money but is highly respected.”

Ms Xia's husband found that in poor soil even the most expensive seeds grow poorly and fail to prevent landslides, but contacts with a German firm in Sri Lanka and in other countries he visited helped him learn innovative practices, which he adapted in China. He said this to me in 32003, “The most important things for the future are air, water and soil, so let's go into the soil business!”

Her Israeli friend had told her that China was still weak in a possible global agriculture war, in spite of its economic success, yet she still had no interest in agriculture, until her husband showed her that such a business could be handed down through generations.

“Are you and your husband business partners?” I asked.

She laughed. “We complement each other at work and home. His parents are both teachers, and my father had served in the army, so my husband is gentler, and I have a temper. I can't be gentle, and he can't be a hothead, but we each have our own advantages. Because he is patient, he can conceive of a soil business that will prosper for a century. Some companies overseas are 120 or 140 years old and have been passed down to the fourth and fifth generation of the family. Hence I started the soil company, and my husband now has an engineering company.”

After 16 years, Ms Xia has become a soil master, her company producing not only quality soil but also biological organic and inorganic fertilizers to restore soil vitality. “Pumping depleted soil full of fertilizer will not improve yields,” she said. “We must restore the soil's organic matter content and vitality, so our company's mission is: ‘Bring the soil back to life.’”

“Soil restoration is not just a product but also a technology. And we also do ecological restoration, such as greening a desert. Some people did not believe that I, a woman, could do it—but our team did it! We are even working on innovative microorganisms to help plants better tolerate Tibet's high altitudes.”

“You've been very successful at this. What are your plans for the future?” I asked.

“One must have a dream in life,” she said. “I long had three dreams: to start a listed company, attend an overseas university, and run a marathon. I've founded a listed company, and in 2016 I ran a full marathon in Germany.”

“I was already in my 40s, and had not exercised much. I really thought I would die when I still had 30 km to go, but I forced myself to finish—otherwise how could I face my employees, my children, and my classmates?”

“Running a marathon, and running a business—both are hard. Both require a goal, hard work, perseverance and continuous learning. And we must continually replenish our energy, as I learned, while taking water throughout the marathon. And we also need encouragement. When the spectators saw the red flag on my shirt, they just shouted to cheer me on, ‘Jiangping, come on!’”

“How fast did you run?” I asked.

“You mean how slow! It took me over six hours, and the organizers kept asking if I was okay, and wanted to quit, but when they saw I was serious, they encouraged me. I felt good when I saw many men quit. I thought, ‘Men can’t finish this but I can!’”

“Did you almost give up?”

“Almost! The most painful point was at Berlin Avenue—still five km from the finish but only 400 m from my hotel room with iced drink and a soft bed. It was torment—go on or not? Comfort or continued agony. But there was another runner, a Japanese lady in her 50s whom I passed a few times along the way. I imagined her as my opponent. Companies are like this, you know—they need an imaginary opponent. When I hesitated at Berlin Avenue, she surpassed me yet again. She never ran fast, just steady. I put the hotel out of my mind and just kept pace with this older Japanese lady for the rest of the race. Even though we were so slow, people on both sides cheered us on, and I ran faster the last section trying to show off a bit. It was such an encouraging atmosphere, and all runners receive a hug at the end. A handsome guy hugged me, and said some words of encouragement. It made the whole thing worth it! I felt such camaraderie with people from so many countries.”

“What did you learn from running a marathon?”

“Business is like a marathon, not a sprint! In business, I’ve faced difficulties, such as the foreigner in Sri Lanka who cheated me and sent me 20 empty containers that should have been filled with 20 tons of goods! Fortunately, both the Orient Overseas Shipping Company and Maritime Court sided with me, and I recovered my loss in the end. The entire process was unimaginable, but I stuck it out—like in a marathon.”

“I still don’t understand, though, how your business landed you in Tibet?” I asked.

“When we went public in 2015, some officials from my hometown in Hunan visited Xiamen looking for investment for modernizing Tibetan agriculture, and they called on me. I liked what they were trying to do but told them I could not help them. But they didn’t give up.”

“Tibet is not short of food or oil,” I learned, “but short of grass, and the soil erosion there is very serious, with severe sandstorms in north Tibet, near the Yarlung Zangbo River. I finally agreed to help them make the plan, but once the plan was done, I decided to do it myself. Tibet has much land but little is arable. I figured if I could restore land in Tibet, China could lead the world in such technology.”

“And this could help China overcome its weakness in food security,” I noted.

“Yes, but few want to come here to Tibet. They fear altitude sickness, and with so many places where they can make money, why bother with Tibet where transportation is difficult and the people are fairly insular? Many people also fear Tibet is unsafe, but that is not true at all! In fact, Tibet is the safest area of China! There are no thieves or crime because all Tibetans are Buddhists, and the regional government checks the IDs of everyone who enters Tibet, which also helps preserve safety”.

“Were you worried about altitude sickness?”

“Yes! I did not come with my team in 2016, because I thought I could not handle the altitude. But once we’d decided to invest here, I wanted to find the most suitable plants, so that I could teach locals to cultivate them and then collect, refine and sell the

raw materials to pharmaceutical companies. I finally decided to forget about altitude sickness, or making money fast, but to focus on building relationships and tapping the market.”

“After arriving in Tibet, I founded a large company, mainly for ecological restoration, as well as small-scale cultivation. And when the government saw the potential, they invested 40 percent on a second phase to make biomechanisms and biological fertilizers, which the government bought from me and distributed to Tibetans for free. Our ultimate goal is to eliminate pesticides entirely while maintaining high yields, which should be possible within five to 10 years.”

“You had mentioned a small business that you can pass on, why are you going to the capital market now?” I asked.

“A small company would have been much easier, but the Chinese market is so vast, and competition is fierce. If I don’t plan this well, my technology will be plagiarized pretty soon. Going public helps provide the funds, so that we can lead this industry quickly. It also helps assure transparency and accountability, and that will ensure our good reputation, credibility and long-term survival.”

“In other words,” I thought, “she is planning this for the long haul—like another marathon.”

As Ms Xia had noted, she could make more money, more easily and much faster, in finance—which she studied in college. I admire her for choosing instead to tackle China’s food security, especially in Tibet. If she can revitalize soil on the Roof of the World, her company will create a legacy that may benefit not just China but all humanity, as our little planet struggles with modern perils such as desertification, urbanization, and climate change.

On behalf of my own children and grandchildren, and those whom I hope come after them—thank you, Jiangping!

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Chapter 15

Wu Qiong (吴琼)—Educated to Serve Tibet



In the US, youths who served for four years in the military were then given four years of college tuition free. China has similar programs, though with more peaceable goals—free college tuition, as well as a living allowance, in return for moving to Tibet and working to lift the “Roof of the World” from poverty. And I was delighted to meet Wu Qiong, an alumnus of Xiamen University (XMU) who is part of this program.

A native of Xiayi County, Shangqiu, Henan Province. Wu Qiong has worked in Tibet since graduating from the Department of Finance of XMU in 2008. His first position was in the Finance Bureau of Bianba County in Qamdo Prefecture, Tibet. After working for four years, he passed the public recruitment examination and entered the Department of Finance in Lhasa where he now works in the Economic Construction Division (Fig. 15.1).

Wu explained how he was exempted from tuition and given a monthly living allowance if he agreed to serve in Tibet after graduation. “In our year, over 20 people came, but maybe only four people are left.”

“Why didn’t they stay on?” I asked.

“Life was very difficult when we first came,” he said. “We had water for only two hours each day. In the winter, we had to fetch our water from the river.”

I had to laugh. “In the late 1980s, even in Xiamen we had daily water and power outages, with water off sometimes for days, and we had hot water for only one hour each night—though often not even then. Now the entire country has reliable water and power supply!”

“We had electricity for only a short time at night,” he continued. “In homes, it was for alternate nights—one night here, one night there. There was no natural gas or coal, and we had to chop wood for cooking. And roads were bad. It took a day and half by bus, climbing nine mountains, to travel the 498 km from Qamdo to Bianba County.”

“Is it better today?” I asked.

“Yes, water and electricity are as good as anywhere, and roads are very good. The 498-km drive to the district is only six to eight hours—twice as fast as before.



Fig. 15.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing Tibet assistance official Wu Qiong in Lhasa, Tibet on July 21, 2019

But many graduates left Tibet because it was much harder than life in the rest of China. The land is vast, but a county 10 times the size of Xiamen may have only 30,000 people, and the natural conditions are bad. Many suffered badly from altitude sickness. I was able to stick it out because I was transferred to Lhasa where the living conditions are better.”

“How are the living conditions in those remote areas now?” I asked.

“Very good now!” he said. “Thanks to years of development, they now have telecom, mobile, 4G network, and the transportation, water and electricity are all good.”

“How many years have you lived in Lhasa?”

“I came here in 2012, seven years now. Lhasa has also changed greatly. It used to take two hours to drive to the airport but since the ring road and airport highway were built around 2012, it is now only one hour. And Lhasa has very good hotels and guesthouses now. It seems like Lhasa improves with each passing day.”

