

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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