

William N. Brown

# Chasing the Chinese Dream

Four Decades of Following China's War  
on Poverty

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“China's targeted poverty alleviation is the world's only way to help the poor and reach the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, 2017.

William N. Brown  
MBA Center  
Xiamen University  
Xiamen, China



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# Preface

For more than two decades China served as the most potent anti-poverty weapon the world has ever known.... Of every five people in the world who escaped poverty during this span – a total of roughly 1.1 billion people – three were Chinese.

World Economic Forum, Feb. 3, 2016

In my youth I dreamed of visiting Australia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe, but I had no interest at all in Asia. That I ended up in China was, as Chinese say, sheer *Yuanfen* (fate).

When I arrived in Xiamen, I was impressed by the nation's goals and the people's excitement and optimism, but I wondered if reform and opening up benefited people in the remote interior. I determined to find out for myself—and I'm still exploring to this day.

If I had scripted my own life from cradle to grave, I could not have conjured up a more exciting or fulfilling adventure than witnessing firsthand the world's most populous nation single-mindedly eradicate absolute poverty. For over three decades I've explored every corner of the country by bicycle, boat, car, train, plane—even farm tractor a few times, as well as on foot into inaccessible valleys. I've interviewed hundreds of people from all walks of life—farmers, fishermen, teachers, doctors, engineers, merchants, street sweepers, barbers, scientists, and athletes. I've been inspired by students like Feifei, who as a five-year-old sold herbs on the street side to support her struggling family but made it to Xiamen University, graduated top in her class, then graduated from Harvard, worked for McKinsey and Google, and is now a professional and proud mother of two.

And there's the farm girl with four years education whose Chinese Dream was to earn 20 Yuan a month as a maid for a Xiamen University professor but who is today a multimillionaire philanthropist with international schools, real estate ventures, and a biotechnology company. And I can't forget the boy who had no shoes until he was a teen but today is one of China's top tunnel experts, philanthropist, and producer of historical documentaries.

I've met Mongolian herdsman who track their cattle by mobile phone and China's Beidou satellite navigation system and Tibetan farmers with online shops for their

traditional products, as well as boat people who had never stepped foot on land until Xi Jinping gave them homes and training. One of the shy mothers that I met now earns more from aquaculture than I earn as a professor. The village still keeps a sampan in the square to remind everyone of where they came from.

Honey farmers, geneticists, doctors, street sweepers—their stories all prove that China has done so much so fast not just because of top-down visionary leadership but because of bottom-up grassroots industriousness and innovativeness.

But I've also been fortunate to meet many of the visionary leaders behind China's rapid transformation—people like premiers Li Peng and Wen Jiabao, or a young Xi Jinping, whom I witnessed tackle poverty in Fujian and slowly move up the ranks from Xiamen vice-mayor to Fujian governor to president of China.

Until I met Dr. Huang Chengwei, former director of the entire anti-poverty program, I had no idea of the sheer complexity of balancing so many diverse factors, including rapid economic growth, regional disparity, urbanization challenges, and environmental protection. Yet the UN and World Bank have documented how China has excelled in virtually every measure. I have witnessed mistakes and failures, of course. What nation with 1.4 billion people would not have missteps? Yet China learns from successes and mistakes alike and presses forward.

## **New Nation, Ancient Ways**

Although I've witnessed phenomenal changes, one thing that has *not* changed, in 30 years or 2,000 years, is the nation's commitment to what Confucius called the "Ancient Ways"—the moral imperative for a just and ethical government to maintain peace and stability and to meet the needs of the people—some 56 million even 2,000 years ago according to China's census in 2 A.D. Old China's leaders led the nation with unsurpassed inventiveness, ingenuity, and passion for most of 2,000 years. I've no doubt they would have been proud at what New China's leaders have accomplished in only seven decades.

Since New China's founding in 1949, the Chinese government has said, "A prosperous society cannot coexist with poverty." In the same way, there is no reason for such a small planet as ours to have unprecedented prosperity coexisting with endemic poverty. Fortunately, China is now tackling poverty in other nations through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and similar initiatives. It's a tall task, but if any nation can lead the world in eradicating absolute poverty, it's China.

I have met only two classes of people who are able confidently to assert, "We do [understand China]!" They are newspaper reporters and globe-trotters. As for myself, I am continually discovering a continental area still unexplored.

Dr. Arthur H. Smith (1845–1932), author and resident of China for 54 years.

## 1. Photos of author



(Photos by Zhu Qingfu)

## 2. Interviews in Ningde, Fujian Province



Visit to Nantang She Minority Village Primary School in Xiapu County, Ningde, on December 5, 2019 (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)



Interviewing Lan Naizhong, Nantang Village, Xiapu County, Ningde, on December 5, 2019 (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)



Panoramic view of Nantang Village, Xiapu County, Ningde (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)

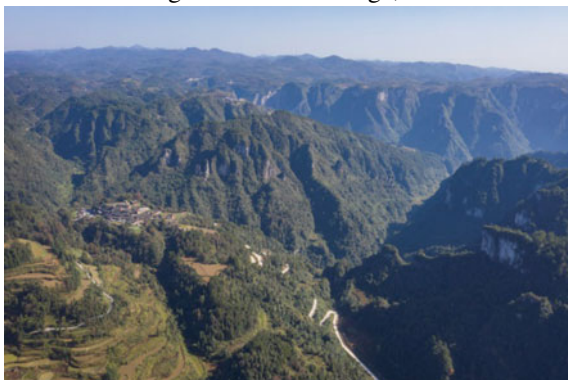


### 3. Interviews in Shaoshan, Hunan



Visiting Mao Family Restaurant in Xiangtan, Hunan on November 12, 2019 (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)

### 4. Interviews in Eighteen Caves Village, Hunan Province



Eighteen Caves Village is secluded deep within Hunan's mountains (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)



Interviewing Miao villager Yang Chaowen in Eighteen Caves Village, Hunan, November 11, 2019 (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)



Taking a photo with a Miao grandmother in Eighteen Caves Village, Hunan, December 11, 2019 (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)

## 5. Visit to Changsha, Hunan



(Photo by Zhu Qingfu)

## 6. Interviews in Yunnan's Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture



Panoramic view of a village in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture (Photo by Li Jintai)



Interviewing a Lisu family, December 10, 2019 (Photo by Li Jintai)

7. Interviewing officials in Beijing, who are going to Tibet to join the battle against poverty alleviation



Interviewing Liang Nanyu, who volunteered to work in Tibet to help locals, in Tibet (Photo by Pan Zhiwang)

8. Other interviewees



Interviewing Prof. Hu Min, CEO of New Channel in Beijing, July 7, 2019 (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)



Interviewing Mr. Cui Rui, a blacksmith in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, on July 10, 2019  
(Photo by Jie Shangfeng)



Interviewing Mr. Tian Ye, a poverty alleviation official, in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, July 15, 2019 (Photo by Jie Shangfeng)



Interviewing Tibet University teacher Yixi Danzeng in Lhasa, Tibet, July 21, 2019  
(Photo by Wu Qiong)



Interviewing Mr. Yang Yuanjian, who volunteered to teach Tibetan students, in Chengdu, July 22, 2019 (Photo by Zhu Qingfu)



Interviewing Mr. Zhou Dexin, a Xiamen University gate guard, in Xiamen on August 6, 2019 (Photo by Jie Shangfeng)



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**Part I**  
**One Dream, Many Dreamers**



# Chapter 1

## How My Chinese Dream Began



China's targeted poverty alleviation is the world's only way to help the poor and reach the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, 2017

I first encountered the Chinese Dream in 1976 in Taiwan when I quite literally received a sign from the heavens. Hundreds of leaflets from a mainland balloon rained upon me as I crossed a field on CCK Air Base in Taizhong. I could not read Chinese so wasn't interested in them, but I was surprised that mainland farmers in the photos so closely resembled Taiwan farmers. When I learned that both sides of the Taiwan Straits were quite literally one family, I determined someday to see the rest of China—but it took me 10 years to get there.

After leaving Taiwan, I spent three years as an Air Force OSI agent in the U.S. and Turkey, and an assignment with the Shah of Iran in 1979 led me to question many of my assumptions of why so many developing countries remained mired in abject poverty even in a world of unprecedented prosperity. In 1981, I left the Air Force and started a master's program in Los Angeles, where I met an American girl who had been born and raised in Taiwan and also wanted to study in China. Our mutual interest in China led to friendship, and our wedding that Christmas in Taipei (Taipei).

Over the years, as we awaited an opportunity to move to China, we often traipsed to Los Angeles' Chinatown to buy copies of *China Reconstructs* (now *China Today*). The more I read about China's advances in everything from industry and agriculture to health and education, the more I looked forward to seeing the changes myself, and in 1988, ten years after I'd left Taiwan, Sue and I finally moved with two small sons to Xiamen University to study Chinese.

We felt right at home in Xiamen because it was only 100 miles across the Straits from our former home of Taizhong, and both sides shared the same dialect and customs. But though we loved the place and people, living conditions were a challenge.

Today, Xiamen has received so many international honors as a modern livable city that it is hard to believe what this island city was like in 1988. We had almost

daily water and power outages. Roads were narrow and potholed, and buses belched black smoke that poured up from cracks in the wooden floors. There were few stores and good items were usually sold out before we could get to them, leaving only the centrally distributed products that no one would buy. I bought a three-wheeled pedicab to help us seek staples like toothpaste and toilet paper.

It took over a month to get permission for a pedicab because they thought I'd use it for business. It was even harder to get a phone. I paid over USD 450 and waited three years for it to be installed.

Yet in spite of the challenges, Xiamen people were cheerful because living conditions were already better than any had ever experienced and they were optimistic about the future—but I was curious if rural life was also improving.

Each evening, the TV station aired a short clip urging urbanites to not waste the food that farmers labored so hard to provide. The first scene was the poor farmer toiling at dawn in a rice paddy, then it showed an urban family eating a meal of several dishes and throwing away the leftovers, and the final scene was of the tired farmer at dusk with only a plain bowl of rice for supper. It was a powerful message. I vowed to be less wasteful—but I also vowed to see for myself how farmers really lived.

## Exploring the Countryside

In January, 1989, I began exploring rural Fujian by bus, boat, bicycle and farm tractor. It had been so warm in Xiamen that I left home without a jacket, clueless that we were about to be hit by a very rare cold spell. I spent the nights in dark, unheated granite homes, and was so cold that my gracious hosts, whose clothing was even thinner than mine, insisted on soaking my feet in hot water and giving me an extra blanket for the night—a thin blanket, but the best they had. I shivered the entire night, my very bones aching. By the time I rose, just before dawn, my cheerful hosts had already prepared a big breakfast. Years later I learned they'd served me, a stranger, treats they'd been saving for Chinese New Year.

Although my hosts were poor, they did not seem to know it. Like my city friends, they were cheerful and convinced things would only get better. For their sakes, I hoped so. But given that much smaller and wealthier nations had yet to end poverty, I suspected that change would take half a century, and that we were all “planting trees that future generations could enjoy the shade.”

I dropped my Chinese study after one semester to help start Xiamen University's (XMU) new MBA program, figuring I could study Chinese on my own, and the more I learned, the more I realized that China was nothing like the country portrayed by Western media. But when I wrote articles to refute some unfair criticisms of China, indignant foreigners complained, “You should not write about things you don't understand. You've only seen coastal China. Inland provinces are not changing!”

“How would you know?” I asked. “You've never been there!”

“Neither have you!” they replied.

They had a point. So in 1993, I bought a 15-passenger van and we drove 10,000 km around S.E. China, and in 1994 explored another 40,000 km. We averaged only 25 km/h as we spent three months driving from Fujian up the coast and over to Inner Mongolia and the Gobi Desert, west to Qinghai and Tibet, and back to Xiamen through South China. I was surprised at the massive investments on roads, electricity, healthcare and education even in the poorest corners of Ningxia, Gansu, Guizhou—places that even UNESCO officials had deemed hopeless. It was heartening from a humanitarian standpoint but as a businessman I did not see how they could justify spending a fortune on such impoverished, relatively unpopulated regions. I slowly learned that China's leaders were very farsighted.

## **Give Fish or Teach to Fish**

Chinese have long said, “Give a fish, feed for a day; teach to fish, feed for a lifetime.” Early on, China learned the hard way that simply doling out aid, though sometimes necessary, does not solve the root of poverty and can lead to dependency, so the nation shifted from “blood transfusion” to “blood production”—from aid to enablement. China taught the poor to fish by giving them an improved environment that fostered self-sufficiency so they could lift themselves from poverty. This approach showed that the government had tremendous faith in the people's ability and motivation to seize new opportunities—and it paid off because Chinese people today are as industrious as their ancestors.

Rose Talman, a Xiamen missionary from 1916 to 1930, wrote in her unpublished memoirs of the Chinese love for peace, and their “will to love and fight against poverty”:

To their conditions they have developed responses – frugality (nothing wasted in China), patience, industriousness, sense of humour – a philosophical approach to the realities of life. These are the qualities that make the Chinese tough and persevering and give them the will to love and fight against poverty. The Chinese enjoy few luxuries in material things. They are not an acquisitive society. The people yearn more for peace and stability – a climate for work rather than affluence or wealth for the sake of pleasure. There is a great difference in the psychology of Eastern and Western society.

Over the years, I've collected hundreds of books and documents written by foreigners in China over the past few centuries, and they uniformly admired and respected both China's system of governance and the people's enterprising spirit—and that spirit is just as evident today.

South Fujian is famous for China's best tea, but in the early 1990s, my tea farming friends were so poor that they could not afford to drink their own tea, brewing weeds and herbs instead. Yet whenever I made the several hours drive to visit them, navigating torturous dirt roads snaking through mountains, they served me the best tea they had. Only years later did I understand their sacrifice. Today, concrete roads lead to villagers' very doorsteps and they drink tea whenever they want it. They also now use electricity instead of kerosene and candles, and spend evenings watching

a wall-mounted flat screen TV bigger than my own (they were watching American Idol the last time I visited; hopefully they'll progress beyond that).

China has had exceptional, visionary top-down policies but they have been successful only because of the bottom-up industriousness and ingenuity of people like my friend Madame Yang Ying. As a farm girl with only four years of schooling, her dream in 1981 was to earn 20 Yuan a month as a Xiamen University professor's maid—10 Yuan to keep and 10 Yuan to send home. She achieved that dream, then sold fish, cornered Xiamen's market on pork, opened a rural credit union, invested in real estate, and today has several international schools, a biotechnology company, a bone-marrow bank for leukemia patients and is helping to build 1,000 Hope schools for less advantaged children. She also supports every retiree in her hometown.