“How is transportation in and out of Tibet now?” I asked. “When I drove to Lhasa in 1994, roads outside of the city were very poor.”

“Tourism is booming now,” he said, “because we now have good roads and train service, and many flights in and out. It used to be very hard to buy tickets to Zhengzhou, my hometown, and there were no direct flights, so we had to fly via Chengdu. Now I can get home in less than one day. We can also take a train to Qinghai

Province, and trains will soon connect to Chengdu and also Nyingchi, near Yunnan Province. And with fast Internet I can talk to family anytime with WeChat video.”

“Ordinary people’s lives have improved?” I asked.

“Yes, especially after China started the precision poverty alleviation program. Tibet had 74 impoverished counties, but they are much better, now that the government has a ‘stationed-in-villages-to-help’ policy. In addition to good policies, we have policy alleviation industries to help people shake off poverty and prosper. We give subsidies and support for people to develop aquaculture, raise cattle and sheep, and produce Tibetan handicrafts such as blankets. We also have a rural e-commerce project, so that ordinary people can easily sell their products online through Taobao—and buy things as well.”

Rural Tibetans, like Chinese I met in Ningxia, Gansu, Guizhou and other remote areas, have the world at their fingertips thanks to hi-speed Internet, and programs such as “Buy from the world, sell to the world.”

“It took 15 days to receive a package from outside of Tibet when I first came here,” Wu Qiong said. “But today, it only takes about seven days. And a package to Lhasa takes only two to three days [about the same as the rest of China] with express logistics such as SF Express, Zhongtong or Yunda.”

E-commerce has even improved people’s diet. “Tibet is so vast that in grasslands of northern Tibet, you can drive a whole day without seeing one person. Villages are so far apart that people could not buy fresh fruits and vegetables, but thanks to better roads, we now cooperate with an e-commerce company on a pilot program to regularly deliver fresh produce to even remote areas.”

“Education used to be a problem,” I said. “Has that improved as well?”

“Yes, big changes,” Wu said. “The ‘Three Guarantees’ assure all rural children of free elementary, junior high and high school education. We even guarantee free food, clothes and lodging. When I first came, many rural children didn’t speak Chinese and had to show the numbers on a calculator to buy things. Now, many have no problem speaking Chinese.”

“It must be easier now for Tibetan youths to enter university? I was surprised at how many ways the government works to help minorities enter college. Our School of Management has more than 50 minority students from all over China, where I met XMU’s first Tibetan student, who is now a professor at Tibet University.”

“Yes, we give free tuition and preferential enrolment to Tibetan children, especially those from rural areas.”

“So much has changed since I drove to Tibet in 1994,” I said. “Even since you moved here. What do you see for Tibet’s future?”

“It will only keep getting better and better,” he said. “The Sichuan-Tibet Railway is under construction, and until only recently there were no roads from Lhasa to different counties and townships, but now it is easy to travel in Tibet. Some regional governments and enterprises engaged in aid-Tibet projects are helping me build factories to improve local Tibetans’ incomes and lives, and the central government is investing big in Tibet’s environmental protection. So Tibet is improving in many ways.”

“But regardless of improvements, the reality is that life is hard at such an altitude, why do you stay on?”

Wu laughed. “I also wanted to leave when I first came! The conditions here were so bad, and my 90-year-old grandfather had no one to care for him. Our son was less than one year old, so he stayed home in Zhengzhou with family. I really wanted to go home, but after working here for a long time, I gradually adapted to life in Tibet. And I feel that we should do something valuable and meaningful in life. So I chose to stay. Life of course would be easier back home, but I will stay here until retirement. Quite often, Chinese will work in Tibet for decades but they will return to their hometowns after retirement—many of them to Chengdu. We dedicated our youths to Tibet, but when we get older and our health is not so good, then we will go home.”

“You don’t think you’ll stay here after retirement?” I asked him.

Wu Qiong shook his head. “Tibet is still not suitable for long-term living because of the altitude and lack of oxygen. Not only will the heart suffer but there are other problems such as what we call plateau depression, as well as memory loss. Even now, I sometimes want to say something but then don’t remember what I was about to say.”

“I can see why you would want to return home. I would guess your hometown is well off now because I have seen for myself that all of China has improved, but what was it like during your childhood?”

“My family had three children, and when I was born in 1983 the conditions were still very poor, with no electricity supply at night. But now the countryside has transformed. We have beautiful homes, and every village has roads and buses to the county seat. Local education has also improved, even with kindergartens. My younger brother and sister both went to college, and my family now lives in the county seat. My mom has medical insurance now. We have community hospitals where it costs her very little to see a doctor and she is reimbursed 70 percent of her total medical expense. In the past, we were afraid of spending money on medical care, so if we were sick, we just endured it. Today, my home is called the ‘hometown of longevity,’ and the elderly live longer than before.”

I admire Wu Qiong and his wife for committing to serve in Tibet until retirement. Contrary to popular misconceptions, even Tibetans and Peruvians suffer from the high altitude, and have shorter life spans than those in other parts of China. The human body is simply not suited for long-term oxygen deprivation. I’ve talked with many Chinese working in Tibet, and have heard so many stories of Chinese who persisted until, without warning, they dropped dead on their doorsteps. It’s a difficult life—and yet Wu and his wife, and many others like them stick it out because, as he said, “I want to do something meaningful with my life.”

It is people like Wu Qiong, coupled with good leadership and wise and compassionate policies, that have allowed China to actually achieve what no other large nations have ever attempted—to eliminate absolute poverty.

I’m proud that our XMU has alumni like Wu. I can’t move to Tibet myself, but I hope to learn from his example to find other ways to help the peoples of not only Tibet but other remote areas in China. Thank you, Wu Qiong.

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Chapter 16

How Self-made Man Xu Lidao Found He Needed Society



Yunnan farmer Xu Lidao had the world in his hands in his youth. When he was only 28, he built one of the best homes in Shilin County, Deer Fu Town's Zhaicun village, and he traveled the country. He was a "self-made man"—until a devastating illness left him bedridden and at death's door. "I'd have not survived had it not been for the government's concern and care for me," he said.

Mr. Xu was so ill that his hair turned white, and his face, hands and feet turned completely black. "A construction worker from Kunming asked if I was from India! I went to every hospital and finally gave up. Many people in the hospital ward around me died, and I prepared for my funeral three times. But I tried to stay positive. Some asked why I still smiled when I was sick. My feeling was there was a day to laugh and a day to be sad—but it is better to laugh. I was optimistic—and over time I slowly recovered" (Fig. 16.1).

Mr. Xu eventually made a full recovery, but he's quick to admit today that he owes his prosperity and his very life to the leadership that has helped build not just the economy but also comprehensive social services that protect people from such catastrophic losses. As President Xi Jinping has noted, people are fragile. One costly illness can devastate a family and impoverish them for generations.

Mr. Xu, now 56, proudly gave us a tour of his home. "When I built this house 28 years ago, it was the only home in our committee's six villages that was so well built. Today, almost all of the dilapidated old earthen homes have been razed and rebuilt. Life keeps getting better and better because the central government's policies keep getting better and better."

"Did the government help you build your house?" I asked.

"I did the labor myself, but the government provided razing old homes and building new ones. Each family got RMB 11,000 for this, and we no longer have to pay a land-use fee, which the state used to charge when we built a house. Policies are better now because the country is stronger. With such good preferential policies for farmers, I no longer worry about whether I'll earn enough."

"Is everyone prospering now?" I asked.



Fig. 16.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing villager Xu Lidao in Shilin, Yunnan on July 26, 2019.
Photo by Zhu Qingfu

“No, not everyone,” Mr. Xu said. “Our village has 109 households, and some of these still live in pre-liberation old houses because they are too conservative to change or too lazy. But at least no one lives in thatched houses nowadays. And even the laziest people are much better off than before.”

“And after I built my home, I traveled all over the country.” I was surprised when he showed me a photo album. Only a limited number of people had cameras in the 1990s, and many of my friends have no childhood photos except for class pictures.

Mr. Xu grinned. “This photo is of my wife and I.”

He was quite handsome as a youth, and I could see the self-assurance in his smile. “I have to ask this,” I said, “are you also henpecked like me?”

He glanced at his wife, and nodded. “A little. But in China we think that’s good.”

“Why did you travel so much?” I asked. “Tourism?”

“I traveled a lot with my work,” Mr. Xu said. “This photo was at the Great Wall, and this one was in Shanghai.” He went quiet, then added, “but I’m old now.”

“You are not so old,” I said. “You are 56, and still very young. I’m 63 now.”

“But I spent two years in the hospital because of my illness,” he said. “All things considered, I’m doing well now. But before my illness, I felt so young, and people thought I was in my 40s, not in my 50s. Sickness aged me. I spent a total of three years in the hospital. Recovering from such a serious illness is not easy.”

