

## 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, stavedore—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.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