Mr. Lin Zhengjia, another country kid with only four years of education, did not own shoes until he was a teen, but today he is a leading tunnel expert, documentary maker and philanthropist pouring millions into education and cultural exchange programs.

And tomorrow's leaders are being prepared and empowered today by teachers like Dr. Hu Min, a country kid who would have been expelled from school had it not been for one teacher who urged he be given one last chance. Hu Min was so moved that he buckled down, tested into college at 15, taught in a university until he was 30, and today is CEO and founder of New Channel Education Group, the "Father of IELTS", has published over 300 books and audio-visual materials for his more than 100,000 students around the country, and stresses students' "global competencies" to prepare them for China's growing international role.

Most impressive to me is that, in both Old and New China, most of those whom I have met who rose from rags to riches give generously to help those still in rags. They are capitalists in business, but at heart they exemplify the socialist spirit which says "no society is prosperous if any remain in poverty."

## **20,000 Km in 32 Days**

As I met people like Madame Yang Ying over the years and read about the changes, I yearned to drive around China a second time to see the changes since 1994, and that opportunity dropped in my lap in the summer of 2019.

The Party secretary of our Xiamen University School of Management said to me, "This is the 25th anniversary of your 1994 drive! You should tour China again!" He saw my hesitation and added, "We'll cover all expenses!"

I agreed, but then he insisted I have a driver. "You're 63 now, not 36!" he said, as if I'd forgotten. "It's too long and dangerous."

It wasn't a bad idea. I could write while he drove. But we ended up with three cars and a dozen people, including spare drivers, a medical doctor to keep their aging foreign teacher from falling apart, student assistants and Miss Wang from New Channel Education Group, whom CEO Hu Min sent to help transcribe oral interviews.

In 1994, the 40,000 km drive took three months driving 10 h a day, but in 2019 the 20,000 km trip took only 32 days—and my Chinese colleagues were as astounded as I was by the changes.

In 1994, I had nicknamed Inner Mongolia as “Mudgolia” because the province seemed to have but one color: mud. But in 2019, on the edge of the Gobi Desert, I looked in vain for the barren wasteland where my van had been trapped in 1994. Today, it has a beautiful divided highway with grass and trees on both sides and down the middle.

In 1994, even mountainous stretches of Guangdong, the rich province bordering Hong Kong, had only dirt roads. Today, China has the world’s largest hi-speed railway and highway networks, and concrete roads to remote villages rebuilt with government-subsidized homes, many of them with nice architectural flourishes to reflect minorities’ heritage.

China also has the world’s largest online community and a booming rural e-commerce business with over 4,000 “Taobao Villages” (villages earning at least 10 million Yuan yearly from e-commerce).

All nations struggle with urbanization, with over half of the world now in cities, but in China, many are returning from cities to seek their fortune in their hometowns thanks to improved living conditions and government training, support and subsidies for rural entrepreneurs. But such precision poverty alleviation, from national to village and even household level, has been possible only because of the dedication and sacrifices of China’s First Party Secretaries.

## **Barefoot First Party Secretaries**

Even with the world’s most successful national and regional poverty alleviation programs, the leadership realized it still lacked direct contact with the poorest people. Xi Jinping proposed reaching these people by the creation of First Party Secretaries as a core strategy.<sup>1</sup> Between 2015 and 2019, China selected some 459,000 talented and dedicated people to serve poverty-stricken villages.

I have met many of these courageous and compassionate leaders, and nicknamed them “barefoot first secretaries” because they willingly left families and careers for three or more years and, like early barefoot doctors, live with those whom they serve in China’s poorest villages. I marveled at how they creatively tackled problems ranging from poor infrastructure, healthcare and education to the creation of sustainable green industry. Above all, their example has helped shift attitudes from dependency to self-reliance, innovativeness and entrepreneurialism—or as Chinese put it, from blood transfusion to blood production.

In spite of their challenging living conditions, I did not meet even one who regretted the sacrifices, and several had volunteered for a second three-year stint in

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<sup>1</sup>Trilogy of the First Secretaries’ Poverty Alleviation Mission, July 10, 2020, China.org.cn [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2020-07/10/content\\_76257976.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2020-07/10/content_76257976.htm).

spite of family or health challenges. It is no wonder that several farmers in different provinces told me, “We have good policies now because the government understands us and cares for us.”

But several farmers added, “Good policies aren’t enough; we must also do our part.”

In December, 2019, the World Economic Forum noted that between 1990 and 2015, China had accounted for over 3/5 of reduction in global poverty, yet in spite of China’s lead, the rest of the world has not kept on track. The World Bank projects that half a billion people will still live in extreme poverty in 2030.<sup>2</sup>

My hope is that the rest of the world can learn from China’s experiences because all people are dreamers. We all dream of a better life of peace and prosperity for our families and descendants. But for the first time in recorded history, we have an example of how to make this dream a reality. And not only do each of us have a part to play but, and this is important—there are *no* small parts.

If we each do our part, even a miracle like the Chinese Dream can be achieved. But only if, as T. E. Lawrence wrote in 1922, we dream by day with eyes wide open.

All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible.

T. E. Lawrence, “Seven Pillars of Wisdom”, 1922

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<sup>2</sup><https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty>.

## Chapter 2

# Ningde: Xi Jinping's Training Ground for Governing the Country



The first stop on our 20,000 km drive around China in 2019 was my own Fujian province's northeast city of Ningde—a young Xi Jinping's governance training ground. Over the past three decades I've watched it transform from one of China's 18 poorest areas into a prosperous area known for business as well as a beautiful environment and rich minority cultures and customs.

Ningde's transformation was so astounding that in 2005, I had packed our van with a dozen friends from abroad and gave them a tour, but my goal wasn't to show them the surrealistic scenery of Tailao Mountain or Baishuiyang Lake, or to taste the famous Xiapu seafood. I wanted them to see the remote villages where, in 1988, a 35-year-old Xi Jinping first started tackling poverty, environment, corruption, education and protection of minorities in one of China's poorest places.

I drove some eight hours into a remote valley, after which we hiked four hours and ferried across a river. My friends were astonished that such a remote area had electricity, tap water, cell phone service, and TV. But the only inhabitants were children and grandparents. They had all seen China's prosperity on TV and every villager of working age had fled to cities to realize their own dreams.

### Roads First, then Prosperity

Today, Ningde youth are returning home from the cities—and they don't need to hike or take a boat. New concrete roads snake through deep valleys to even the remotest villages, thanks in part to people like journalist and *Mindong Daily* chief editor, Qiu Shutian. Locals call this Ningde native “Road Reporter” because for 30 years he has not only chronicled Ningde's transformation but even spent his own time and money to finish projects in the poorest areas.

Today's Ningde is a far cry from that of 1988, when the prefecture's new Party secretary Xi Jinping wrote, “Ningde is almost a world to itself—hard to get to, little information from the outside world, and an economy based on small-scale farming....”

When you mention Ningde, five words come to people's minds: old, ethnic minority, remote, island, impoverished."

"People were so poor they'd never seen rice," Qiu Shutian told us. "They'd never seen a 100 Yuan note, so if given one for a wedding or funeral, they might exchange it for a 10 or 20 Yuan note. Some couples shared one pair of pants; one would wear the pants out to work and the other stayed home covered with a quilt. Thatched houses were freezing in winter and sweltering in summer, and when it rained heavily outside, it rained lightly inside. Lifespan was short."

## **Young Xi Jinping Gets to the Roots of Poverty**

Young Xi Jinping was so shocked by Ningde's abject poverty that as soon as he took office, he spent a month visiting Ningde villages, companies, schools and government departments to probe the roots of poverty. Qiu said, "I see clearly how Xi developed his ideas on governance and policy while in Ningde... Ningde was Xi's training ground for governing the country."

Qiu said that an old idiom said, "stupid bird flies first," but Xi had studied Ningde's rich history and culture and said that Ningde was not stupid, just weak. Xi read how ancient Ningde engineers had shattered stone mountains with fire and water to make the 1400-year-old Huangju irrigation project, and how the area had produced many war heroes. The "weak bird" of Ningde, Xi declared, would not only fly first but cross the seas.

## **No Patience with Tinkers**

Xi put his heart into fighting poverty, meeting and eating with villagers, even working their fields, and he had no patience with "tinkers". In 1988, he criticized government offices for displaying "Excellence" and "Number One" awards that had nothing to do with economic development. He wrote, "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."

People "not only want to hear what you say," Xi warned, "they also want to see how you do it."

When Xi lashed out at some officials who misused power, or built homes and tombs on public land, some urged caution, but Xi replied, "Should we upset three million people or a handful of officials who violate Party discipline?"

Xi was so dismayed by Ningde's poverty that he visited Beijing with a graphic video to show people's plight. This indeed got the central government's attention but also worried Xi's family. His elder sister, Qi Qiaoqiao, cried when she saw the



conditions in which her little brother worked. “At least the scenery is beautiful,” Xi reassured her.

When Xi’s mother visited Ningde, she urged a colleague, “Please look after him and help him. Jinping is still very young.” But Xi was in his element, earning the respect of villagers even as he’d won the admiration of farmers during his seven years laboring in the fields of Liangjiahe. Xi lived and ate simply, often spending his modest monthly salary of 170 Yuan to help needy families. Xi’s wife, a famous singer, had a higher income than he did so she often added funds to replenish his emptied account.

## **Precision Dreaming**

Although Xi dreamed big, he stressed that poverty could be eliminated only by long-term, step-by-step, targeted change focusing on promoting what locals already did very well—very much like the “precision poverty alleviation” he voiced in 2013 when he announced China could end poverty by 2020. Xi wrote in March, 1990, “Instead of daydreaming about overly ambitious or flashy projects, we need to have a firm footing in reality as we take concrete steps to reach long-term goals.”

Xi visited each town, discovered what was unique, and urged government and business to develop advantages such as mushrooms in Gutian, Xiapu’s seaweed, seafood and mustard root, Fu’an’s electrical machinery, bamboo shoots, and taro, Zherong pharmaceuticals, and Tailao Mountain eco-tourism. Xi had faith that as one industry grew, it would drive others. Today, Ningde leads not only the nation but the world in some technologies.

Xi had shrewd insights on drawing foreign investment, noting that mere tax exemptions weren’t enough. “Foreign companies not only want to save money, they also want to make more money and be able to do business easily and smoothly,” with stable business environments and good infrastructure. Today, Ningde is home to CATL, the world’s largest maker of lithium-ion batteries. With over 10,000 employees, CATL partners with the world’s top auto makers, including BMW, Honda, Hyundai, Geely, Xiamen King Long, etc.

## **Greening While Growing**

Ningde’s most remarkable feat has been its balance of growing and greening, thanks to Xi’s emphasis on environment long before ecology was a high priority. Today, Ningde is a prefectural level city and a model for innovative environmental protection practices. In 2014, Xi said during a trip to Fujian, “‘A true treasure’ should never be exchanged for any other ‘fake treasures’ that may harm the environment.” Two

years later, in 2016, Ningde was listed as No.2 in China Integrated City Index 2016's environmental ranking.<sup>1</sup>

Thanks to Xi's farsightedness, Ningde is 65% forested and boasts rich ecotourism and cultural tourism, with villagers earning income from rafting (100 Yuan per trip), Nongjiale (tourist farmhouses) and sale of local products such as Guangxi Honey Pomelo. Ningde exports such fruit as shaddocks, Chinese chestnuts, plums, honey peaches, lychees and longans, and has almost 500 squ. km. of tea plantations. Ningde exports also include seafood such as yellow croakers, oysters and prawns and fresh water eels that are prized at home and abroad.

## A Heart for Ningde Minorities

"Ningde is where Xi Jinping had his first real encounters with minorities," Mr. Qiu Shutian told us. "He saw little if any minorities during his time in the countryside, and few in Xiamen." Xi's heart went out to minorities, such as the She, whom he learned were often the poorest of the poor because of their isolation and language barriers, which hindered education. Xi argued, "To holistically achieve a well-off society, there must be no minority or person left behind."

The She have a unique culture with beautiful traditions, costumes and music, but no written language, so culture was passed down through oral tradition and songs. Mr. Qiu said, "Xi felt preserving She culture was very important. After listening to a She song, he asked his wife, Prof. Peng Liyuan, who is also a famous singer, what she thought of it, and asked her to help promote it.... Their stories and songs have now been recorded for posterity."

In 1999, Xi wrote, "I and the She people are tied by fate.... My heart is close to the She people."

A decade later, on March 10, 2019, Xi Jinping was pleased to see that one of Ningde's two delegates to the annual congress in Beijing was Lei Jinyu, a 33-year-old She lady with a degree in architecture who had returned to Ningde as a village official in Banzhong—the very She village Xi Jinping had helped decades earlier. As soon as Xi saw Ms. Lei, he recognized her She costume, which varies from village to village. "You are She, from Luoyuan," he said.

## Sea Gypsies Go Ashore

"Ningde also had 20,000 or 30,000 'sea gypsies' who had never been on land," Qiu told us. When Xi Jinping saw the cramped sampans in which they lived cradle to grave, he not only provided free land and subsidies to build homes for hundreds of families but also had them learn modern aquaculture and business.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://t.m.china.com.cn/convert/c\\_m5V2hH.html](http://t.m.china.com.cn/convert/c_m5V2hH.html).

A retired fisherman in Xicheng Village, his face wizened and darkened by decades at sea, told me, “We lived in constant fear. During typhoons we’d lash many boats together and huddle inside. Sometimes boats capsized and entire families were lost. We had no healthcare, no police, no education for our children.”

In 2017, net capita for Xicheng Village had reached 18,756 Yuan—a far cry from the 850 Yuan of the 1990s. One Xicheng mother grinned when she told me how much she netted from her fishery. “That’s more than I make!” I exclaimed. “I’m moving to Xiayu Village when I retire!”

She grinned and said, “We’ve an extra room for you!”

## **New Life for Nantang Village’s She Minorities**

We were keen on seeing how minority lives had improved so Mr. Qiu drove us to Nantang Village. It would have been a grueling drive and hike in 1988 but today a wide concrete road leads straight to the village’s doorsteps. Nantang is clean and neat, with a small She heritage center and murals of traditional life on the walls of public buildings.