As we drove into his village, I marveled that not only were the main and side roads made of concrete but even footpaths through the fields were in cement. Even the houses were all of concrete. When Mr. Xu built his home in 1991, it would have

been hard to believe that what was a showcase back then would within two decades become the norm.

“Rural life has obviously improved a lot here. What’s the main reason?”

“Good policies,” said Mr. Xu without hesitation. “But that has to be coupled with our own production and labor. Life is really better now. Many of our villagers have cars and like to travel. My family has two cars, two motorcycles and tractors.”

“Which policies have helped the most?” I asked.

“Farming subsidies are a big help,” Mr. Xu said. “The village committee invested over RMB 1 million to convert 2,000 acres of farmland to groves of walnut trees. They are already bearing fruit. And we have wonderful new roads and bridges everywhere. China’s bridge-building technology is very good.”

Mr. Xu pointed to an elevated expressway crossing the well-cultivated valley in the distance. “Highways surround our rural areas, and our economy has taken off.”

“How about electricity?” I asked. “Twenty-five years ago, even big cities had frequent power outages.”

“Electricity is very reliable now,” Mr. Xu said. “Even rural areas lose electricity only during emergency repairs. And they always notify us in advance of when and where they will be working—and it never lasts more than a couple of hours at the most.”

“That’s very fast for emergency repairs!” I said. “But I’m not surprised. When we had one of the worst typhoons in decades a few years ago, our power went out at 3 am but was back on at 3:45. Workers braved gale-force winds to fix it so quickly! And I’ve seen that electricity and water supply is just as reliable in China’s remote valleys as in the big cities.”

“And farmers have very good medical insurance now,” Mr. Xu said, “with reimbursement of 70 percent to 80 percent of their medical bills. Without insurance, I would have had no hope. Just one year in the hospital cost me RMB500,000, but over the past few years I’ve only had to pay about RMB100,000 from my own pocket.”

“I just gave my wife a RMB64,000 burial insurance policy on me, and we can buy retirement insurance. In a word, all of the policies are good, China is strong, and life is good. Of course, every country has good and bad people. Some work hard, some are lazy.”

“I can see that you are a philosopher!” I said.

Mr. Xu grinned. “I’m an optimist. Since I was young, I’ve done everything. Like this house—I built everything myself, including the doors and windows. I’m also a mason, carpenter, stevedore—I can do everything. But my main income is from veterinary practice. I can heal any animal—cows, horses, dogs, chickens, etc.”

“You have very rich experience,” I said.

“Do you know bullfighting?” Mr. Xu asked.

The non sequitur caught me by surprise. “Yes. Spain and Mexico have bullfighting.”

“Our bullfighting is also famous,” Mr. Xu said. “Today is Stone Forest’s Torch Festival,” Mr. Xu said. “And the bullfight is very grand.”

Bullfighting in Stone Forest County has become a big tourist draw, and has attracted corporate sponsors such as, not surprisingly, Red Bull. This Yi minority

custom goes back for centuries, but unlike Spain or Mexico, the bulls fight each other, with no human matador involved. I wondered why Mr. Xu brought up bull-fighting, but then learned, to my relief, that unlike in Spain or Mexico, Stone Forest bulls are rarely killed, and if they are injured, they are tended to by Mr. Xu, the local veterinarian.

“I have also done business,” Mr. Xu said. “I’ve mobilized local people to plant corn, which I buy and resell. But I’ve spent the longest time in land and resources management—almost 16 years. And for 15 years I have been elected to be on the village committee for promotion and organization. There is no remuneration for this job, but I earn income from cultivation, breeding pigs and veterinary practice.”

“Our county’s economic pillars are flue-cured tobacco, tourism and stone materials. Our stone forest is very famous, and there are hundreds of stone processing factories. Because I do land and resources management, stone processing is also within my scope, but policies are strict and many areas do not allow quarrying. The policies have been good, especially since Xi Jinping became the Chinese president.”

“Have Xi Jinping’s policies affected here?”

“Of course,” Mr. Xu said. “President Xi has greatly influenced the minds of the people, and we farmers are quite supportive of him. Some farmers think we could not have stopped corrupt officials without him. In their eyes, he is on a similar level to Chairman Mao.”

“Life is much better since Xi came on the scene?” I asked.

“Yes. We do have a few households in our village of fairly young people who are strong and vigorous but too lazy to work. They prefer to live on state subsidies, and they are still poor. But thanks to good policies, subsidies, and many forms of support, as long as you are diligent, life is okay. I dare not say you are rich, but you definitely don’t have to worry about food and clothing nowadays. And with these basic needs met, people can gradually prosper—if they remain in good health.”

“I’m curious, what was your income when I drove through here in 1994?”

“Our family income was at most RMB15,000 a year,” Mr. Xu said. “But today, even people with poor health can earn RMB50,000 a year.”

I noted how Mr. Xu kept coming back to health. This self-made man’s health scare obviously awoke him to the truth of Xi Jinping’s warning about how a lack of sound medical care can be devastating to even the hardest worker.

Two little girls played as we talked. I asked Mr. Xu, “Are these your granddaughters?”

“Yes, they are my daughter’s. And this chubby is my granddaughter. Their kindergarten costs RMB700 to RMB800 per year, and they eat at school. The state also subsidizes their elementary school where they receive lunch during school days. There was no such thing in my days in school, when we could not solve such basic problems as food and clothing. Back then, classrooms and office buildings, and even village committee offices, were earthen buildings; today, they are all high-rise buildings. Our conditions are as good as those in towns and cities,” Mr. Xu said, smiling.

As Mr. Xu showed us more photos of his travels, I said, “You have done so much, and traveled so widely, that I think your real name must be Xu Xiake [a Chinese geographer and travel writer of the seventeenth century]!”

“Yes, my wife, son and daughter-in-law and I have traveled the entire country—though not at the same time. I’m a farmer, at least one of us must always remain behind to care for the pigs.”

Mr. Xu proudly showed us around the village, and I chatted with some retirees sitting on a bench near the village entrance. It was evident that, as Mr. Xu had said, village life was as good as that in towns and cities. And I had seen the same rural prosperity in every province we’d visited.

It’s no wonder that Mr. Xu is both happy and proud, when he said, “I can do anything!” But even this self-made man was humbled when ill health taught him why we also need help from one another, and from good policies of wise and compassionate leaders.

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Chapter 17

Zhu Qingfu—Passionate About Photography



I first met Mr. Zhu Qingfu over 20 years ago when he allowed me to use, free of charge, many of his award-winning photos for my first book about Xiamen (and for half a dozen books after that). Only years later did I learn the story of my selfless friend's impoverished childhood, and of the sacrifices he had made to become one of China's most celebrated photographers. I've long cherished his photographic creations, but now I also cherish his life story. Not only did he rise from bitter poverty to become widely celebrated and admired but, thanks to reform and opening-up policies, his family in the countryside has now prospered even more than himself in the city (Fig. 17.1).

"All of us Chinese have undergone great changes as the country has changed," Mr. Zhu said. "For example, I was born in a ravine in Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province, and in my junior high school years, I had to leave before dawn for a two-hour walk on a mountain road to school — four hours' roundtrip walk each day."

"When I was 10 it also took me two hours to get to school — but at least one hour was on the bus!" I said.

In addition to walking four hours a day to school, for years, he also had to cut and dry firewood on Saturdays and Sundays. "I pushed the firewood each day in a small cart to school, and during lunch I sold it to a ceramic kiln next door. I was happy to earn RMB1.02 because our school's annual tuition was over RMB2."

"What was school like?" I asked.

"Not so good. My teacher printed our books with a mimeograph."

I laughed. "I used to do it myself at XMU when I first came. The students always knew when I was handing out a test because I'd have blue ink on my hands and clothes!"

In high school, Mr. Zhu attended a school in town but had to climb two mountains to get there. "My classmates and I were so poor that we had nothing to eat, we'd pickle peanuts and corn stalks, put them in a bucket, and that's what we'd eat for the entire week. I was determined to escape life in the mountains but failed the college entrance exam—which was no surprise. While town kids could prepare, we rural kids



Fig. 17.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing photographer Zhu Qingfu in Yangshuo, Guangxi on July 29, 2019. *Photoby* Zhu Qingfu

spent hours each day walking to school, and I also had to raise cattle, do housework, and climb the mountains to chop wood.”

“What was life like at home?” I asked.

“We were very poor but pretty self-sufficient. We could make or raise everything we needed at home. We bought only salt and cloth to make our annual set of new clothes for Chinese New Year. We got the money from the chicken’s butt!” he said, laughing. “We sold the eggs in the market to buy salt with the money.”

“Did that also provide the money for the cloth?”

“No. For that we’d sell one of our pigs. I’d buy the cloth myself, but then we’d have the tailor come and measure us, and he’d make our new clothes for the year.”

“Since you failed the college exam, how did you finally escape the ravine?”

“Another option was joining the military, but it was hard to enlist back then, and regulations forbade an only son joining. Even worse, my family objected — especially my grandmother, whose husband had been forced into the military by the Kuomintang. He died in battle when she was only 29, leaving her to raise the family by herself. But she eventually relented, and I enlisted and was sent to Fujian.”

At that time Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping had just said that military officers must graduate from college. Mr. Zhu knew from day one that he could not become an officer unless he could get into the military academy. “I knew that after my

three-year enlistment, I would be back to the farm, unless I could think of another road—and that's when I considered photography.”

He had loved photography since childhood, and often cut out and pasted his favorite pictures into a scrapbook. When he heard that his army regiment's reporting team had a photographer, he tried to join the team.

“Actually, my first dream was to be a singer, but our regiment only had a small performing team that put on shows in their spare time. Then I asked a man who had enlisted the year before I had how to get on the reporting team. He said that the only way was to get attention by often writing radio drafts for the reporting team.”

Mr. Zhu's military training was intense, and he also had stints standing guard, but in spite of his grueling schedule he used his little spare time to write a broadcast draft about the life of his team, which he then submitted. “In my eighth month of military service, I was selected as one of over 30 people for a training session for key reporters. The press officer learned that my skills were poor because I was a country boy with a simple education, but he also saw that I was keen to learn and worked very hard, rising early each day and working tirelessly at every task I was given—whether cleaning the red brick so as to make it spotless, or washing dishes and laundry. The older troops took note of my industriousness and, later, from the over 30 candidates, I and three others were selected for the reporting group. From that time onward, I began studying every newspaper I could find, and wrote articles for the *Frontline* and *Liberation Army Daily*, which was very hard to get published in.”

“But how did you go from writing to photography?” I asked.

“I was not allowed to do photography at first, because I was a country boy, and photography was considered very fashionable, but I had friends back home who bought and sent me some photography books, so I could learn. And before our press officer departed on a 45-day wedding leave, he gave me the key to the darkroom, where he had left an old dual-lens camera for me to use. This was the turning point for me!”

Mr. Zhu's first trip to Xiamen was on the back of a coal truck, and he used his entire monthly allowance to buy two rolls of film. “With a broken camera I photographed my platoon leader. I then spent every free moment of the 45 days in the darkroom practicing what I read from the books about taking photos and developing films. I'd study all night and then, when morning call sounded, I'd throw on my uniform, and race out to join the others for the morning run. By the time the press officer returned, I was already familiar with every procedure in the darkroom.”

“My first photographic assignment was to shoot our regiment chief of staff. That photo, which was published in the *Advance News*, laid the foundation for my later photography. From then on, the press officer got me involved in photography work. It was very difficult to publish photos in newspapers at that time, but I studied their layouts, and saw that every issue had one ‘pretty photo.’ ‘I should try this,’ I thought, because everyone else is writing news but there is only one photo each day. I submitted a photo of our handsomest soldier posing by a machine gun — and that was my first photo in the *People's Liberation Army Daily*. I was given a third-class merit, and it

created a sensation in our regiment because many couldn't publish one photo in an entire year."

From that point on, the young man's photos frequently appeared in newspapers. "The main reason was that I studied what newspaper editors wanted, and then I submitted all of my best photos for publication," he explained.

"You should teach MBA!" I said. "Deliver what customers want!"

He laughed. "Yes, that's right. If I sold vegetables, I'd need to know what the cook's recipe called for. I did a thorough research, and jotted editors' contact information in my notebook. My photos were carried not only in military publications but also in civilian papers and magazines, such as *Liaoning Youth*, *Guangxi Youth*, and *Life Creation*. From then on, almost every issue of *Forward* has run my photos. Each of the four pages has only one photo; and in one issue, three or the four photos were taken by me — including the one for the 'Art Column' because my photos were well taken."

He so impressed his superiors with his dedication and work ethic that in his third year of service he was promoted from the regimental level to the divisional reporting team in Quanzhou, just north of Xiamen.

"The first time I came to Xiamen," Mr. Zhu said. "I was in uniform in the back of a military coal truck because the cab's three seats were taken by the driver, our platoon leader and his girlfriend. I was so moved by the beauty of Xiamen and the Gulangyu Island that I set a goal of finding a Xiamen wife and moving here! On the trip home, the truck was loaded with coal, and I had to sit on coal all the way back. By the time I got to Quanzhou my entire body was black — except for the white of my eyes."

After a 10-month training program, Mr. Zhu was transferred to Xiamen. "I achieved my goal of moving to Xiamen even before finding a wife!" he said. "I was the only army photographer in Xiamen, meaning that I had a large territory. Military newspapers and the covers of many magazines used my photos because I studied what editors needed, took beautiful photos, and excelled at developing them. My photos were of such a broad range of people — pilots, correspondents, cooks, and some division-level officers, including the political commissar, deputy division chief, chief of staff, deputy political commissar, logistics minister, etc. And I earned a RMB5 remuneration fee for most of the photos."

"That was a small fortune back then!" I said.

"Haha! I was really rich because I honed my strategy, and I worked hard. The nation developed, and so did I, keeping pace with the times. Although I learned very little from my schooling in the countryside, I learned much in the army. In fact, for me, the military was one big school! But I left the army after nine years because of family and other reasons, including my poor health. This surprised my commanders because I was the youngest and supposed to be in very good health."

Mr. Zhu had a gap of about a year between changing jobs, during which period he traveled all over Xiamen. He set a three-year goal—to create a set of photographic works to portray Xiamen—or else give up photography. "I changed careers in 1994—the same year you first drove around China. I explored every corner of Xiamen and climbed every mountain, taking photos to capture its beauty, as well as the

development of Haicang and Gulangyu. Not only is Xiamen beautiful but the people are very hard working and friendly. Like you, Professor, I am an outsider, but I love Xiamen very much and wanted to photograph and promote it, and I've been doing that to this day. Every year, I choose the best weather to take a panoramic photo of Xiamen from Sunlight Rock on Gulangyu Island. These photos are often used by enterprises, institutions and schools in Xiamen for their brochures. I took a series of photos on Xiamen's urban development."

In 1995, the Xiamen city government selected Zhuqing's photos for a commemorative album celebrating the city's 15th anniversary as a special economic zone of China. "So I helped lay the foundation of photography in Xiamen," he said.

He was also in charge of the "Why Xiamen Is So Beautiful" exhibition in Beijing. "My photos helped Gulangyu gain recognition by *China National Geographic* magazine as the 'nation's most beautiful urban area,' and Gulangyu's promotion has capitalized upon that honor ever since."

Mr. Zhu also produced an album that helped Xiamen win a "National Sanitary City" title—a major milestone for Xiamen. "I spent eight months just editing the *Xiamen-Civilized Homeland* album", he said. "The man heading the evaluation and selection committee in Beijing said, 'I can't say if Xiamen will rank first or not, but your photographic album is definitely the most beautiful that we have seen.'"

Mr. Zhu smiled. "You and I are alike. We both speak for Xiamen and do all in our power to help Xiamen. I'm very proud of Xiamen's achievements."

After leaving the army, Mr. Zhu's first job was as deputy director of *Xiamen Business Daily's* Photography Department, and later the director. He set a record for monthly submissions, with 68 published photos in one month!

In 1996, he went abroad for the first time and helped shoot an album in Singapore. On his way through Hong Kong, he created a photo series about the former British colony's upcoming return to the Chinese mainland, and in 1997, a photo that he shot in the army entitled *Chinese Men* beat 35,570 other works to earn him a gold medal in the "National Photographic Art Exhibition." This was Fujian Province's first national photographic art medal since 1949—and a gold medal at that. "Fujian has always been relatively weak in photography," he said. "This award created a sensation in our province. The Fujian Provincial Federation of Literary and Art Circles and its Xiamen city branch jointly organized the 'Zhu Zhuqing Commendation Conference' in Xiamen, where I was awarded RMB10,000 — joining the RMB10,000 households!"

Mr. Zhu's award helped kickstart Fujian photography. In the 19th session of the National Photography Awards, Fujian photographers brought home national bronze and silver awards, and the province's standing has improved ever since. "Fujian used to be ranked among the bottom six provinces," he said. "But now we're in the top six."

Mr. Zhu has continued to not only improve his own artistry but also to train other photographers. "When I joined the army, I only had two sets of clothes," he said. "Now I'm considered upper-middle class, with my own house and car in Xiamen. This would have been unimaginable a few decades ago. Living in Xiamen was my biggest dream — and still is."

“Mine too,” I said.

He laughed. “Haha, you and I are the same. We not only can live in Xiamen and care for our families but we can also do meaningful work for our city. Of course, we had to be self-reliant. Our efforts have reaped such great rewards because we worked so hard — and because of the nation’s development and changes.”

“What was life like when you first moved to Xiamen?” I asked.

Mr. Zhu grimaced. “Not so good. I was in love with Xiamen when I first came in the 1990s, but I could not find an affordable place to stay. My first home was a tiny 11 m² room in a temple in Wenzhao (文昭). My oldest child was born in that temple, where I added a small shed at the door to use as a kitchen.”