In 1988, many She children had no schools, so they studied sitting on the floors of old temples or shacks. Today, Nantang has a beautiful new primary school with a modern sports yard and playground. The recess bell rang just as I arrived and bright-cheeked laughing children clamored for photos with their foreign grandpa. Mr. Qiu then led us down a concrete trail to the home of Lan Naizhong, for whom the anti-poverty program had literally meant life and death.

Qiu checks on Nantang residents’ welfare every two months. After querying Lan about his health, finances and family, and asking if he needed any further help, he signed off on the official checklist.

“When I first met Lan Naizhong,” Qiu said, “he was in a bad state of mind and his mud house was collapsing. Now when I see him, he is all smiles.”

“Ten years ago, my father got brain cancer,” Lan said. “That cost us maybe 200,000 Yuan. Then I fell ill, had two surgeries, and could not work, so we sank further into poverty.”

Village leaders reported Lan’s situation to their superiors. Lan said, “Then village leaders came to see if I was really poor. If so, they would be sure to help.” Soon Qiu had Lan sent to Ningde best hospital, the People’s Hospital.

“How is your health now?” I asked.

Lan grinned shyly. “No big problem now.”

Qiu smiled proudly. “He recovered both physically and mentally, and some girls like him now!”

Lan proudly showed us his new home. “Unlike the old mud house,” said Qiu, “this new cement brick house is very strong and can withstand typhoons. Strong and clean, it even improves the mental outlook of the residents. Lan’s life has changed. The biggest task now is to bring a young wife through the door!”

“How did you afford this beautiful new home?” I asked.

“Our mud house was dangerous and ready to collapse,” Lan said, “so the government gave 30,000 Yuan, and I paid the rest.”

“He is a strong laborer,” Qiu said. “Last summer alone, he earned over 30,000 Yuan installing air-conditioners.”

“The national policy is good and vigorously supports rural areas,” Lan said. “Twenty years ago, conditions were poor, and everyone lived in mud houses. We had no roads, so no way to sell what we grew. Besides, with only two *mu* (a Chinese unit of area equal to 1/15 of a hectare) of land, we could not even grow enough for our own family. Sometimes we chopped firewood on the mountain and sold it on the streets, but it was hard carrying hundreds of pounds of firewood to the market to earn only a few Yuan. And we’d hire out as day laborers, but once I was sick, I could not work.”

Qiu said, “Rural areas are poor because they lack knowledge, skills and talent. After Lan mastered a skill, he could make money installing air conditioners, or labor on a farm, and earn 4,000 or 5,000 Yuan a month.”

“How did you learn to install air conditioners?” I asked Lan.

“Nothing really to learn,” Lan said, grinning. “If you have the courage, you can do it. They’re all mounted outside the window. The first step is to be bold. Nothing else is technical.”

## **Xiadang Village Coop**

Xiadang Village is yet another model of Ningde’s many triumphs over poverty. When I first visited Xiadang decades ago, the village was just mud houses off a dirt path. Wang Guangchao, 72, who runs “Happy Teahouse”, remembers that Xi Jinping walked three hours to visit their village in 1989. “At that time, there was not an inch of road in the village.” Today, Xiadang has a clean, green gardenlike setting with quaint buildings nestled between lush mountains and clear streams, and emerald tea gardens sprawling across the mountainsides.

In 2014, Xiadang launched China’s first poverty-reduction-oriented tea garden, allowing individual tea growers to integrate and organize. The coop helps provide capital for fertilizer and pesticides, as well as markets for the tea.

Coop members use mobile apps to track each step, from growing and processing to packaging and shipping. Thanks to hi-tech efficiency, 128 village’s planters have seen their tea soar in price from 4 to 20 Yuan per kilogram. Annual per capita income has surpassed 11,000 Yuan, with 31 families lifted from poverty and 26 building new homes. The village-level income has increased from zero to 223,000 Yuan, and the coop model is now being expanded to include grapes, rice and kiwifruit.

Chixi Village’s First Returnee Entrepreneur, Du Ying.

The most vivid proof of Ningde prosperity is the dozens of people returning from big cities to seek their fortune at home—youth like Du Ying, the first college student to return home to Chixi.

As a child, Du Ying's family subsisted on sweet potato, and he had only one new coat a year, so his father's dream was for his son to go to college and forever escape Ningde's rural poverty. Imagine his dismay when his son graduated from college and, in June 2013, returned home to start a business.

"Everyone urged us to leave," Du Ying said, "but we returned anyway, and did well. We showed folks that young people are actually quite capable of a lot of things!"

Du Ying and his girlfriend pooled a 100,000 business bank loan with their 200,000 wedding savings to start Chixi Tea Co. Ltd. Today, Du Ying's girlfriend is his wife, they have a four-year-old son, and their tea company has two buildings covering over 600 sq. m and over 100 acres of tea plantations.

By the end of 2013, Du Ying had earned over 100,000 Yuan in only two months and paid off all of his bank loans, and net profit exceeded 400,000 Yuan in 2014. Today, Du Ying's proud parents help the business, which provides jobs for dozens of his neighbors. Du Ying's next plan is to build a "white tea experience hall" to help promote the village's white tea folk culture.

"The government helps a lot," Du Ying said. Chixi Primary School's "Farmer Cultural and Technical School" offers courses on everything from e-commerce, catering and tourism etiquette to tea planting, aquaculture and fruit tree cultivation. Such support, coupled with Du Ying's example, has helped lead over 40 college and technical graduates to return to Chixi Village for business or work.

When asked if Du Ying had any special marks on his body, he said, "If there is, it is the fighting spirit of Fujian people!"

Xi Jinping's "weak bird" of Ningde has not only flown first but soared higher than anyone could have imagined.

But Ningde's success also owes much to China's rapidly evolving infrastructure, which was possible because of the tunnels dug by my traveling companion, Mr. Lin Zhengjia—a barefoot country boy turned entrepreneur, documentary film maker and philanthropist whose inspiring story we'll read in the next chapter.

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## Chapter 3

# Lin Zhengjia: China's Kung Fu Tunnel Expert with *Artitude*



### Barefoot Country Boy Dreams Big

In the 1990s, a deeply rutted road forced me to drive so slowly that a wizened granny grinned and waved as she passed me on foot. Highways were little better. We were stuck in a remote Sichuan village for three days when rains washed out that area's only national highway. But two decades later, China has the world's most extensive highway and railway system, and I was fortunate to explore 20,000 km with one of the men who helped make it possible.

Mr. Lin Zhengjia, a truly rags-to-riches entrepreneur with only four years of schooling, proudly showed me many of his dozens of tunnels, from Xiamen's dual 3-lane undersea tunnel plunging 70 m below the sea to Tibet railway tunnels, which at 5,000 m above sea-level, are the highest in the world.

Lin had no shoes until he was a teen, and learned Kung Fu to fend off schoolyard bullies and give himself confidence, but he doesn't lack confidence today—in either himself or in China. He wears many hats, including entrepreneur, adventurer, martial arts expert, philanthropist, historian and film-maker, promoter of Chinese culture and publisher of the magazine *Artitude*, and head of the overseas Chinese association. He has also donated over 50 million Yuan for poverty relief, education and international cultural exchanges.

### Pingtian Island: Home of World's First Seafaring Explorers

Mr. Lin was born on Pingtian Island, the part of the mainland closest to Taiwan, and is proud of his home's heritage as the origin of Austronesian culture. "I have no diploma but I do have culture!" he said. "All Pingtian people have the island spirit that drove tens of thousands of our ancestors across the seas to settle on the islands."

The world's first truly global ocean adventurers, ancient Pingtian people settled not only in Taiwan but also the Pacific and Indian Ocean islands from Easter Island

and Hawaii in the East to Madagascar in the West and New Zealand in the South. Today, 386 million people speak one of the 1,257 Austronesian languages.

Pingtan's extensive trade helped give rise to the legendary Maritime Silk Road, and for over two centuries the island was strategic for both mainland and Taiwan coastal defense as Pingtan's Haitan Fort and Taiwan's Penghu Navy exchanged troops for three-year stints. Not surprisingly, many Pingtan and Taiwan people are related.

I suspect that Pingtan folk explored the world simply because survival was so difficult at home. "We said Pingtan has 'stones but no grass'," Lin said, "because not even grass survived here." But tough terrain breeds tough people. "We lived by the sea and off the sea," and on sweet potatoes and peanuts because they could survive in sandy soil."

Pingtan is also famous for its unique stone homes, some of which are centuries old. Mr. Lin showed me the stone house of his childhood, which he is restoring. "I had eight siblings, so with grandma we had 11 living in this tiny 25 sq. m shelter. And our school's teachers were just village school graduates. That's why my *Putonghua* (standard Chinese) is so poor. I'm uneducated."

I had wondered why he had such a strong accent that he sounded like a foreigner.

## Kung Fu Confidence

"Other children looked down on me because I could not afford the 4 or 5 Yuan tuition," Lin said. "So I studied martial arts to stop their bullying and increase my confidence."

"How many years did you practice?" I asked.

"Over ten years," he said. "And as my strength and confidence grew, I tried to join the army, which was my dream – but they turned me down! So I worked as a laborer in the army for ten years and learned more martial arts with the military police, though in the 1980s, many people studied martial arts because of Chairman Mao."

A 24-year-old Mao Zedong wrote, "If one seeks to improve one's body other things will follow automatically." For Mr. Lin and his second son, who is now a special commander in Singapore, martial arts became both a physical and mental discipline.

"Martial arts changed my life," Lin said, "and engineering changed my career – and the two influenced each other. Us martial arts practitioners had the confidence and strength to work 14 h without a break when others collapsed after 12, and only we dared face winters at the Qinling tunnel site. And while others worried about kidnappings at remote sites, I was never afraid. Even if approached by four or five suspicious people at night, I had confidence!

"But the dangers were so great that sometimes heaven alone helped me survive. I often inspected the Qinling Tunnel site at night in case the workers had cut corners."

"Now that life is easier, do you still practice martial arts?" I asked.

Lin grinned and let loose a kick higher than my head. “I still practice for hours, and still climb hills at dawn. I’m in good health. Without martial arts, I’d have died by now.”

## Struggle Succeeds Thanks to Reform and Opening up

But Mr. Lin admitted that even his dogged determination would have been fruitless had it not been for China’s changes. “Without reform and opening up,” Lin said, “those of us born in the 1960s would not be here today. Life was a struggle, and poor children were often forced to take charge of their household early. But as we Fujian people sing, ‘Struggle to succeed!’ and we all dreamed of making something of ourselves.”

Pingtán’s poverty arose in part from its isolation. The fierce winds—over 50 kph 200 days a year—and violent waves led global experts to declare Pingtán as one of three places on the planet impossible to build a bridge, the others being the Bermudas and Cape of Good Hope. But thanks to the 2010 completion of Pingtán’s “impossible bridge”, and the world’s longest cross-sea road-rail bridge in 2019, the once sleepy island is now thriving and even leading the nation in fields from 5G and self-driven buses to shipping and tunneling.

## Fujian Dream: Love of Home

“Pingtán should be China’s number one county in maritime shipping,” Mr. Lin said. “We have the island spirit, and we take root wherever we go and dare strive to thrive. But we are also nostalgic and cherish our Fujian culture, so for hundreds of years, wherever we Fujianese go in the world, if we get rich, our dream is to return and help our hometown. Patriotism and love of country are integral to traditional Chinese culture.”

His comments reminded me of Henry Noel Shore,<sup>1</sup> who in 1881 wrote of Fujianese’ love for their homeland:

...Very many (Fujianese) settle down in their adopted countries, but great numbers return home after amassing a competency; some, indeed, after death to be buried near their ancestors, for the Chinese have a deep regard for the mother country, and make a point of having their bodies embalmed, if, that is to say, they can afford it, and being sent back to their native place for burial.

“I understand why. Seafaring is in your blood,” I told Mr. Lin, “But why does Pingtán account for 70% of China’s tunnel industry?”

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<sup>1</sup>The Hon. Henry Noel Shore, R.N., *The Flight of the Lapwing, A Naval Officer’s Jottings in China, Formosa and Japan*, Longmans, Green and Company, London, 1881.



“Two reasons,” Lin said. “Firstly, during war years, we dug underground shelters from solid rock, so we are adept at working rock. Secondly, we had no other way to make money. Other people avoided tunneling because it was so dangerous but Pingtan people dared to do anything. So over the years we not only mastered the technology and techniques but even improved upon them, and today tunneling is Pingtan’s largest industrial chain.

“When I dug my first tunnel 20 years ago in Yan’an, it was as grueling and dangerous as digging mines. We’d dig by hand one meter, prop it up with wood, and dig another meter. We had no tractors so we dragged out the dregs on skids. At only a few dozen centimeters a day, it took ages to dig a 1,000 meter tunnel, and if there was a landslide, we had no support at all. But I kept learning new tunneling techniques, and I adopted the faster and safer New Austrian sequential tunneling method. In Gansu, I was able to dig up to 12 meters a day. Now looking back, I’ve no idea how I did it.”

“Maybe you whacked the rocks with your Kung Fu fists?”

Lin laughed and threw a rapid punch that came close enough to scare my moustache. “It became normal for us to dig dozens and even hundreds of meters in a month. I was always learning, and whenever I saw new equipment, I bought it—even equipment that state-owned enterprises did not buy. I did this to build a brand, and that could only be done by making progress. As our reputation grew, we got better jobs, and we also got better workers because they needed reliable jobs and they all knew that Lin Zhengjia’s team was good and honest.

## **Battling Goliaths Together**

“But as a small private enterprise we were always competing with state-owned giants, and unlike them, we did not have a parent company to protect us. We could only borrow money from family and friends because banks would not loan to someone who had no money. But I succeeded in business for 20 years because my parents taught me, ‘Son, you need to become a leader, but a leader must have integrity and be dedicated.’ We rural families always helped each other. When I was young, neighbors were all like brothers and sisters. If something happened to your family, and I did not help you, I could not live with myself. And my parents taught me to not fear suffering or exhaustion. To get ahead, you must step out – but after stepping out, you must return home again.