“Xiamen University was like that in the early 1990s,” I said. “Even professors made kitchens of cardboard in public hallways. I suppose that today your clothes closet is bigger than your first home?”

“That’s true!” he said. “Even my bathroom is bigger! I often go back to look at the temple in Wenzhao, which has been restored to become a protected site. It used to be on the outskirts, but now it is surrounded by modern high-rises. This is how all of China has changed. Collectively and individually, we have all struggled, but as President Xi said, ‘happiness comes from struggle,’ and this is true. I was deeply moved when President Xi moved from Fujian to the central government because we in Fujian witnessed him advance step by step as he worked to develop our country and led people to live a better life. No government that fails to help its people live well is a good government. I admire President Xi’s philosophy. Our country is fortunate to have a leader like him — and I say this from my heart.”

Mr. Zhu is especially proud of the photos he took of President Xi at the UN Trade and Development Conference held in Xiamen in 2010, when the president welcomed leaders from nine countries and regions. Mr. Zhu was chosen as a designated photographer for the occasion. “I was impressed by President Xi’s presence, but also by his calm. He spoke relatively slowly, but frankly and with conviction, and his voice was loud and magnetic. When he raised the golden key to formally open the China Trade Fair, I seized the moment and raised my camera above my head to take a photo blindly. That photo became my classic work because it caught his charm. I called the photo *New Voyage* as, with Xi’s leadership, we have indeed embarked on a new voyage — one that is democratic, prosperous, and stable—and this is what gives us happiness. If your country is turbulent and unstable, no matter how good you may think of it, it’s useless. Without security, it is impossible to do anything.”

“I can see how you have prospered here in Xiamen, but what about your family back in your impoverished hometown?”

“They are now even better off than I am!” he said. “When I left the military, my parents moved to live in Xiamen with me for a while, but the housing conditions were so poor that they had to sleep in the corridor. Then my father returned home before my mother did, and began to live with my sister, who had a difficult time herself, and had to make her ends meet by cutting firewood to earn a little income. After reform and opening up, however, my sister and brother-in-law built a wood-processing factory, and they are now better off than I am!”

“How could people in such poverty prosper?” I asked.

“Nankang County, which is now Nankang District, is a major furniture base with more than 2,000 furniture manufacturers. And of course, they all need wood. Today, one out of every seven high-end beds in China is produced there, and much of their furniture is shipped directly to Europe. My sister left the mountainous area, and built a house in the town, and her children are well educated and work in the city. Such changes would have been unthinkable just 30 years ago! They just need opportunity.”

“I was deeply moved at how meticulously President Xi’s poverty alleviation program was carried out in my hometown. Every impoverished home had a notice, with the name of the official responsible for helping them put on it. Some of my relatives used to be so poor that they had no oil for cooking, instead they wiped the pot with pig skin and added chilies and a bit of salt. But when I went back two years ago, life was very good there. Before 1990, my home had no electricity, so we used kerosene lamps. Today electricity supply is very reliable.”

“Do they have access to the Internet?” I asked.

“Not only the Internet but also cable TV. And I used to have to cross a single-plank wooden bridge over a river to get to my home. Now there is a bridge, and I can drive my car on the cement road to my doorstep. In fact, cement roads lead to every doorstep. And where I used to have to climb two mountains to go to school, it is just a 10–15 mins’ drive now.”

“The poverty alleviation effort is going well?” I asked.

“Very well. The entire country has families with stories like mine — including the mountainous areas in our own Fujian Province. It is extraordinary that any nation can do this for more than 1 billion people. But what amazes me most is that even as China has developed economically and tried to eliminate poverty, it has also fought to restore the environment. The development of west China has moved me most deeply. It used to be barren, arid loess, and had little greenery. But today, from Inner Mongolia to Tibet, and even in the Gobi Desert, all you see is green along the way. This is extraordinary.”

When I drove through Yan’an of Shaanxi in 1994, the entire area was barren and arid, and many people lived in caves. But when Mr. Zhu drove through the same area with me in 2019, he took a panoramic photo from a building’s 27th floor, and the vista was as green and modern as any other city in China.

Mr. Zhu smiled broadly and proudly. “As you can imagine, our country’s huge development and changes have made a significant contribution to the world and to the protection of the earth,” he said.

“Even the UN admits this,” I said. “China has spent more on environmental protection and championing new energy and green industry than the rich countries that could afford to do more but do not.”

“Yes,” he said. “The key is good policy with long-term goals. And to be honest, dependence upon war or other such means is not a long-term solution. Only going forward peacefully and down-to-earth is reliable and sustainable.”

“What I really appreciate today is how safe I feel in China. “Thirty years ago, we worried about pickpockets, but we’ve not seen any in 20 years,” I said.

He agreed. “I often go on photographic explorations, trekking through mountains and forging rivers. I used to not dare go alone, especially when carrying expensive

equipment. Now I feel safe anywhere I go. In the old days, I encountered pickpockets, and I had two train tickets stolen on the bus to the railway station. Nothing like that happens now.”

“This is one of the things I’m most proud of,” he continued. “It is not easy for a country as large as ours to give people security and stability. And in many areas of technology, we are even ahead of the developed nations — second-generation ID cards, for example, and expressways and hi-speed trains as well.”

I laughed. “Fujian roads used to be so bad that I got carsick even when I was the driver!”

Mr. Zhu finished off his tiny cup of Fujian tea, then he said, “As we’ve driven around China together this past month, I think the most important and impressive thing has been how people in every corner are enjoying social stability and a better life—and a greener life. It is truly remarkable.”

China is indeed truly remarkable—because of visionary leadership with farsighted plans and policies that are capitalized upon by passionate and persistent dreamers like Zhu Qingfu. Thank you, Qingfu!

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Chapter 18

Grandma Chen Qiaodi's 3 Generations of Change



Our family fell in love with Yangshuo when we first drove there in the summer of 1993. In our eyes, this country town along the river is far more beautiful than the sprawling city of Guilin 66 km to the north. It feels like a gigantic Chinese miniature landscape, surrounded by the otherworldly temple-dotted karst peaks that inspired the whimsical mountains of Dr. Seuss' children's books. We loved the beauty and the quiet—but it is no longer so quiet.

In July 2019, I was astonished to find the country town had evolved into a small city. And the bamboo rafts that men used to pole along the river for tourists are now powered by engines to make the trip faster (and more profitable)—and we had to wait in line to buy tickets and then wait in line to board. In Yangshuo, it seems one of the most common pastimes is now waiting in line—whether for tourist sites or restaurants.

Many people who remember the Yangshuo of 30 years ago complain about the changes and the crowds. I've had foreign tourists complain to me about the crowds, and I've responded, "Feel free to leave and lessen the crowds by one person!"

While standing in line is not my favorite pastime, I appreciate the crowds at Yangshuo, the Great Wall, Yunnan's Stone Forest or Lhasa's Potala Palace for three reasons. One, it shows that Chinese now have the money to enjoy their own country. Twenty years ago, they were visited mainly by overseas tourists or wealthier Chinese. Two, as Xi Jinping emphasized 30 years ago, when he was a young leader in Fujian's impoverished Ningde, cultural tourism is an economically sustainable way to preserve and promote local culture, especially that of minorities. Three, thriving tourism has boosted economies and improved locals' lives—people like Ms. Chen Qiaodi, who happily shared with me how her family's life had changed.

"When I first started working in the literature and art promotion team in 1965," she said. "Yangshuo had only one street, and our house was very dilapidated, but things have changed rapidly since the 1980s."

"Even in the early 1990s, Yangshuo had only a couple of main streets," I said. "But today it has grown so much that I can't even find the old main street."



Fig. 18.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing villager Chen Qiaodi in Yangshuo, Guangxi on July 29, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

Ms. Chen laughed. “You just walked down that street to get here! But it does look a little different now.”

Ms. Chen was transferred to a film company in 1975. At that time, no one had TV, but films were very popular. Nowadays, however, many movie theaters have closed because new technology makes it easy to show educational and promotional movies for free in park squares and the countryside.

“Yangshuo did not have many tourist spots back then, but now the Lijiang River, Moon Mountain, and Nine-Horse Painting Mountain have developed very fast. And new roads connect villages. I used to have to walk to get to these villages, but nowadays not only are all of the villages connected with concrete roads but these roads lead directly to each farmer’s doorstep. Roads have helped even the remotest areas to prosper, especially the past 10 years” (Fig. 18.1).

“Many have said that the fastest change has been over the past 10 years. Why is that?”

Ms. Chen said, “Under President Xi’s leadership, science and technology have developed rapidly, and so has tourism. Yangshuo has much better facilities now, and tourism by both foreigners and Chinese has grown. Even my own hometown of the Nine-Horse Painting Mountain has a road leading directly to our doorstep, and tourism has grown there as well.”

“What was it like before the new roads?” I asked.

“Before we had roads, we had to climb over a large mountain to get anywhere. If we rode a bicycle, we had to carry it on our back. The first road was not built so well, but later it was improved, and tourism in our area exploded after that.”

“The last time I drove here was in March of 2000, when even the new roads were still very poor. But today they were as good as anywhere in China, from coastal provinces in the east to Qinghai and Tibet in the west.”

Ms. Chen nodded in agreement. “Yes, I remember very clearly. By 2009, the roads were okay but still not great. Now the road to the Nine-Horse Painting Mountain is flat and as good as Yangshuo’s main roads. Thanks to good roads, every household in my home village has someone working in tourist attractions on the Lijiang River. Tourism has benefited us greatly, and life is improving day by day.”

“What was life like here when you first arrived in Yangshuo?” I asked. “What was your home like, and what did you eat?”

“It was pretty bad,” Ms. Chen said. “I married in 1970. Back then, there was no tap water, and we had to carry water in buckets from the Lijiang River. My mother-in-law was too old to haul water, so I carried most of it myself. And we had very little to eat—mainly sweet potatoes, corn and sorghum. Nowadays, of course, everyone can eat rice.”

“How about medical care and retirement?” I asked. “Some people have risen from poverty, only to be devastated by illness and medical costs.”

“We used to have to pay all costs up front when we went to the doctor or hospital, but many people could not afford that. Today, we pay much less because the hospital deducts right up front what they know the government will pay, and after that I’m reimbursed for most of my expenses.”

“Do farmers in rural areas also have medical insurance?”

“Of course,” Ms. Chen said. “Everyone is covered. In fact, the reimbursement ratio in rural areas is higher than that for people in towns.”

“How about pensions?” I asked.

“Yes, farmers, too, have pensions.”

Ms. Chen’s house had been newly renovated, both inside and out. “Your family is obviously doing well now,” I said. “But where did you get income in the old days?”

“The government allocated our house to us in 1952,” Ms. Chen said. “It’s over 100 years old. My husband has five brothers and six sisters, and we used to be porters at the pier. But as the economy improved, my husband and his brothers left Yangshuo to find work. My husband’s oldest brother is head of the Quanzhou Education Bureau, and the second brother graduated from Wuhan University. My husband, the youngest, is a driver, the fourth brother is in a Guilin factory, and the fifth has a job here in Yangshuo. The sisters also have jobs. In other words, in the past it was really difficult to find work, but not now. The reason is all have benefited from school education. My husband’s father was an educated man, he pushed his children to get an education. They did, and they all have jobs.”

“Has education improved?”

“It is much better today! Everyone can get an education, get higher salaries, and have a higher pension after retiring. My own company’s salaries are a little lower, but

I've renovated my home and rent part of it out, and life is good! Now my grandson is studying at Chongqing Jiaotong University."

"I'm thankful that even rural children can attend university," I said. "That was rare when I first moved to China."

"Today, not only does the government provide support and loans to college students, but some companies also subsidize college students' expenses. And if rural elementary schools lack facilities, specialists in poverty alleviation projects will help them in many ways such as improving the facilities, showing them how to cultivate gardens, etc."

"A tour guide told me this morning that in the past, people could eat only what they had grown themselves and that only seasonal fruit was in stores, but now you can eat anything you want any time of the year. Is that true?" I asked.

"Yes, it's true. We used to never have fruit here, but now it is shipped in year round from all over the country."

"That's amazing to me," I said. "I remember that even in Xiamen in the early years we could buy only what was grown or made locally."

"You mentioned that Yangshuo's fastest changes have been over the past 10 years. Why is that?" I asked her.

"I think the biggest change is that people now have guaranteed medical care, and the society is safe, and our children have no problem getting an education. The government has done so much in so many ways that everything is better now."

"When we were in Yunnan two days ago," I said. "There was a man who was sick and hospitalized for two years. He said he would never have survived had medical insurance not paid most of his bills. It seems people all over the country have benefited from such services."

"That's true," Ms. Chen said. "And the best thing is that there is no problem now caring for the elderly. Older people like us receive retirement pensions, we don't have to worry about food, and children don't have to worry about getting an education."

Zhu Qingfu, the famous Fujian photographer who had been traveling with us around China, asked, "What was your family's income 25 years ago?"

Ms. Chen said, "I was still working then, but when I retired in 1996, my monthly salary was only RMB315. Today I receive about RMB2,400 a month—enough for what we need!"

"Even in the late 1980s," I said. "I was told that Xi Jinping was concerned about retirement. It was during his 17.5 years in Fujian that he developed his ideas on precision poverty alleviation, and he has said that by 2020 China should have been able to raise everyone in the country from absolute poverty. It's hard to believe that this can be done in such a big country, but I am fortunate enough to have watched it take place over the past three decades. And during our drive up to here in 2019, we saw that absolute poverty had truly been ended in every province."

Ms. Chen laughed, "We had originally hoped that we could earn at least RMB100 a month in retirement. We'd have never imagined receiving more than RMB2,000."

"But what is the main reason behind the government's care for everyone from schoolchildren to retirees?" I asked.

“The government has good leadership and good policies,” Ms. Chen said. “The people are happy, and I am the happiest because in the past I witnessed the difficulties of rural life. Back then we didn’t even have clothes to wear, and we went to school barefoot. Many young people could not find spouses because no one wanted to live in such conditions. Today, I’m 72, and things are much different.”

“You look much younger than 72!” I said. And she did, perhaps because of her optimism, joy—and gratitude.

“I’ve experienced great changes since I moved here in 1965,” Ms. Chen said. “And I’ve watched President Xi build a whole team to help China develop step by step from the grassroots level. He understands us very well.”

Xi Jinping showed a lot of courage when, in November 1993, he told a remote Miao ethnic village in Hunan Province that China could eliminate absolute poverty by 2020. No other nation in history, large or small, rich or poor, has dared make such a statement. I’m thankful, for the sake of people like Ms. Chen, that China not only set such a goal but achieved it.

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Chapter 19

Lin Ruiqi, Huawei's Senior Vice President



One of my biggest surprises in driving 20,000 km around China in 2019 was that even the remotest people not only have good concrete roads right to their doorsteps but they also have the Internet. Even farmers in remote Ningxia and Inner Mongolia, or Tibetan villages in the 5000 m elevation Death Zone have prospered through e-commerce, and many happily shared their WeChat contact with me, so we could keep in touch by video chat. And Huawei is the company that made all of this possible not only in China but in many other countries as well—from African deserts to Arctic Circle villages and South American out-backs.

Huawei sees connecting remote peoples to the world as a matter of social justice because in the information age, the online highway can be just as important as the concrete highways in helping lift people from poverty.

Fortunately for Huawei, it can act on its values because as a private company owned by employees, it is not hamstrung like other companies with external shareholders demanding high dividends that shortchange R&D and social justice projects. But how does Huawei instill its leaders' keen sense of social justice and mission in employees, so that they are not just willing but eager to scale 6000 m peaks, heavy equipment strapped to their backs, to install a base in Tibet? Or, like Senior Vice President Amy Lin (Lin Ruiqi), braving 60° below zero temperatures north of the Arctic Circle and having to be evacuated by submarine. Or, like young Lucy in Argentina, sleeping on the ground with her young teammates, eating food that they could not even identify, and working around the clock to provide the Internet access to remote villages?

I gained a much better understanding of Huawei, both its head and its heart, after I interviewed Amy and Lucy on the futuristic Huawei campus in Shenzhen.

Senior Vice President Amy (Lin Ruiqi), who has been with Huawei since 1997, was surprised when her eight-year-old daughter, returning home from school on March 21, 2019, asked her, “Mom, do you know why Americans are attacking Huawei?”

“How did you hear about this?” Amy asked.

“My teacher told us so,” she said.



Fig. 19.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing Huawei Senior Vice President Lin Ruiqi in Shenzhen on July 31, 2019. *Photo by Zhu Qingfu*

Her daughter was upset when Amy set phone to record. Amy told her, “I just want memories of this conversation!”

“Why do you think the US is attacking Huawei?” Amy asked her daughter.

“Because China is developing very well but the US is not,” she said. “They want to stop China.”

Amy wondered if this was really her daughter’s view or her teacher’s, so she asked her, “Do you have any suggestions for Huawei?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Except to continue to be yourself.”

Amy shared these words of wisdom with colleagues and even my business school professors and classmates, all of whom agreed with her daughter. But when Huawei was added to the US entity sanction list two months later, Amy asked her daughter if she thought Huawei needed a new war strategy. “No,” she said. “Continue being yourself — but I think you can make more friends to help you” (Fig. 19.1).

On the bright side, as Amy noted, the US attacks raised Huawei’s global profile, and people like George Gilder did come to its defense. The American economist famed as the “Nostradamus of Technology” and “America’s No.1 Tech Futurist,” Gilder wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, “Huawei Is an Asset, Not a Threat,”¹ where he argued that “Ren Zhengfei’s company should be celebrated as a triumph of the US-led global trading system.”

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/huawei-is-an-asset-not-a-threat-11558390913>.

“Huawei is facing great challenges,” Amy admitted. “But I have a golden sentence I suggest you use. ‘Struggle is not hard, struggle is cool,’ because your experience and life story are the sum of your struggles.”