“So I did step out, and my 20 years’ experience was quite profound. In my third year I earned enough to buy an off-road vehicle because I had to do site inspections but there were no highways to my projects. My driver and I traveled 130,000 km that year and 110,000 km the following year. From 2001 to 2002, I built the Fenghuang Tunnel on the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, the highest tunnel in the world. At that time, no one else dared work at such altitudes. Within days our lips were cracked. But our team slowly grew and the team culture became more powerful. I couldn’t personally visit every site but I kept studying the latest tunnel strategy and technology in China

and abroad and continued to improve. We were very conscientious and improved rapidly, and I named my company Jiaxin Haitan Holding Group, which means “Jia Family Pingtan enterprise based on integrity. For almost ten years I didn’t return home for Spring Festival because progress and profits were faster during holidays.”

## **China’s First Undersea Tunnel**

“Did you earn a lot from Xiamen Xiang’an undersea tunnel job?” I asked.

Lin laughed. “Actually, I lost a lot on that job. Four companies initially competed for the project but two dropped out. We progressed only six meters a month because the German supervisors directed us by book knowledge that didn’t fit our real life situation. The supervisor, construction team and design team were not a family and when the foreign supervisors fought each other, everything stopped for a month or two. I lost over 40 million Yuan. Finally, I held a meeting with my company and reminded them of Fujianese’ motto, ‘persistence is victory!’ I said, ‘This is China’s first undersea tunnel so we must certainly do this, and do it well.’ We persevered, finished the tunnel and quickly passed all inspections. I made no money on that tunnel but I learned a lot. And I attended many schools to improve myself, including EMBA at Tsinghua University, Peking University and Changjiang Business School. But in 2007, I switched my focus to investing, and since 2011 or 2012 I’ve been focusing on promoting culture.”

Lin smiled proudly. “So much has changed now! I had to squeeze a month from my schedule to travel with you around China but I wanted to see the tunnels we built and to witness for myself the results of our efforts. I was very moved by the experiences. Only 20 years ago, China had less than 2 km of expressways; today, 120,000 km of expressways! China had 50,000 or 60,000 km of railways back then but over 140,000 km today. Such earthshaking changes in only 20 years – and someone like me, a kid born in the 1960s, was able to experience it.”

## **From Commerce to Culture**

“So why do you now focus on culture?” I asked.

“Money is earned from society,” he said, “so naturally it should be returned to society. Our bellies are full; now we need to fill our spirits. I shot a documentary about the South Pacific’s Austronesian Culture and donated tens of millions for related documentaries. I also made a documentary on Chen Jiageng [the “Henry Ford of Asia” who founded Xiamen University], who started out as a Chinese laborer. And I filmed about 1,000 people for the 60-episode documentary about overseas Chinese who sought their fortune abroad but returned to help their hometowns by building schools and roads. I plan to shoot 100 episodes in total.”

As a Singapore resident, Mr. Lin is technically also an Overseas Chinese, but he spends much of his time in the mainland, and since 2012 has increased his push to protect and restore traditional Pingtan culture. “I firmly favor opening up Pingtan but we also need to respect and protect the traditional culture. My 2012 proposal was rejected but Xi Jinping visited Pingtan in 2014 and changed everything with one sentence. He said, ‘A true treasure should never be exchanged for a fake treasure.’ After that, *People’s Daily* and *Fujian Daily* published articles about my proposal, the government supported it, and eventually it was rated as a Top Ten outstanding proposal.

“Stone is the culture of Pingtan,” Lin said, “symbolizing our tenacity and unstoppable spirit. And it is our common culture with Taiwan. Taiwan has many stone houses just like those in Pingtan. No one but Pingtan and Taiwan people can build such houses. It takes craftsmanship.”

Mr. Lin sees Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative as a vehicle to promote cultural exchanges. “In recent years, I have been promoting the Belt and Road Initiative. Now that China’s highways are so good, I hope that China’s culture will be like China’s highways.

“The true international language is not English,” he said, “or any other language. Culture is the only truly borderless, transnational language. I’ve worked for years to promote China’s culture to the world but it must go both ways. I also want world cultures introduced to China, so I donated 10 to 20 million Yuan to start a China International Cultural Exchange Foundation. A truly new era needs new thinking, with bidirectional and integrated cultural exchanges.”

“So what can the world learn from Chinese culture?”

Lin smiled. “I think a great element of the Chinese nation is the spirit of hardship and hard work. We don’t fear suffering or toil. This spirit is something the Chinese nation deserves to carry on. Why can 60 or 70 million Chinese live so well overseas? It is because of this spirit. They work hard, prosper, and love their home. So I don’t believe there is any reason for the Chinese to not prosper.”

## Superior Culture, Leading Spirits

Over the years I’ve read biographies of many historic Overseas Chinese entrepreneurs who, with little or no education, amassed great fortunes which they used to help not only their homeland but also their adopted homes. As I explored China with Mr. Lin, I could see clearly that today’s generation is just as capable as its ancestors, and they will continue to enrich not just China but the world. As Maclay<sup>2</sup> wrote in 1861, Chinese throughout Southeast Asia relied upon their keen work ethic and integrity to ... become the “leading spirits” of their adopted homes.

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<sup>2</sup>Rev. R. S. Maclay, *Life Among the Chinese: With Characteristic Sketches and Incidents of Missionary Operations and Prospects in China*, Carlton & Porter, New York, 1861.

The Chinese work ethic that Maclay wrote of in 1861 has survived the ages, and is a powerful force to this day, because it is being perpetuated by educators who are both traditional in morals and values and highly innovative in teaching—teachers like Prof. Hu Min, whom we visited in Beijing.

Prof. Hu Min, CEO of New Channel, is one of China’s most respected educators, but had it not been for a country teacher’s intervention, he would have never even finished high school.

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# Chapter 4

## Prof. Hu Min, Scholar Entrepreneur and “Father of IELTS in China”



### Land of Books

China is said to have more books than any other country. I am not able to say whether this statement is true or not, but certainly the Chinese have a voluminous literature. In Peking there are several blocks of streets in the Chinese city which are devoted to books. The Hanlin Library<sup>1</sup> contained many thousand volumes. Among them there was one work comprising 23,633 volumes...<sup>2</sup>

Denby, 1906

Two hundred years after Plato wrote of a fictional utopian meritocracy ruled by wise and capable “Philosopher Kings”, China instituted a real-life meritocracy to govern its 50 to 60 million people by virtuous and honest leaders selected solely on merit. That ancient meritocracy, grounded upon Confucian education and moral values, survives to this day—but what about tomorrow? I saw the future of tomorrow’s education when I met Prof. Hu Min, the visionary founder and CEO of New Channel Education Group.

China has over 50,000 programs teaching English, but in 1999, Hu Min single-handedly helped raise China’s English standards to a new level by promoting IELTS in China. He flew to the UK, boldly told leaders that “IELTS will become a rising star” in China, and returned to Beijing to form a team of outstanding teachers to research and develop China’s first set of IELTS textbooks.

Today, IELTS has 74 test centers around the country, and in 2017, over half a million of the IELTS’s 3 million test takers were from China, but the “Father of IELTS in China” is resolutely against merely teaching “exam skills”. “How is it that Chinese can study English for ten years and still be unable to speak it?” he asked. “English learning should create an actual capability, not just a shortcut to pass tests. If English is an ability that has penetrated to the marrow, tests are easy! But even as tools rust without use, English is a tool that must be used always.”

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<sup>1</sup>China’s first public library was in our Fujian provincial capital of Fuzhou.

<sup>2</sup>The Hon. Charles Denby, LL.D. [Thirteen Years United States Minister to China], *China and Her People: Being the Observations, Reminiscences, and Conclusions of an American Diplomat*, Vol. II, L.C. Page and Company, Boston, 1906.

## From Meritocracy to Global Competency

Hu Min's most far-reaching innovation is probably his emphasis on cultivating youth's "global competency" to prepare them for China's growing global role, but even as he prepares youth for the future, he grounds them solidly in their own heritage and culture. "I encourage students to study abroad but not until after they have laid their own cultural and learning foundation." To this end he has prepared the unique *Stories of China Retold in English* series, which includes television programs with China Education TV (CETV), global story telling competitions, dramatic performances, books with QR codes for supplemental mobile content and even animated features.

Today, Hu Min is in what he calls "the second chapter of my 100 years", yet he still maintains a relentless schedule in China and abroad because he is "forever 18-years-old":

Always keep an 18-year-old's mentality because at 18 you still have the innocence and sunny spirit of youth but also the rights of an adult. Besides, you have a brain with an overwhelming hunger and thirst for knowledge, and a burning enthusiasm for life and the future.

But Hu Min had little thirst for knowledge until a country teacher intervened in his life—twice.

## Hu Min's Greatest Influence

Born in Mao Zedong's hometown of Hunan in 1964, Hu Min vividly remembers the winters, feet half frozen after he'd removed his shoes to wade barefoot across a river to his rural school. It was a brutal daily trek, especially for a kid who wasn't that keen on school. "I was so mischievous in Junior High that they finally decided to expel me, but one teacher said, 'We live for decades; who can be certain how Hu Min will turn out? He's young; we should give him another chance.'"

"That teacher was my life's greatest influence," Hu Min said, "and I tried to live up to his expectations. And luckily, he also taught me in high school. I had no interest in English then, but he told our class he could reward more of us if we prepared harder for an exam. He looked at each of us but when his eyes met mine, it seemed he spoke to me alone. After the exam, a student told me that Teacher Chen wanted me to go to his house. I hesitated, thinking I was in trouble, but the student insisted. When I got to his house, Teacher Chen said, 'My wife and I are going to watch a movie in town. You (shall) stay and grade the papers. I prepared some snacks.' And they left!

"My classmates watched me from outside, noses against the window. 'What's my score?' they asked. After the teacher returned, I asked why he had me grade the tests. He said, 'Because your test answers were correct.' I did not get a prize but that affirmation was worth far more than any prize. He showed me that education's greatest purpose is to change people's destiny."

## 15-Year-Old University Student

In 1979, at age 15, Hu Min and Chen Caixia, his future wife, both tested into Xiangtan University, and he started teaching at 19—but I wanted to know what kind of teacher the mischievous kid turned out to be. I found out when I met Prof. Wen Weiping, a National Model Teacher at Xiangtan University who was Hu Min’s college classmate and then coworker for 15 years.

“I knew Hu Min very well,” she said, “and personally, I think his success was inevitable. He and his wife Chen Caixia were the youngest in our class but Hu Min was very insightful and motivated. For example, our classmates all chose Guilin for an internship because it is so beautiful, but Hu Min chose to intern at a school right here in Xiangtan. That showed us his character and determination. And where others did little academic research, Hu Min was always one step ahead of us all editing textbooks and writing papers. That is why, at age 28, he became China’s youngest associate professor in the field of social sciences. And it was Hu Min’s farsighted vision that ultimately led him to his concept of ‘cultivating globally competent youth.’

“But Hu Min is also a man of great love. He is not our wealthiest alumni but he is one of the most generous. He has established scholarships for schools all across China, but while he delights in giving to others, he is very strict and frugal with himself. For example, when I’m overseas he only talks to me on WeChat, even if the connection is bad, because he won’t waste money on long distance calls! And he generously invites friends to nice meals but he takes home leftovers to avoid wasting food. Such things reveal his high character and values.”

## Starting from Scratch in Beijing

In September, 1994, Hu Min moved from Xiangtan University to Beijing’s famous foreign language institution, the University of International Relations, where he quickly distinguished himself, but Beijing life wasn’t easy at first. His rural Hunan accent was so strong that even Beijing railway workers looked down their nose at him. “I was a former associate professor but people here treated me like a migrant worker for years!” Hu Min said. “So from day one, I determined to be successful so no one could treat me or my family like that again.”

Hu Min rapidly gained honors and recognition, as did his students, but at age 36, he was struck by the realization that he was halfway to retirement at 70. “How many more students can I teach before then?” he thought. “In private education I could reach many more students and my readers would be countless.” So Hu Min shocked his leader by resigning.

“You must think clearly!” the leader said to his star professor. “This resignation is not a joke!” Friends were also startled, and encouraged Hu Min’s wife to keep her own position as a safety net, but she knew her husband too well and also resigned her own job.

Hu Min went on to teach at New Oriental, where he worked his way up the ladder to CEO, but at age 40 he resigned to found New Channel in a small house on Zhichunlu Rd. Today, New Channel has over 8,000 employees and has published over 500 books used by its more than 100,000 students in 300 learning centers and 40 worldwide branch schools.

“I see why your motto is “I will persist until I succeed!” I said. “You are certainly successful now, but did you face any challenges?”

## **Doubts and Depression**

Hu Min nodded somberly. “It is difficult to start a business from scratch. This world has many dreamers but how many persist until they create value for society and wealth for themselves? New Channel started in October, 2004, but by the end of 2006 I felt severely depressed because we were broke, our team was unstable and we faced cutthroat competition because everyone was doing the same thing. I felt hopeless and finally completely collapsed.”

Prof. Hu Min paused, as if still pained by the memories. “I share this calmly now, but back then I was desperate. At Spring Festival, I told my wife and son to return to Hunan for a week. ‘When you return,’ I said, ‘New Channel will no longer exist.’ I really wanted to give it up. In university and business I’d had honors, recognition and wealth. Why was it so hard to start over? I could not figure it out.

“I locked myself in the house alone for a week, never leaving, and every day I asked myself, “Why would a 40-year-old start over like this? What was in my heart then? As Xi Jinping has often said, ‘Stay true to your original aspirations and the founding mission.’

“Why create New Channel? The fact is that even now most institutions cater to students. You want scores, I’ll give you scores. But a business must find their customers’ biggest pain point, which for students is their inability to communicate in English. Teaching exam skills to improve scores cures the symptoms but not the root causes of the disease, just like pills may relieve a cold but only physical fitness training can strengthen you to resist another cold. I had started New Channel to treat both symptoms and root causes by raising ability, which would naturally raise scores—but was my original intention correct?”

## **Remember Your First Love**

“I agonized over this for days. Abandon my original dream or stick to my ideals? Success requires having the correct intention, the right team and like-minded investors who invest in you because they share your dream and you are doing the right thing. I finally decided there was no reason for failure because my intentions were right – so I determined to start afresh!



“I felt reborn, fully alive! Most businesses fail the first year and 80 to 90% die by the third year, but by year three we were thriving because we persisted in doing the right thing for students.”