After 22 years with Huawei, Amy is grateful for what she has learned as she has shared Huawei's struggles. “When I was a child, my parents stressed that I be honest, kind and contribute to society. Huawei has been my platform to make contributions both in China and abroad. I've met former Huawei people in China and other countries who all say that the spirit of Huawei and struggle will always be a part of them. Many former Huawei employees have even thanked me for their experiences here.”

“Can you share some stories of early struggles?” I asked.

Amy laughed. “So many stories! For example, we were so tight in the early days that we cut costs by not buying toilet seats — which meant that girls had to stand on the toilets to use them. And between 1997 and 2000, it was common for two girls to share the same bed. But we did not feel bitter. Those were growing experiences that we will never have again.”

“Another example is when we first began delivering telecommunications switches overseas. They were such new technology that at first we sometimes had to upgrade them a dozen times within a month, so we just ate and slept in the customer's computer room. Someone began selling fried chicken right outside. We ate so much of it that everyone now knows Amy does not want to eat any more fried chicken!”

“And we had failures, sometimes, and grieved — but our customers stayed with us. And when we failed for reasons beyond our control, customers grieved with us — and still stayed with us.”

“I've seen that Huawei customers can be as loyal as Huawei employees,” I said.

“Yes, our customers are very loyal,” Amy said. “Because we are loyal to them. Huawei's top priority is our customers' success — and this in turn ensures ours. Some Western companies, for example, have taken half a month, even longer, for their engineers to fix customers' problems. Huawei has never done this. We value our customers' trust, and our rapid responses help create a virtuous circle. Many of Huawei's early adopters were not the leading companies, but they chose Huawei, and trusted Huawei, and many surpassed their competitors later on, and even became industry leaders.”

But in a world that understands little about China, Huawei had to work hard to earn trust. “Even in 2000, a foreigner asked me, ‘Amy, in China can you really easily buy eggs, sugar and salt in the supermarkets...?’”

“What I admire most about Huawei is how it has helped such remote areas in China and abroad,” I said. “But why does Huawei think this is important?”

“For Huawei, this is an ethics issue,” Amy said. “We think all peoples should enjoy ICT solutions on an equal footing, so that they can better interconnect and improve their lives — regardless of their level of development, ethnicity or challenging conditions. And Huawei's innovations to address such issues help stimulate the development of entire industries or nations, which in turn provides more possibilities for the world. Over the past 30 years, we have connected 3 billion people through infrastructure construction, and in the next five or 10 years we will further eliminate the digital divide to benefit more people and ensure fairness.”

“Can you share examples in which Huawei has already bridged this ‘digital divide?’”

“Many examples, even from my personal experience.” Amy said, “For example, Huawei installed the first 2G equipment in Moscow. Moscow was so cold that even Hitler’s army retreated from it. Thus, I asked Mr. Ren Zhengfei to help push R&D’s development of technology that could survive subzero temperatures.”

“A Russian region above the Arctic Circle with only 150,000 people produces 70 percent of the world’s nickel. They have a big impact on the global non-ferrous metal futures market, but conditions were so bad that no company would build a network there.”

The temperature had plummeted to minus 57 when Amy attended the Huawei equipment opening ceremony, and her headset froze and cracked as soon as she stepped outside. Then a snowstorm buried the city, and she was evacuated by submarine. “No other company would even try to work in those conditions,” Amy said.

Amy was dismayed by the terrible natural conditions she saw in part of the Republic of Armenia. “But the local government was still very visionary,” Amy said. “The people there were keen to learn and change their lives and country. Huawei not only built them an ICT infrastructure but also held many charitable events. Their most beautiful building is their school because they strongly stress education, so I gave local students Huawei laptops to access their new telecommunications services.”

“I admire Huawei’s priorities,” I said. “But how does it instill this same passion and sense of global responsibility and justice to the employees who must face frostbite and high-altitude sickness?”

“At Huawei, we all share the same dream: ‘to become a platform to pursue an open and win-win ecology and to benefit the common development of humanity.’ This will benefit everyone, including Huawei, of course. Huawei’s focus is the future,” Amy said.

Huawei boldly envisions creating a fully connected, intelligent world accessible to all people—thanks in part to the RuralStar Pro Solution. Launched in 2017, within only four years this self-contained, easily deployed 550 kg base station had been deployed to over 50 countries and provided connectivity to over 40 million people around the world, including villages as small as having only 500 residents. Still, half of the world’s population lacks Internet connectivity, which denies them access to remote education, telemedicine, online finances and a host of other digital services—but Huawei is working on reaching those who are still offline.

By the end of 2020, Huawei had obtained more than 100,000 active patents, and employed 105,000 R&D staff who had spent 15.9% of annual corporate revenue (RMB142 billion) on R&D projects. More than 30 laboratories on the Shenzhen Huawei campus have been open and visited by thousands of visitors from all over the world—experts, politicians, Nobel Prize laureates and customers. The sheer scope of Huawei’s research is astonishing.

Yet, in spite of Huawei’s humanitarian efforts, the company is facing unrelenting attacks, which is why the day before I visited Huawei, the company had for the first time released a semi-annual report proving it was a 100% non-listed private

company. “We are not required to publish a semi-annual report,” Amy said. “But we’ve produced one to strengthen openness and transparency, and help our partners better understand Huawei.”

I was surprised that in spite of the US tactics, which did reduce Huawei’s sales revenue, the company still grew 23.2% over the previous year. “How could Huawei do this?” I asked. “Many other companies would have folded.”

“There are many reasons,” Amy said. “But the biggest one is our long-term win-win partnerships and cooperation built on mutual trust. Only such a partnership will last — whether in business, life or family. Huawei employees are very loyal to each other, and we are just as loyal to our partners.”

“We have built customer-centric partnerships for 30 years. This means we ensure excellent product quality, reasonable prices and technology, so as to make our products remain sustainable and competitive, and enable our customers to achieve their commercial success. Only this approach is truly win-win.”

“Such a trust, formed over decades, is not easily broken just because some parties toss dirty water and curses at us. Some partners who fear retaliation by the US have put projects on hold to see what happens. We understand this. But many have stood up for Huawei because we have helped develop their countries and industries.”

“We are careful that we and our customers grow and develop together. Our profits are not so large as to hurt the customer. This is unsustainable. But we also can’t just blindly meet customers’ demands because they often don’t even know what they really need. We apply our global experience to helping them see their unique problems with greater clarity, and then provide not just quick fixes for immediate problems but long-term solutions for the future.”

“It’s obviously how Huawei wins customers’ hearts, but I’m still not that clear why workers are so loyal.”

“We don’t believe outside forces can bring Huawei down. Only we ourselves can do that. Customer-centric relations ensure loyalty from both customers and workers. Workers focus on helping customers win. If customers win, Huawei wins — and the employees win, because Huawei belongs to its people.”

“Our employee feedback and motivation include both material and non-material incentives. We have very competitive salaries, as well as the ESOP and TUP incentive policies. This is not unique to Huawei, but we have maximized it. We have over 90,000 people around the world already participating in this program, and all 180,000 employees are likely to become company partners. Huawei is a large partnership enterprise, and we give employees many work opportunities to take on challenges and grow. We are constantly thinking about sustainable ways to encourage our 40,000 employees in Africa, many of whom were born in the 1990s or even after 2000. Some are working in impoverished areas, but they have passion and strong desire and inner motivation.”

“And we continuously learn from the industry and adapt strategy as needed. This is why we have an international advisory committee and strategy advisory committee comprising top industry players from both inside Huawei and outside.”

Huawei faces great challenges, but Amy is very confident in its future. “The only certainty is uncertainty, but we will respond with permanence to impermanence. In

the final analysis, we must be ourselves. In the short term, our scale may be affected, but in the long term we will survive,” she said.

I was very impressed by Amy's love for Huawei and her insights. But after I interviewed young Lucy, who spent four years with Huawei in Argentina, I had an even greater grasp of how Huawei has earned the love and loyalty of its employees.

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Chapter 20

Lucy: The Youthful Heart of Huawei



Senior Vice President Amy's Lin's story of her 22 years at Huawei whets my appetite to learn more about the people who are carrying out the company's vision around the world. It's one thing to articulate strategies in the boardroom, but how on earth do they instill such passion and loyalty in their workers? I found that out when I interviewed Lucy (who asked to be anonymous).

"I have worked at Huawei ever since university, and I have no experience working at other companies — but I'm very grateful to Huawei for giving young people such opportunities."

Ironically, when Lucy was a senior in university in 2005, she did not even attend the Huawei job fair. A Fortune 500 Chinese company had her sign a contract before she'd landed her double major in Spanish and Western economics. Her family was delighted that she'd chosen to work for a secure state-owned company, and she was delighted that she'd finally be able to use her language skills on an overseas assignment. She was not happy, though, when she was told she'd need to receive a few years training before receiving an assignment in Venezuela. "Frankly, I think they just wanted to make sure I fit their culture."