This mischievous country kid, who admits he is now more mischievous than ever, has gone on to receive numerous awards for his contribution to education, including the British Cultural Association’s Global “IELTS 20 Years 20 People” Outstanding Contribution Award and the “Beijing Educational Merit Award for 30 Years of Reform and Opening Up”. But Hu Min is quick to admit that his success is due to more than just his own efforts.

“For two decades, I’ve pondered how my life might have turned out had it not been for reform and opening up,” Hu Min said. “I might still be planting fields in the countryside instead of establishing New Channel. That is unthinkable!”

## **New Channel’s New Mission**

“But China has many companies teaching English,” I said. “What makes New Channel different?”

“Education must have a sense of mission,” Hu Min said. “Many people study a foreign language to go abroad or emigrate, but I remember crossing that freezing river barefoot as a child, and yet today I have a happy family and career right here in China, and life will only get better. So New Channel not only fully meets students’ academic needs but also helps them understand and value their own culture and country. Only cultural self-confidence can help Chinese better integrate into today’s global society—but Chinese students abroad have a big problem. Our Chinese culture and etiquette lead them to respectfully learn about their host country but they don’t share China’s stories because telling Chinese stories in English is difficult and they are not prepared. And even foreigners here in China often know little about our country.

“New Channel was probably first to emphasize that youth learn about their Chinese heritage but we hope more will join us,” Hu Min said. “The more that China develops, the more people want to know about China. So the entire world will benefit if we awaken youths’ cultural awareness. This will help the world understand China and China understand the world.”

## **Stories of China Retold in English Project**

To help both Chinese and foreigners learn more about ancient and modern China, Hu Min’s team of Chinese and foreign experts has created the *Stories of China Retold in English* project. The initial 3-volume bilingual set had over 200 stories, from historical tales about culture and values to modern achievements such as high-speed rail, or scientists such as Nobel Prize laureate Tu Youyou. Hu Min has also published

newly translated and beautifully illustrated versions of *The Analects of Confucius*, *Dao De Jing* and Sun Zi's *Art of War*.

Hu Min's most influential work will probably be *Global Competence: The Core Literacy of Future Adolescents*.

"In today's global world," Hu Min said, "talk of building a better world without cultural exchange is just empty words. Only mutual understanding, tolerance and respect can help us live and work together in harmony. Technology can be quantified with numbers and formulas but cultural soft power can only be wielded through human communication and interaction. So in the second half of my life I am focusing on one thing – training the global competency of youth. They need more than book knowledge and high exam scores. We build both their hard and soft power by expanding both their global perspective and their knowledge of China's traditional cultural foundation. I am very excited about this because the 21st century is completely different from the 20th century. This is the era of globalization, but much needs to be done."

## Community of Human Destiny

"I don't understand politics," Hu Min said, "but I like General Secretary Xi's vision of 'a global community of shared future'. China and all countries and regions must develop together. A country that develops itself but ignores others has no future.

"President Xi often talks of 'harmony with differences, all beautiful, one Great Community under heaven.' As a British sinologist recently said, many countries' development depended upon plunder, war and aggression, but China has never countenanced aggression and suppression of other countries. We have always sought peace, and we Chinese are fully confident in the future because we have patience, tenacity, and confidence that we'll all be better off if we are kind and better to each other."

I had one last question for this Confucian Scholar Entrepreneur. "You've said that you benefited greatly from reform and opening up, but do today's youth have as many opportunities as you did? This is important for me, as I teach business to Chinese youth."

## Hu Min's Five Magic Weapons for Success

"The future will only get better," Hu Min said, "if you follow five magic weapons for success."

1. Focus on strategy! Focus is simply physics. Position yourself, know who you are. How do we compete against 50,000 English education institutions? Quite often, deciding what *not* to do is more important than deciding what to do.

2. Differentiated competition. New Channel was not first, but we found many students having the same problem. They study English for years but can't actually use it. So we focus not on high exam scores but high English competency, which naturally leads to high scores.
3. Hard work. The world is fair. If you give, and work hard, you will get everything you deserve.
4. Be good at reflection. Know yourself. "Ask yourself at all times, can I do better?"
5. Share benefits. You may have created the business but it is not solely yours. At first, you share with your partners; later, you create value for customers and benefit employees. China, for example, is sharing its benefits with the world through the Belt and Road Initiative.

I will be sure to borrow Hu Min's five magic secrets for my leadership and strategy classes.

Just before I left New Channel's Beijing headquarters, Hu Min said, "It is fate that, of the planet's billions of people, you and I should meet." I agree. And I'm especially thankful for the fate that led a compassionate country teacher to intervene in the life of a mischievous boy, who in turn has changed the lives of over one million youth.

I hope that I can do the same for those people fated to cross my own path.

## Ballroom Dancing Inner Mongolia Blacksmith

Prof. Hu Min is both a classic Confucian scholar and a modern innovative entrepreneur, but a few days later we met a blacksmith in Inner Mongolia who also proved to be quite the entrepreneur—and a ballroom dancing philosopher as well.

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## Chapter 5

# Cui Rui, Philosopher, Blacksmith in Inner Mongolia



These are China's best days – and it will only get better!  
Rural Chinese blacksmiths forge flaming iron with hammer and anvil much like their ancestors 1,000 years ago. They bring to mind a favorite childhood poem, Longfellow's, *The Village Blacksmith*, which reads in part,

Under a spreading chestnut tree, The Village blacksmith stands,  
The smith, a mighty man is he, With large and sinewy hands;  
And the muscles of his brawny arms are strong as iron bands.  
His hair is crisp, and black, and long, His face is like the tan;  
His brow is wet with honest sweat, He earns what're he can,  
And looks the whole world in the face, For he owes not any man.

But not even Longfellow himself could have imagined a man like Cui Rui, a 5th generation blacksmith who witnessed New China's transformation firsthand and said to us that in spite of amazing progress, "The best is yet ahead!"

### **Born in Old China, Thriving in New China**

Cui Rui grinned as he greeted us from the doorway of his shop, which was on a street lined with new wooden buildings designed in traditional styles. He was dressed plainly, and his shop was littered with odds and ends that looked like they'd been tossed there before Liberation in 1949. I would have never guessed that this shabby shop's owner produced not just knives and cleavers but recreations of jeweled swords and metal utensils now proudly displayed in some of the best museums in the land.

Cui Rui invited us to sit on stools in the back of his shop while he shared his story. "Life has improved a lot," Cui Rui said. "It is very different from 20 or 30 years ago. We had hard times then, but today we have a well-off society."

Cui Rui shared frankly about mistakes made and lessons learned as the nation slowly modernized and shook off poverty, but in his eyes the turning point was Deng

Xiaoping's reform and opening up. "A remarkable figure appeared in China," Cui Rui said. "Deng Xiaoping led China's people and started us on a new journey. Since then, generation after generation have led China into a more advanced and scientific era.

"I am 76 years old," he said. "I was born in the old society, but today is the best of times! In the old days, you could not eat even vegetables, much less staple foods. Today, however, various fruits and vegetables are very abundant year round. In the summer we can now eat fruits and vegetables that used to be sold only in winter. And people's lives are particularly carefree. Retired workers and the elderly have no pressure in life."

Of course, in a competitive society not everyone is free of pressure. Cui Rui said, "Young people are competing to get into college, and invest a lot of hard work in the exams. But I feel today is better than any time in China's past – and it will probably be even better in the future!"

## **Blacksmithing in the Blood**

Cui Rui tried his hand at many things after retirement but his first love is still working iron. "I am the fifth generation of our family, and our family has been blacksmiths for over 200 years. In the last years of the reign of Emperor Daoguang, my ancestor suffered a drought in his hometown of Shanxi. He begged his way all the way to Inner Mongolia. After his blacksmith apprenticeship, he started his own business, but then returned to Shanxi, leaving behind his 9-year-old son.

"His son also became a blacksmith's apprentice, started his own business, and had a family of five sons and two daughters. And each generation carried on the blacksmith tradition right up until Liberation in 1949.

My grandpa had nine children and four of them chose to be blacksmiths. My father and uncle were both blacksmiths, and they passed down their technique. I'm the fifth generation, and I and my five brothers are all blacksmiths!

After Liberation, Cui Rui and his brother worked in the state-owned factory, but, "After the reform and opening up, factories closed and the market economy replaced the planned economy. We relied on ourselves and lived on working iron."

I wondered if people like Cui Rui preferred the security of the old ways over the competitive pressures of the market economy, but he is grateful for the changes. "Our lives have changed greatly," he said. "We were the have-nots but now we're the haves!" we went from a meager existence to affluence. We have indeed tasted the sweetness of reform and opening up!"

Cui Rui's enthusiasm was contagious. I imagined him giving a pep talk to my own XMU students because this 5th generation blacksmith is well-informed not just on local changes but the nation as a whole.

"Of course, from the development of the country, the development of the political situation, and the development of various aspects, we are very proud when we listen

to radio or watch TV,” Cui Rui said. “Although I am 76 years old, and I am in the twilight of my life, the joy of a new happy life still feels new to me.”

For someone supposedly in the twilight of his life, he shows no signs of slowing down, driven by pride in both country and profession.

## **Can’t Cook Without a Cleaver!**

“As a Chinese,” Cui Rui said, “I am very proud and very happy. And as a blacksmith, I must continue my career. I mainly create knives and other objects, which are used by ordinary people.” He hefted a beautifully balanced knife and laughed as he said, “Every family has to cook, and you can’t cook without a cleaver!”

Cui Rui’s cleaver, with its razor edge and beautifully carved wooden handle, was a work of art distinct from the cheap, mass produced knives in stores. I’ve loved knives since childhood, when I was given my grandpa’s pearl-handled knife. Cui Rui must have sensed my delight as I tested the cleaver’s balance. “Keep it!” he said. I could not keep it, sadly, as I would be taking a train in West China and it would not pass security, but someday I hope to return for it – and give it to my own grandson.

Cui Rui is passionate about his work, and especially about preserving the techniques inherited from his ancestors. He turned the cleaver over in his hand and sighed. “My forefathers had so many wondrous ironworking techniques that are now lost. I’ve worked to rediscover them – to bring some lost things back to life. I want to leave a legacy for future generations. And today’s prosperity gives me the freedom for innovation and creation.

“In the past, my father and uncle were very clever, and their skills were quite good. Like me, they wanted to create something special, but the pressures of life prevented it. Their families had five or six children, and with eight or nine people in a family and only one person working for a meager salary, they struggled just to make ends meet.”

Cui Rui frowned as he recalled the old days. “Everyone ate from the big rice pot. Industrious people worked harder but lazy people did little. By the time of reform and opening up, my father and uncle were already in their twilight years. They really paid the price to train us, so for their sakes, my generation must work from our heart to create what they could not.”

## **Ballroom Dancing Blacksmith**

The 76-year-old laughed and thumped his chest. “My health is very good! So I must take advantage of reform and opening up. We eat well, we live well – life is very good!”

Life is good indeed, and this village blacksmith has quite the social life. “I am a blacksmith,” Cui Rui said, “but I can also have my own hobbies and cultural life.

For example, I am active and I exercise. I also practice martial arts. I wanted to learn martial arts when I was young but with the pressure of life there was no way. And today, I still dance – even ballroom dancing. Every night, I practice ballroom dancing in Dazhao Square. My life is very rich!”

Not all of Cui Rui’s peers have seized the day as he has. “I took advantage of these good times, but many of my peers failed to catch up, and died early of illness. I work every day, but not because of financial need. Each day I am free to do whatever I want to do.”

## **Resurrecting Legendary Techniques**

As if blacksmithing, Kung Fu and ballroom dancing weren’t enough to keep this 76-year-old man busy, he also makes museum-quality recreations of ancient metal cultural masterpieces. “I was at a museum for a while and the curator asked me to copy an ancient Kangxi sword. In ancient times, only the palace blacksmith possessed the techniques to make such knives.” He pointed to the elegant gold inlay in copper and gold plate on silver. “This is traditional Chinese technology, but when I arrived at the museum, this technology had been lost for 100 years. The curator asked me to rediscover the technique because they dared not display the real Kangxi sword in public. In the end, I did rediscover the technology. I was given only 80 Yuan for my efforts but I didn’t care how much I was paid because I was able to resurrect a precious technology for my country. The Kangxi sword can easily cut wire. It is a creative work made by rediscovered historic traditions.”

## **Like Father, Like Son**

Nowadays, many youth are reluctant to spend years learning a low-paying traditional craft, so I asked Cui Rui, “Have you taught your techniques to your loved ones?”

Cui Rui grinned proudly. “My son took over! And while in the museum, I recreated all of their iron exhibits. Some of my works were sold during the 30th Anniversary Celebration of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and many foreign friends bought them.”

“Can your son also create these reproductions?”

“Yes,” Cui Rui said, “he can make them now. He started his apprenticeship when he was only 13 and 14 and he is 48 years old this year. He runs our iron business and has a small workshop of his own and a retail store. My apprentices create the pieces that he sells in his shop.”

## Two Treasures the Secret to Life

Cui Rui seems to have boundless energy and excitement about life. “How is it you are in your 70 s but still so young?” I asked. It turns out this village blacksmith is also a philosopher.

“Good health, good mood!” he said. “There are two treasures in life, one is the body and the other is the mood. If you’ve never experienced bitter times, you can’t taste the sweetness of today. Some young people not only do not work hard but they also blame families, parents and even society. In fact, the reason they don’t work hard is because they have never experienced any hardships. They’ve never known hunger like us.

“In the past, iron work was all manual. From dawn to noon, I was sweaty head to toe, and lack of food left my legs almost too wobbly to walk. A man needs 1 ½ to 2 lb of food but I was given only 8 or 9 oz – and nothing in the morning. Nowadays, for breakfast people have a big table laden with eggs, milk and everything else. During bitter times, we were sent to the countryside where life was even harder. A day of wielding bellows and sledgehammer left a man exhausted and weak. We were panting and breathless – not like today, with so many big-bellied people. It was a difficult time in the country – not just Inner Mongolia but everywhere. Natural disasters left everyone famished.”

The ebullient blacksmith’s face darkened for a moment as he reflected on the past, and then he brightened, the philosopher coming to the fore again.

“But that’s all history now. It is still vivid to my generation when we talk of it but to the youth these are just stories, perhaps embellished. Youth today have not eaten soup made from husks and tree bark. Soups did not have eggs or other things; it was just water with a bit of soy sauce for color, a drop of oil and some spring onions and a tad of salt. It was hard to digest and we broke out in boils so badly that we could not even sit on a bench.”

Cui Rui paused, and the entire room went silent as we thought of what his generation endured only decades ago. But Cui Rui grinned again and said, “But China will be even better in the future!”

As our time together came to a close, I scanned Cui Rui’s WeChat contact so we could keep in contact, and we took photos together in front of his tiny shop.

As we drove off I turned and saw him waving until we were out of sight, and I was reminded vividly of the closing lines of Longfellow’s *The Village Blacksmith*,

Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,  
For the lesson thou hast taught!  
Thus at the flaming forge of life  
Our fortunes must be wrought;  
Thus on its sounding anvil shaped  
Each burning deed and thought.

Cui Rui’s story is representative of people I’ve met not just in Inner Mongolia but throughout the entire country. And later that same day, I had dinner in the home of



a creative Inner Mongolian mom in the remote countryside who paid her daughter's Xiamen University tuition by making and selling traditional Mongolian snacks.

Longfellow could have written a poem about her as well.

The longer I live, the more I agree with Mark Twain that “There was never yet an uninteresting life,”—especially in China.

I could not imagine more stirring stories than the dozen or so I'd heard between Xiamen and Inner Mongolia, but one of the most moving tales was to come from Mr. Tian Ye, a compassionate young leader who has devoted his life to stamping out poverty in an area that even UNESCO once deemed hopeless.

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## Chapter 6

# Mr. Tian Ye Frees Ningxia’s “Frogs in a Well”



When I drove through Northwest China’s Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in 1994, it was one of the poorest places I’d ever seen in China or any other country. The arid province suffered from desertification and had an abysmal infrastructure. I spent hours driving up and down dirt roads that snaked around mountains from one hamlet of mud-walled homes to another.

Yet in spite of heartbreaking poverty, the people were cheerful, optimistic and kind, and I’d have never finished my 40,000 km drive without their help. During our three month journey, our van broke down completely only once—in Ningxia, just short of a mountain pass on a moonless night. I coasted the van backwards in the dark down hairpin curves until it coasted to a stop on a small patch of level ground. But as luck would have it, only 2 meters from my driver’s window was a small hand painted sign that read, “car repair”. It was after midnight but a wizened old grandpa opened the creaking wooden door, wiped the sleep from his eyes, looked at me closely, and asked, “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No, I’m from Fujian,” I said, “and I’m headed to Tibet.” He nodded, and without another word helped me push the van into a courtyard littered with ancient car parts. He looked more like a farmer than a mechanic but appearances can be deceiving. Several award certificates were tacked to the rough wooden walls of his repair bay. He found the problem within minutes, and two hours later crawled out from under the van, wiped his greasy hands, and said, “I don’t have the right parts but at least it will get you to Lanzhou’s repair center.”

I was so grateful that I’d have paid any fee he demanded, but in spite of his obvious poverty and our wealth (in his eyes, at least), he asked for only a few Yuan and refused to accept more, apologizing that he’d not had all he needed to do the job right.

## **Young Xi Jinping Led Fujian to Ningxia**

As we traveled about Ningxia, our hearts ached to meet so many kindhearted people like him trapped in such poverty. We'd have never dreamed then how much their lives would change within only 25 years—some of it in part because of my own Fujian Province.

China has tackled poverty so quickly by relying not just on top-down leadership and bottom up grassroots initiatives but also lateral support, with wealthier provinces partnering with their poorer counterparts. In 1996, only two years after our trip to Ningxia, Fujian's young deputy Party secretary, Xi Jinping, led a delegation to Ningxia to explore ways to help what even UNESCO deemed one of the planet's most destitute places. A year later, Xi proposed a resettlement program to move entire communities from the most desolate areas such as Xihaigu to more fertile land. Over 1 million people have now benefited from this program, which was so successful that it was later adopted across the entire country.

When we drove through Ningxia in July, 2019, I could scarcely believe this was the same wasteland I'd traversed in 1994. Modern highways and bullet train networks now crisscross the province. These are possible only because of the breathtaking bridges spanning the valleys and hi-tech tunnels so deep that the walls are lined with electronic light shows to keep drivers from dozing off.

## **Xiamen University Partners with Ningxia**

Even more impressive was that Ningxia had greened as it had developed. Many of the formerly barren hills were now blanketed in grass, fields of corn or groves of fruit trees.

Ningxia had also become a center for manufacturing and research, and I felt proud to see several buildings built by Xiamen University, which has partnered with Ningxia for years. And imagine my delight when, on my second day, I encountered half a dozen of my former MBA students who had just flown in from Fujian to explore a new project.

Since 1958, Ningxia has lifted 3.3 million people from poverty, including 21.8% of the population during the last five years. But more moving than statistics are the firsthand accounts of changed lives—and the stories of young leaders like Mr. Tian Ye, a local who gave up lucrative opportunities after college in Xi'an to return home and help those he had grown up with escape poverty.

## **Mr. Tian Ye: A Passion for Fighting Poverty**

A native of Ningxia's Longde, when Tian Ye was a child his father had worked in the Water Conservancy Bureau in Qianjin Village, a hamlet nestled deep in an inaccessible valley and one of the county's two poorest villages. "When I went to college in 2002," Tian Ye recalled, "a reservoir was almost finished and they had a road. I wondered when I left if I'd ever see that village again."

Tian Ye returned home after college but in September 2015 the local government sent him to Fujian's Changde to broaden his experiences. "After my return home in June 2016, to my surprise I was put in charge of poverty alleviation for the county's two poorest villages, Qianjin Village and Xinzhuang Village! When I left in 2002, almost all Qianjin Village homes were mud-walled. But when I returned in 2016 – nothing had changed! I'd changed, though. Although I still recognized the people, they did not recognize me, so when I first started, I didn't tell them I had been there when I was young."

### **Replacing Mud-Wall Death Traps**

"At that time," Tian Ye said, "the entire country was focused on poverty alleviation, and the most important task here was rebuilding the mud-walled houses. After a heavy rain of 40 days, our disaster relief team found one family huddled in a house whose earthen walls had been soaked. We begged them to leave before it collapsed on them but they refused. Finally, we had no choice but to force them out. As soon as we got them out, the sodden mud walls collapsed, with earth flying up in a small gray mushroom cloud."

But the dangers of mud-walled homes were not new to Tian Ye, who had grown up in one. "I remember that in one year of heavy rain, we were at my aunt's house. My mother and brother returned home first but I stayed behind because of the rain. When they got home, the door of our mud-walled home collapsed. My mom was so worried that I would be crushed when I returned home so she stood on the table in the upper room and waited for me."

In 1994, Tian Ye's father returned home one night and said to his wife, "Most villagers have built brick houses. Only we and one poor family still have mud-walled houses. If we don't rebuild our own house, first, other people in the village will look down on us, and second, it really is unsafe when it rains."

"My father smoked all night, brooding over this," Tian Ye recalled, "and then he rose at dawn determined to build a brick house, which he finished two years later. I was only 12 but I remember vividly to this day the pride I felt in our new home. Later, when I was in charge of poverty alleviation and helped people build new homes, I felt just as proud as I did when my dad finished our new home in 1996. No difference!"

## No Roads, No Houses

Tian Ye expected villagers to be grateful when he began implementing the county decree to replace the mud-wall death traps with safe, clean brick homes, but to his surprise he faced two problems. One, the people said they had no money to build new homes. Two, they did not really believe that mud-walled houses were dangerous. Tian Ye shook his head in disbelief. "We saw with our own eyes that mud walls soaked by heavy rain could not bear the weight and collapsed, but the people really could not grasp the danger, and did not want to waste what little hard-earned money they had on a new house. They did not see the point."

Tian Ye persisted. "The county says everyone must demolish the mud house and build a new brick home. The state policy and subsidy is very good now. If you don't seize this opportunity, you may never have another opportunity like this in the future."

The people finally said, "Ok, Secretary Tian, we can build a house – but first you must build a hardened road to our village."

"I will definitely get you a cement road," Tian Ye promised them, "but the timing is uncertain. Not this year, but definitely next year. Such a large project requires approval by higher authorities."

"No road, no house!" the people replied. "When the road is built, we will rebuild the house, but if we build a house with no road, we can't come or go. It makes no sense."

Tian Ye admitted they had a point, and since Qianjin Village was the county's largest poor village, he laid his neck on the line by promising, "I will definitely build your road."

The next time they had a big rain, Tian Ye brought county leaders to Qianjin Village. "As soon as they saw the situation firsthand, they agreed it was intolerable," Tian Ye said. "They approved the road project and the people were happy." Yet even with generous government subsidies, some people still could not afford a new home.

## If Son Doesn't Care, Why Do You?

"At that time, there was an elderly lady whose son did not help her because he'd had a conflict with his father. Her small Qing Dynasty mud-walled house had wide and very dangerous cracks, but she and her husband were both 68 years old and had no money for repairs. I urged them, daily, to rebuild, but the old man never let on that he had no money. He just shouted at me over and over, 'I won't do it. I just won't do it!'"

At first, the man even cursed young Tian Ye, but as the villagers slowly came to know him and realized he was working hard to help them, the old man's heart softened. He finally allowed Tian Ye inside their home and the young leader saw that the elderly couple indeed did not have a penny to their name.

“Don’t worry,” Tian Ye reassured him. “The government will subsidize it. If the money is not enough, I will ask the county’s poverty alleviation office for more money. Together that is over 30,000 Yuan – surely enough to build you a safe new home.”

The old man replied, “I don’t want to trouble you. If this mud house collapses and I die, I die. If my own son doesn’t care, why should you?”

Tian Ye was adamant. “I’m in charge of poverty alleviation here, so it is my duty to provide you a safe home. I promise you I will raze this old house and build you a safe brick house.”

The couple finally agreed, and the villagers helped move their things to another house. “After I’d razed their dilapidated mud-walled house I reported this special situation to my superiors. The leader replied, ‘Make this a priority.’ So I found a construction team to build the new house. The construction boss said, ‘There is no profit in building this house,’ but villagers help gather unused bricks lying about – and that’s how we were able to build the elderly couple’s new home.”

But when the house was finished, Tian Ye was still 10,000 Yuan short. Once again he traipsed to the county’s poverty alleviation office. After the leader had verified that the couple was truly destitute, he said, “We must be practical when we help the poor, and help those in the greatest need. This is truly a case of greatest need. Although I risk being charged with violation of discipline, I must allocate the money.” Tian Ye soon had the 10,000 Yuan to pay off the construction boss.

## **No Place to Cook**

When Tian Ye took a deputy county magistrate in charge of poverty alleviation to inspect the complete house, he could see that the elderly lady had something to say to the magistrate, so he asked her what was on her mind.

“I live very comfortably in this house, thanks to the government,” she said, “but there is no place to cook.”

So Tian Ye promptly found another contractor and built a small kitchen next door.

“In the first half of 2018,” Tian Ye said, “that same deputy magistrate visited our village again to see the conditions of the poorest people. In our village, the existence of safe housing is one of the key benchmarks of poverty alleviation. Since I had been in charge of poverty alleviation, I myself showed him some ordinary Qianjin Village homes; that way, if we did see any issues, I could deal with them directly.”

The villagers were happy to see Tian Ye, who had finished his work in Qianjin and moved on to another village. “Later, when I went back to see them, they took my hand and said, ‘Secretary Tian, I haven’t seen you for half a year, have you been busy recently?’ Then they told me about their situations at home. Everyone seemed happy.”

The last house Tian Ye visited was the elderly couple’s home. “As soon as we entered, she took my hand and said, tremblingly, ‘I feel like I may not live out this

year, but now that I can see you before I die, I am satisfied. You helped me solve such a big problem.'

The county magistrate asked her, "Do you have any other needs?"

## **Dying Without Regret**

She said, "No, I asked for a kitchen; Secretary Tian has built it for me. It is enough that I can see Secretary Tian again this year, and I am satisfied. Even if I die soon, I have no regret."

"When she said this," Tian Ye recalled, "the county magistrate looked strangely at me. Once back in the car, he asked me, 'Tian, what are your thoughts on grassroots work?'"

'In grassroots work,' I replied, 'we must be practical, and seize every opportunity, because if we miss an opportunity, we may not easily find another chance to help the people. Our people are very good, but often we approach them the wrong way. Just like this old man – he has a bad temper, and at first would not even let me in his house. But after speaking with him many times, he finally understood I really was just trying to help him. So in grassroots work, if I can only find the right approach, I can definitely persevere.'

Tian Ye's other village, Xinzhuang, was initially just as poor as Qianjin Village, but he had an easier time of it because the very capable village leaders had already persuaded the people to build new homes. But behind the mountain were two groups of people, all of whom lived in mud-walled homes on arid ground and were scheduled for relocation to fertile land. By the end of the 12th Five-Year Plan period, there was still no sign of moving them, so Tian Ye intervened. Like Qianjin Village, their biggest problem was no road, so he fell back on his proven tactic. "Every day, I took leaders to see the situation until they approved the project."

## **First—To the Doorsteps!**

Such a tactic worked, Tian Ye explained, because all leaders had to adhere to strict poverty alleviation guidelines and policies, and were held accountable to lift every family from poverty. "What leaders most fear," Tian Ye said, "is having even one village where poverty alleviation has not been done well, or roads have not been built. When I was building the road, a poverty alleviation office leader said in one meeting that because of tight finances, they would first build the main road but stop about 2 or 3 meters short of each house's doorstep. But I knew that waiting until later to finish the last part to each house would be more wasteful and they might not find anyone willing to do such small jobs. So I told the construction boss, 'First build the roads right to each households' doorstep. Once you're finished, if there is not enough money to continue, we will apply for more from the county.' The construction boss

agreed, and the entire road system was built at one time. We were the first village in the entire county to have completed house-to-road access, and by 2018, we had renovated over 90% of old houses. Since then, other villages have seen our results and followed suit.”

“It is obvious that villagers’ homes have changed a lot,” I said to Tian Ye, “but has life changed in other ways?”

“Great changes!” Tian Ye said, “Especially in food and other areas. I remember as a kid having only spinach and sauerkraut to eat in winter. Today, thanks to roads right to our doorsteps, even the poorest people can choose to grow their own vegetables or buy from markets. We can enjoy fresh vegetables every day and even meat anytime we want it. In the past, poor transportation made it difficult to eat meat. But with good roads, people have money. If you don’t want to prepare it at home, you can always go to town and eat in a restaurant.”