Meanwhile, virtually everyone in her class had attended a Huawei job fair and her friends shared how Huawei recruiters had given such a detailed overview of the company's culture and processes, and spent so much time getting to know the potential recruits. But in the end, Huawei did not accept even one of them as a recruit!

Lucy was intrigued by Huawei's thoroughness, as well as its very high standards. She had an interview and, to her delight, Huawei offered to give her immediate training and send her off to Argentina as soon as they could get her visa.

"As a foreign language student," Lucy said. "I wanted to go abroad and experience the world, whether it helped my career or not. The state-owned company had wanted me in China for a while but Huawei wanted me abroad as soon as possible! I spent four years in Argentina, and then a few years in Beijing before moving to the Shenzhen campus."

What most impressed Lucy about Huawei was its youthfulness. "We only had a dozen people in Argentina back then; today we have about 1,200. And most were

young — including our country CEO, who was only in his 30s. Given how young and inexperienced we were, I was surprised at the trust and opportunities that Huawei gave us.”

“And how did the young inexperienced people do?” I asked her.

Lucy shrugged. “Well, I later saw that Huawei paid a great price for our mistakes. We were young, inexperienced and sometimes impulsive. And youth can be aggressive, and are prone to make costly errors.”

“What did Huawei do to those youths who made such mistakes?”

“Actually, Huawei did not seriously punish or criticize those employees or even their country office,” Lucy said, “and this is because part of Huawei’s culture is to give young people opportunities. I think companies like Huawei are very rare. The extremely high recruiting standards help Huawei bring in only the most talented youths, and then they give them ample opportunities and are willing to pay for their mistakes because that is part of learning. I was shocked, and slowly learned that I did indeed have many more opportunities than my peers who went to other companies. And I was proud of the trust that Huawei showed in me.”

But life was challenging for a young Chinese in South America. “Argentina sounds like a romantic or exotic place, but except for Buenos Aires, real life there is not as good as the Chinese countryside! Most of the Huawei people were very young, like me, and full of energy, we were very focused on our work. We would work together every day, and on weekends we cooked together and watched movies together — just like back when we were in college.”

“When working on a project, we would talk until we were exhausted and then just lie down on a table or in a chair in the meeting room, sleeping for a few hours, and then keep going. It was actually very difficult and stressful, but we were determined because of the way we were helping Argentina — especially its remote areas.”

“Fully one third of Argentina’s 45 million people are concentrated in Buenos Aires,” Lucy explained. “Their economy relied mainly on the export of primary agricultural products, and most of the land was unpopulated ranchland. While Brazil was willing to invest heavily in telecommunications for densely populated areas, they could not justify a big investment in the vast, sparsely populated areas like Argentina. But we at Huawei were not happy that two thirds of the population in the country lacked network coverage, and we worked very hard to design a unique solution that covered technology, personnel, network deployment and other aspects.”

“But the roads were bad there, and we’d have to drive for hours to reach a site. We’d be exhausted, and have nowhere to sleep except in the car or on the ground. We all suffered a lot to complete the projects, but we were proud of the part we played in helping Huawei serve one third of the world’s population in over 180 countries and regions around the world. The Argentine government was very grateful because no other company was ever willing to consider such a project”

“Why do you think other companies won’t even try?” I asked.

“Actually, they do have their reasons,” Lucy said. “Although many countries and companies are not really committed to solve such problems, some simply don’t have the budget, or their shareholders will not allow them to spend money on such a project with little or no immediate return. They must be profit-oriented in everything. Huawei

also must consider profits, of course, but our situation is very different. We have an ESOP plan and no external shareholders, we don't have to make commitments to external capital, or make shareholders profitable — or juggle the annual report to make the data look good. So, we have much greater freedom to focus on corporate social responsibility, which is rooted in our company's culture. And our country CEOs have great autonomy, if we see something that needs to be done, we can do it right after filing a report. There is no complicated mechanism to require what input-output ratio must be achieved. We can do pretty much everything as long as we feel it should be done."

Lucy's excitement and pride in Huawei's contributions to the world was palpable. "Huawei is from China," she said. "But it is truly a global company. I only bought iPhones very recently because I didn't want to be criticized as *Chongyang Meiwai* (崇洋媚外), as some Chinese people say. Chinese used to think imported technology was better than domestic products — and in the past they were usually right. But Huawei has invested so much in R&D that we have leapfrogged from being a chaser to being a global leader. Now, many of my European friends and customers tell me, 'Huawei's mobile phones are really good, and much easier to use than iPhones.' And I agree — which is why for the past five years I've only bought Huawei phones. Huawei itself does not care what phones we use. They don't give us any discounts on our phones. Mr. Ren Zhengfei said in an interview that even his own daughter uses an iPhone. But I'm proud that, today, Huawei phones are in fact the best."

"I admire how you helped provide services for low-populated areas in Argentina, but how about here in remote areas of China?"

"Huawei has built base stations in Tibet, on peaks that are over 6,000-meters high," Lucy said.

"That's hard to imagine!" I said. "When I drove into Tibet in 1994, the 5,200-meter Tangula Pass was above the 5,000-meter Death Zone, and I really felt it. I can't imagine working at 6,000 meter!"

"It was very difficult," Lucy admitted. "The Chinese government helped fund it, but Huawei was the only company with both the technology and the determination to provide coverage for very small populations in extremely remote areas. And no one but Huawei people would probably carry such heavy equipment on their backs in such conditions. And that is why remote Tibetan villages can now make WeChat video calls or buy and sell on Taobao."

"China has changed so much," I said. "In the 1990s, I paid US\$450 and waited three years to get my first phone, and now even Tibetans have phones and the Internet."

Lucy laughed, "I was in sixth grade when we got our family's first phone. We only had to wait three months but it cost RMB500 to RMB600 — which was a year's salary for my mom. But Huawei helped bring the change and drove prices down in China and in other countries as well, which drove some of our Western competitors to lower prices and improve their services. In addition, Huawei helped push the rapid evolution from 3 to 4G and 5G."

"But how does Huawei get its people like you to work so hard in such difficult conditions?" I asked.

“Huawei’s compensation package is very good,” Lucy said. “LinkedIn shows it is one of the best. Huawei believes we can focus on work better when we worry less about life. And since many of us hold stock, our performance affects our incomes. Quite simply, if the company does well, we do well. If the company suffers, so do we. It’s a great mechanism because we all share the same simple and consistent goals.”

“What about Huawei’s customer strategy?” I asked. “Senior Vice President Amy Lin shared about how loyal customers are to Huawei.”

“Huawei’s culture has always been customer-centric,” Lucy said. “Huawei’s top priority is meeting customer needs, and this has helped drive the entire industry. Companies like Ericsson were very slow in resolving customer problems, but competition with Huawei forced them to improve.”

Lucy shared with me how Huawei learned many of its advanced management from the US, at one point hiring 200 to 300 highly paid IBM consultants. “We learned many of our management concepts from the US. Prior to the recent messes, Mr. Ren trusted and admired American corporate management and studied IBM management from beginning to end, and we were all told to either adapt to the new procedures and methods or to leave. I doubt many companies have such determination as this.”

Another of Huawei’s advantages over competitors is its extremely broad R&D. “Other companies’ R&D is restricted to application level,” Lucy said. “But Huawei focuses on solving fundamental problems. We invest a lot into pre-research, and basics such as mathematics, materials science, mobile phone imaging, etc. Samsung had a problem with exploding batteries as they tried to extend battery life by very simplistically rearranging components closer and closer together, until they exploded. Huawei would never pursue problems in this way. We focus on the material itself. If we wanted to improve the battery life, we would improve the battery itself, which is more efficient and safer.”

“Huawei does make mistakes! A few years ago, the D2 phone was a great phone in all respects, except that it got so hot that we joked it should be used to treat back pain or warm baby formula. Huawei quickly got rid of it.”

Huawei is also very focused on its long-term goals, Lucy explained. “Huawei is more responsible because we do not stress short-term benefits and profits. Although we too have high pressure to turn a profit, we do not do it at the expense of long-term development. For example, PHS tech was highly profitable for a short time, but it had no long-term future, so Huawei refused to invest in it, and put all of its resources in 3G. At that time, 3G had no practical applications, and we spent without a return — but we persisted, and it eventually paid off not just for Huawei but for the entire industry.”

As I wrapped up my time with Lucy, I was struck by how similar her feelings were about Huawei to those of Senior Vice President Amy—though they came from very different backgrounds and levels within the company. What was obvious from both of them, however, is that Huawei does instill loyalty in both its employees and customers—and this is because of its unique corporate culture.

“To this day, Huawei’s culture is inseparable from the ideas of Mr. Ren Zhengfei, Huawei founder and now the CEO,” Lucy said. “But he rarely attends to day-to-day

issues, leaving daily operations to the operating CEO and decision-making committees. Although our culture continues to fall within Mr. Ren’s shadow, he is a very broad-minded person who likes to delegate power to us and give us latitude to grow.”

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