“But how do they earn money?” I asked.

“Now that we have convenient roads,” Tian Ye said, “ordinary people can go out to work and earn over 100 Yuan a day. Before we had good roads, even if they wanted to work, it took one or two hours just to cross the mountain; today, it’s only a dozen minutes’ walk to town. Good roads allow us to engage in aquaculture, and now we can easily transport cattle feed. Before roads, if you had 10 cattle to raise, you could not get the feed for them. Nowadays, even if you have 20 cattle, you have no problem getting feed or whatever else is needed. And the government has subsidies. If you raise a cow, or a calf is born, the government will subsidize it. The country’s policies are great, giving even ordinary people a chance to prosper.

“And we encourage people to be entrepreneurial and take out business loans, and the government will repay the interest for them. With these loans, they can raise cattle or expand their cultivation at home. People have seized these opportunities, and those who once had two cattle now raise eight or nine.

## **Roads Lead Out—And Back Home Again**

“Before we had good roads, people used to seek work far away to earn money for their families, but if you calculate it, you still have to eat and drink, so in the end you don’t really make that much. But nowadays many of them are returning home. We are very mountainous and can grow grass or corn, and after harvest, we can use the stalks as cattle feed. Many people raise more than six cows. If they sell just two cows a year, they earn 30,000 Yuan. If you go somewhere else to work, and don’t eat or drink for a year, you’ll still only earn 30,000 a year! Now you can earn just as much money staying home, where you can also help care for the elderly and children, and if you are tired, you can choose to take a break. There’s no need to go far afield and daily work yourself into the ground.”

“I have one last question,” I said. “I called my wife last night to tell her I was in Ningxia, and she remembered that in 1994, we saw many people on the roadsides selling rats. Why buy and sell rats? Do you eat them?”



Tian Ye laughed. "They weren't selling rats. They were exchanging them for free rat poison. When I was a kid my mom took me to town shopping and I too was puzzled about why people would sell rats."

"I haven't seen people with rats this time," I said.

Tian Ye grinned. "That's because all of the houses are brick now and rats can't get in, so people rarely see rats in their homes."

Tian Ye was not exaggerating. Every village I saw had concrete roads leading to the very doorsteps of homes, all of which were brick. Although the houses were not large – the government subsidizes 10 squ. m per family member – they were safe and clean. And they weren't just utilitarian cookie cutter brick boxes. Each home boasted a bit of decorative trim that gave it a simple but elegant Chinese flair. I later saw this same feature in remote minority areas, such as the land of the Lisu tribes in West Yunnan, where the government made people's new houses more "homelike" by incorporating cultural elements into the architecture.

## No Longer just Frogs in a Well

Tian Ye joined us as we visited Ningxia farmers and entrepreneurs, and a business center that Xiamen University had helped build. I marveled at the changes since 1994, but I was most moved by the people's spirit. They were happy, relaxed, and obviously quite proud of their newfound prosperity. I was especially delighted to have a chance to give a talk at a junior high school and afterwards take a group photo with the children. Their bright eyes and cheerful laughter were proof enough to me that Ningxia folks, young and old, have faith in their future.

"Why do you think things have changed so much so quickly?" I asked one elderly farmer.

"Well, the government knows our situation," he said, "and the leaders care for us. Before we had roads, we were like frogs in a well. We could see only the patch of sky right overhead, and there was no escape. But now we're free."

When the farmer asked to scan my WeChat contact, I thought back to 1990, when even in Xiamen, a coastal Special Economic Zone, I spent USD 450 to apply for a home phone and waited three years for it to be installed. Today, even farmers in the remotest corners of Ningxia, Gansu and Tibet have mobile phones, use WeChat, and buy and sell on Taobao.

I was delighted to see Ningxia's changes, and as we continued our journey west, we discovered that every corner of rural China had benefited from Beijing's visionary anti-poverty program—thanks in part to the passionate persistence of young leaders like Tian Ye.

I hope the world will someday better understand not only the Chinese Dream but also the dreamers who have made it a reality. And thanks to selfless teachers like Ms. Yan Guizhen in West China's Jiayuguan, the dreamers' children have even greater hopes for the future.

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## Chapter 7

# Gansu's Teacher Yan Guizhen I Love Because I Was Loved!



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... 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.

Rev. John MacGowan, Xiamen missionary, 1913

## Leading the Global Desertification Battle

Photos from my first visit to the western end of the Great Wall show a land as yellow and sun-baked as the Great Wall itself, and it was probably just as desolate 1,000 years ago when camels trod this remote stretch of the Silk Road. The walls are still yellow in my 2019 photos but now set against a green backdrop. Even the city has a large forest, neighborhood parks, and landscaped roads. When I asked leaders their secret, they said, "We studied Israelis. They're masters at recovering deserts!"

But increasingly the world is turning its eyes to China's own fight against desertification.

The UN warns that global desertification is now 30 or 35 times historic levels, and a European commission warned that over 75% of land is already degraded and this could exceed 90% by 2050. Yet China, the most populous nation, has managed to green even as it has achieved unparalleled economic growth. And West China's Jiayuguan is a model of how China has also tackled another global problem: unequal regional economic growth.

## Coping with Unequal Regional Growth

A leader in Warsaw boasted to me recently that Poland was Europe's 7th largest economy and the only EU country to avoid recession during the financial crises of 2008/09. While the statistics are impressive, I'd also talked to rural Poles to see the reality behind the statistics. Several said, "Yes, we read about our 'economic miracle', but only city people benefit from it."

Poland's rural inland development lags behind urban and coastal growth because, as in other countries, companies must invest near the best infrastructure. The EU's "economic miracle" of Poland still faces this problem even though it has been the largest beneficiary of UE infrastructure funds—some 208 billion Euros from 2013 to 2020. If Poland struggles bringing prosperity to areas only 100 km from a city, China's success in developing regions thousands of miles from the coast is all the more remarkable.

China is nearly 31 times larger than Poland yet in three decades has built the world's vastest highway, hi-speed train and internet networks—and China's infrastructure reaches not just cities and towns but even, as we saw in Inner Mongolia and Ningxia, the very doorsteps of mountain villages.

I saw this firsthand when I revisited West China's Jiayuguan in July, 2019. The city was not only greener than before but also as modern as cities in the east. Beautifully designed apartment buildings lined wide paved streets that were landscaped with shrubs, flowers and grasses illuminated at night by solar lighting, and the shops offer not only local specialties but products from all over China, as well as imports.

But it was the adults' and children's cheerfulness and optimism that moved me most. They were both proud of their city and confident in their children's future—probably because they have teachers like Ms. Yan Guizhen, a middle school teacher whose passion for education was kindled when, as a child, she was quite literally carried on the back of a teacher who was passionate about her.

Jiayuguan citizens were delighted when Teacher Yan was chosen to represent them at the 18th National Congress in Beijing in 2012. She has inspired such devotion and passion in her students that during 15 consecutive years, 90% of them tested into college and 100% succeeded from 2002 to 2004. Three of her students scored the highest in the entire province.

Yet in spite of awards and media attention, Teacher Yan remains indifferent to fame and fortune, living so frugally that even on her modest salary she has donated over 300,000 Yuan to needy students. But what led a young Manchu minority girl from N.E. China's Liaoning at the opposite end of the Great Wall to devote her life to poor children in the far west of China?

## Longing to Study

Teacher Yan was born in 1962 in Liaoning to a poor rural family of 10, including parents, grandmother and 6 siblings. China had 800 million farmers, but much of their communal farms' produce went to feed workers and soldiers in the cities, so farmers had little left for themselves. "We were very hungry when I was young," Ms. Yan said. "But we were creative with potatoes! We ate potato soup, shredded potatoes – many potato dishes. Sometimes we'd get a little corn and grind it for porridge. We honored our elders by giving grandma the thickest portion and we children ate the watery bit left over."

Guizhen's great escape was reading, so she was dismayed when her father told her to quit school to work the fields with adults and earn work points. "I longed to study," she said, "but I obeyed my parents. But just at that time an official, Uncle Zheng, came to help our county. He said to dad, 'Your daughter is too small for work but she's a good student, so let her study.'"

"We have no money," Guizhen's father said, but he agreed when Uncle Zheng paid the tuition from his own pocket, though it still meant hardship for the family.

## One Room School

"I was so grateful that I worked very hard. Though China was vast, Mao Zedong had made sure that every village had a school, however small. Our village had over 20 students from grades one to six all in one classroom, but our teacher planned well so when she taught one grade the other five always had something to do – math, writing and drawing. Such was my education environment."

"Was it effective?" I asked, skeptical.

"It was very good!" Ms. Yan said. "Nowadays, families have only one child and we are over-protective, with few outings lest students have an accident. But we were less constrained back then. Our teacher had over 20 students, aged 6 to 17, and she often took us on Spring outings. But it was a long trek to the mountains and at six I was so small I could not keep up. Yet instead of having me stay home, she carried me on her back! From first to sixth grade, she carried me on every spring trip!"

"Her warmth moved me deeply and showed me that education needs love."

"I've never heard of such devotion!" I said, "carrying a student six years!"

"Yes, I feel emotional just talking about her. To this day, every time I return home I pay my respect at her grave. General Secretary Xi said a good teacher can influence a student's life. My teacher influenced my entire life. Our rural area was so poor that we had no blackboard, so teacher Wang made one by fastening boards together and smearing them with ink. She exemplified the philosophy of Confucius, who over 2,000 years ago said, "Education is for all!" She made sure every child had the best learning opportunity and never ignored a child because she was too small, or for any other reason. And when she saw I was so small that when I sat on a stool I could

not see over the table, she went right out and made me a stool with high legs. Then I could see! Those are some of my fondest childhood memories. But even in high school I was still blessed with a teacher who cared for me.”

## Decision to Teach

Ms. Yan's rural home was very remote and they were too poor for a bicycle, so many of her cousins dropped out of school. “But my dream was college, and escaping life in that poor valley. I'd rise before dawn on cold snowy days, eat my mom's porridge, and take a bowl of it to school. At noon, when my high school teacher saw I'd carried this porridge 30 miles for lunch, he asked me, ‘After such a poor meal, how will you have energy to study? How will you ever make it to college?’ He left the room and returned a bit later with a large bowl of white rice, which he was allotted as a technical secondary school graduate. ‘Eat this,’ he said. ‘It will give you energy to study for university.’ My eyes teared as I bowed my head and ate the rice given to me by a teacher who had such high hopes for a girl from a poor valley, and I vowed that I'd overcome any obstacles to become a teacher like my own teacher.

“General Secretary Xi has said we should never forget our original aspirations. This was the source of my original aspiration to become a teacher.”

After graduating from college in July, 1991, she returned to her poor county as a middle school teacher with a salary of 38 Yuan. She used 10 Yuan for living expenses, sent 10 to her mom and gave the remaining 18 Yuan to needy students. “The children were as poor in the early 1980s as I had been,” Ms. Yan said. “Many had no shoes or winter clothes or money for school fees. “So I passed on my teachers' love for me to them by helping them by food or clothes or books.”

As Ms. Yan taught school, she was caught up with Mao Zedong's vision of a prosperous China. She watched patriotic movies, read patriotic books, and heard the call for youth to help distant areas, but they only wanted boys. “What about girls?” she thought. “If I get the chance and China needs me, I too will volunteer to teach in remote places. And I got that chance!”

Teacher Yan glanced out the window at the beautiful buildings and landscape. “Jiayuguan today is very beautiful but it wasn't this way 30 years ago. In 1958, Mao Zedong built one of the Northwest's largest steel mills and when production restarted in 1985, they recruited engineers from all over China but they did not have teachers for their children. When I heard this, I told my parents I was going to the Northwest.”

“Did your mother agree?” I asked.

“No, she did not agree,” Yan said. “My mom was herself a poor, rural woman but she had heard China's far Northwest was even worse off. She'd heard they carried guns and was terrified that I'd be killed.

‘Mom,’ I said, ‘there are steel mills, and if technicians and others can live there, I can too – and they badly need teachers.’ Mom finally agreed because she knew I'd made up my mind. But mom wasn't the only one to try to dissuade me. My school's principal and Party secretary didn't want to lose me. I had joined the Party

and the principal had said that I was a good teacher and worked hard and he wanted to continue training me. But I persisted, saying the Northeast was full of talent but the Northwest needed teachers badly.”

## **Journey to the West**

Ms. Yan rode the “hard seat” train for a full week, but she didn’t have the money for a seat so she stood the entire week, sometimes curling up under a seat when she was exhausted. She was hot and hungry, and so relieved to finally reach Jiayuguan, only to find it was vast and empty—no people, just Gobi Desert.

“Jiayuguan had only two modern buildings for the steel company leaders and engineers; all other buildings were unbaked mud brick. But I was relieved to see the market had potatoes! At least I would not starve! And they had planted drought-resistant trees like poplars. If those trees could take root, so could I!

“But what really motivated me to stay in the Northwest was the old man in his 50 s who met me at the station on a rattling bicycle, its chain half falling off. He rode up the dirt road and said, ‘You are Yan Guizhen from the Northeast? Hop on!’ He dropped me off at the dormitory and then returned shortly with a kerosene stove he’d just bought for me and some noodles from his home. As he patiently showed me how to use the stove, I wondered who this old man was. I was shocked to learn from other teachers that he was Director Zhang of the Jiugang Education Department—the very leader who had sent the ‘help wanted’ notice across China! It turned out that he personally cared for every new teacher in the same way. At that very moment, I knew in my heart that the second half of my life would belong to the Great Northwest and its children because they loved and valued teachers. That is how Director Zhang moved me. But I also learned that he was a very selfless Party official.

Although Director Zhang’s salary was only a few hundred Yuan and he had three children, he spent little on himself. He knew life was hard for the teachers from other parts of China so he often dropped by to see what they needed and he’d buy it for them, or buy nutritional supplements for a sick child. “If a student lacked school fees,” Yan said, “he’d pay them from his own pocket. He was my role model!”

Only after Director Zhang’s retirement in his 70 s did she learn the true extent of his sacrifices.

## **Generous to Others, Frugal with Self**

When Ms. Yan visited Director Zhang in his home in 2009 she was shocked to find he was terminally ill and living in very poor conditions. “He should have made at least 2,000 Yuan a month by then. He was in his 70 s and his son was married. Yet his bed was just boards placed across two stacks of bricks. I felt so badly that I wept. ‘Director Zhang, why sleep in such a bed? Had I known, I would have bought

a comfortable bed for you!' He had been so generous to others but so frugal with himself. No wonder the common people love and support our leaders. Director Zhang was my role model, and his influence and teachings, etched deeply within my heart, reinforced my desire to commit the rest of my life to the students in Jiayuguan."

"I can see what has led you to give so much to others," I said, "but what does your husband think about you giving away all your money to the poor?"

## **Like-Minded Husband**

"We two are very like-minded!" she said. "He is a technician from Shaanxi who was recruited to help but he also had a bitter childhood. His father died of cancer when he was only nine, leaving his widowed mother with four children. So he understands these children really need help and he is completely supportive.

"Some students' fathers have died so I organized students to help the needy mother. Salaries were very low, so donations totaled only 800 or 1,000 Yuan, but the gesture was powerful and gave the children and mothers hope. And I've urged needy children to aim for college and overcome obstacles so that one day they will find good jobs and then can serve their country and help their parents."

As Ms. Yan's salary increased over the years, she helped more and more children. When children scored well on the entrance exam for college but could not afford to attend, she'd help cover the costs and had no qualms borrowing the money when her own funds ran short, and put them on the train herself. Yan smiled broadly as she showed me photos of students. "To me, every student is like my own child, and when I see them leave on the train, I know this will broaden their horizons and their lives will be wonderful."

## **Lady in Green**

Ms. Yan was the "Lady in Green" during the 1990s because she wore the same dress for five or six years. "Man-made fibers don't wear out easily!" she said, laughing. "Parents looking for me at school were told, 'Look for the lady in green clothes!' But I was happy to have any clothes, and to eat plain steamed buns and gruel. Some female teachers had 1,000 Yuan of cosmetics but I was happy with a 1.5 Yuan sack of Yumeijing. In this way, I saved over 300,000 Yuan to help give children a way forward and hope. More than that, I gave them power."

Over time, Yan's story was reported by the media and she was given local and national honors with prizes that eventually totaled over 500,000 Yuan. "But I kept none of them," she said. "I gave it all back and asked them to help needy or sick women and students."



## 200,000 Yuan Teacher's Day Award

Teacher's Day 2012 was especially memorable. When told she'd receive an award, she declined to attend the ceremony. "I'd already received too many awards and wanted them to recognize young teachers, but the Education Bureau insisted. After the leaders' speeches, Secretary Zheng gave me a big trophy, a child gave me a bouquet of flowers – and they gave me a large sign with many zeroes on it – a prize of 200,000 Yuan for the Promote Jiayuguan City Basic Education Special Contribution Award."

Yan was astonished. "Secretary Zheng, you can't give me so much money. I've not done anything worth that!"

Secretary Zheng replied, "Your contribution to Jiayuguan has been far too great. This is the city's award to you."

"I cannot take personal credit for my work," she insisted. "It is the result of the Jiayuguan government's many years of education support and the selfless dedication of over 2,000 educators, and the hard work of countless parents and students. This award belongs to the city of Jiayuguan – so I will use the entire 200,000 Yuan for something special."

## Yan Guizhen Charity Education Foundation

Thunderous applause followed her speech, and afterwards many people asked what she'd do with the money, but she really had no idea until someone suggested she start a foundation so she could help even more children. She shared this idea with Mayor Liu when he visited her home at Chinese New Year, and he gave the foundation a name, "Jiayuguan Yan Guizhen Charity Education Foundation".

From that March, every day after class Ms. Yan visited departments, factories and neighborhoods to collect donations. "In March, Jiayuguan sandstorms are so strong the sky is dark, and I could barely pedal my bike against the wind, but I persisted. Two institutes each promised 100,000, and in July she told the Civil Affairs Bureau she wanted to start a foundation, only to learn the minimum was 2 million Yuan.

"Don't worry," Mayor Liu said. "Raise what you can and the government will provide the rest." But Yan knew the mayor had enough pressure already and determined to resolve the problem herself.

"At that time, our director of Civil Affairs, a former soldier named Wang, hit upon a brilliant solution. "Don't change a word of the foundation's name, but make it an association instead of a foundation. An association only needs 30,000 Yuan."

As Yan collected the required 50 signatures from 50 units, she was humbled by the people's reactions. "Grandfathers selling fruits and aunties selling drinks said I was doing a good thing and tried to give me their fruit and water for free, but I threw the money at their stalls and raced off. They needed the money themselves. Even taxi drivers wanted to take me on trips for free.

“Don't you feel like you're begging?” someone asked her.

“Not at all!” she replied. “So many children still need help that I have no embarrassment going door to door!”

Ms. Yan obtained the 50 signatures in only two days. “That journey was the most unforgettable experience of my life,” she said. “I saw that when you do good, people will help you.”

## Reaching Beyond Jiayuguan

The association paperwork was completed in August but there were so many needs in the community that Ms. Yan decided to strike while the iron was hot and raise more funds. She was overwhelmed by the response. By October 21, 2013 she'd raised 3.28 million Yuan, but then she had children from areas near Jiayuguan ask for help with surgeries.

“This association was formed for Jiayuguan children,” her associates said. “If we help children of other places, we'll run out of money quickly.”

“I did not listen,” Yan said, smiling. “I donated 30,000 Yuan for the children's surgeries, and then raised tens of thousands more.”

“One of my own students got leukemia when he was 18 and the doctor said he'd live only three months if he did not have a bone marrow transplant, but his parents could not afford the medical care. After her own school's 3,000 teachers and students donated over 90,000 Yuan, the Education Bureau encouraged all teachers and students to donate. Even grandmothers in their 80s heard of the need and donated from their pensions, and 2- and 3-year old children gave money through their mothers. Within two weeks, we'd raised 579,000 – just shy of the 600,000 the child needed. This was amazing for such a small city. Jiayuguan is truly a city with great love.

“So what happened to the child?” I asked.

“The disease was cured!” Yan said.

## Afterwards

I was deeply moved by Ms. Yan's story, but her devotion to education and her selfless generosity are not new to China. Even villages near my home of Xiamen have stories of poor children who centuries ago showed potential, and their studies were funded either by wealthy merchants or by the poor farmers who pooled their resources.

I gather that China has survived the ages precisely because Chinese have always valued education and built their society and government upon it—and education is China's future as well—even in the most remote regions of the planet like Tibet, where people like Liang Nanyu are even bringing life to the Dead Zones.

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## Chapter 8

# Mr. Liang Nanyu: Bringing Life to Tibet's Dead Zone



I saw why Tibet is called the “Roof of the World” when our family crossed the 5,231 m Tangula pass into Tibet in 1994. The roiling dark clouds that had just unleashed a hailstorm were so low that I felt like ducking as I stopped to photograph Tibetan prayer flags whipping in a bone-chilling wind—and it was August, the warmest month.

I had a migraine from the lack of oxygen and I sucked air like a fish out of water. I couldn't wait to get to Lhasa, another two days' drive down the mountains, which at 11,995 feet is lowlands by Tibetan standards.

### **Clinging to Life in the Dead Zone**

This area at 5,000 m above sea-level is called the “Dead Zone” because little survives—no trees, few plants, not many animals. So imagine my surprise to learn that some Tibetans actually live at such elevations—though they don't live long.

Fiction and Hollywood have romanticized Tibet as a Shangri-La inhabited by long-lived mystics but the reality is less idyllic. Although the average Tibetan lifespan has almost doubled from 35.5 years in 1951 to 68.2 years today, that's short of the national average of 76.4 years or Beijing's 82.15 years. And 700 km north of Lhasa in Shuanghu County, which at 5,000 m is the world's highest county, the average lifespan is only 58—almost 20 years less than the national average.

I was surprised that even Tibetans could cling to life in such hostile conditions, but utterly astonished that a Han Chinese, Mr. Liang Nanyu, would also choose to live in the same conditions and sacrifice his health to help lift the Tibetan nomads from poverty.

## No People Left Behind

Given that locals say there are only two seasons, winter and almost-winter, it is no surprise this is China's least populated area. "It has only 14,398 people in a place the size of South Korea," Mr. Liang said. "One person for every eight sq. km – that's like having only eight people within the entire second ring road of Beijing." But even such a remote and unpopulated area as Shuanghu has not been overlooked by China's anti-poverty campaign which for decades has stressed "no one left behind".

In the summer of 2016, Petro China sent the 39-year-old to Shuanghu County as part of a Central Government partnership assistance program started in 1994 for cities and provinces across China to help targeted Tibetan cities and counties. And in spite of daunting challenges, Mr. Liang has brought such radical improvement to healthcare, education and environmental protection that during the October, 2019 national survey of poverty alleviation work, Shuanghu County was ranked among China's Top 19 counties.

"Does your wife mind you being here for so long?" I asked him, "or that you asked to stay another three years?"

"She doesn't stop me," he said, "but she doesn't really understand, and wants me to come home. And my parents aren't supportive. My family worries because this altitude affects even Tibetans' health, I have an enlarged heart, insomnia, poor memory. I took sleeping pills last night just to make sure I was wide awake when I met you. Before Tibet, I slept very well. For the first two years here, oxygen helped me sleep. After two years, nothing helps. Now I can't sleep anywhere, even when visiting Beijing, and there is no cure."

"So why not return to Beijing?" I asked.

"This year, 2020, is a crucial year," Mr. Liang said. "This year China eliminates absolute poverty, but I've only completed about 80% of what needs to be done. If someone replaces me, they may not understand the situation as I do, or their health may fail. If they do persevere, they may not do as well as I would have. So I must stay a little longer to ensure things are finished correctly."

As Liang shared his creative anti-poverty strategies, including urban guerrilla education and eco-nomads, I also suspected it would be hard to ever replace such a man.

## Understanding the Terrain, Sun Zi's Art of War

As soon as Mr. Liang arrived in Shuanghu in 2016, he visited every village to understand its unique problems. He quickly realized his greatest challenge problem that was insurmountable: altitude

"Most Beijing people get altitude sickness even in Lhasa," Mr. Liang said, "but Shuanghu is so high that in Lhasa I feel like I'm back at sea-level. Just walking in Shuanghu feels like carrying 30 kg or 50 kg of rice down on the plains. When I first

arrived in Shuanghu, my legs felt rubbery. I could not walk and talk at the same time and had to stop walking to answer the phone or I'd have no breath to talk. And if talking was difficult, thinking was even harder, especially when trying to lift the poorest place in China from poverty."

I suspect Mr. Liang was being modest because he quickly came up with an ambitious and successful three-prong attack on medical care, education, and industrial development balanced with ecological protection.

## Step 1: Health then Wealth

Mr. Liang began with health because, as he somberly recounted, "I saw two babies die the first time I went to the countryside. One lived one day, the other lived seven days. Death is a tragedy in the rest of China but Tibetans are used to it. The nearest good hospital was in Naqu, seven hours away on 550 km dirt road. Something had to be done. Only with good health can you prosper."

Infant mortality was high and adults suffered from debilitating but treatable problems such as appendicitis. Petro China had sent a medical team each year since 2009 but they only treated common problems. Shuanghu County did not have one resident doctor and even midwives had little training. "A 32-year-old village doctor named Gangla admitted that her delivery technique was simply to wait and see if the child survived."

Although Gangla was illiterate and spoke little standard Chinese, she was desperate to learn, so Mr. Liang sent her as part of a team to a Lanzhou hospital for training. Six months later, the hospital's director of gynecology praised Gangla, whom he said was always on call day and night, and even slept in the hospital rather than her hotel room because she wanted to observe all she could. When Mr. Liang visited her, Gangla showed him a small sheet of paper on which she'd summarized her work. "I was so touched," he said, "because in just six months she'd taught herself Chinese characters! I asked why she was so desperate to learn, and she said, 'Because I've seen this really saves lives.'"

After forming a medical team, Mr. Liang needed equipment. Petro China donated 1.125 million Yuan for a ventilator, laparoscope and other equipment but Mr. Liang also discovered that the hospital warehouse had unused equipment such as an anesthesia machine manufactured in 2009. The factory demanded 45,000 Yuan to install the 200,000 Yuan machine, "so I pored over the manual and I installed it myself," Mr. Liang said. "Now we had medical workers and equipment, but no patients because no one wanted to be first! Death from natural childbirth is acceptable; it is natural. Death under a scalpel is not natural."

On August 23, 2017, a pregnant Tibetan showed up at the hospital, desperate because the baby's umbilical cord was wrapped around its neck. They finally had a chance to prove the value of modern medicine—but the medical team got cold feet and argued for hours. "We had no blood bank, our hands shook from oxygen deprivation and even the equipment had altitude sickness. Machines would not turn

on or gave faulty readings. Voltage fluctuated, and some equipment had never been inspected – including the machine I'd installed myself. But I felt we had no choice. It had just rained and snowed and the 220 km dirt road to the city hospital was a quagmire. The bumpy seven hour ride would probably kill both mother and child, and Lhasa was over twice as far."

"Send her anyway," one person said. "If she dies on the way, it isn't our fault, but if she dies on the operating table, the people will blame us." But just then a nurse dashed in. "She's having contractions!"

"I was relieved," Mr. Liang said, "because if we sent her out now, she'd certainly die. They had to operate."

This was not only Shuanghu County's very first medical operation but also the world's first emergency cesarean section at such an altitude. News spread like wildfire that doctors would remove a baby from its mother's stomach and people crowded the operating room's doorway to watch. Mr. Liang squeezed in with the crowd, waiting worriedly. "I felt more anxious than when my own child had been born eight years earlier!" he said. "One doctor said to me, 'Don't worry. It's not a big problem.' But later, he admitted to me that he'd been very nervous! The doctor's hands shook so badly from lack of oxygen that he inhaled oxygen as he operated. But at 8:33 we heard a baby's cry. I will remember that voice all of my life."

The six-pound baby's excited grandparents placed a long white Tibetan scarf around each doctor's neck and thanked them and would have named the baby after Mr. Liang but he told them that was inappropriate—that they should name it after the doctor. So little Pasang Norbu was also given another name, Huo Dangsheng, Huo being the doctor's surname and Dangsheng, "Party kid", as thanks to the Party's saving the mother and child.

"Actually, two babies were born that day," Mr. Liang said. "Today, they are 2 and a half years old and those doctors still look after them! They are doing great!"

The babies' birth was a turning point in Mr. Liang's relationship with Tibetans. "Before that, we felt some ethnic distance, but now we are indescribably close. When I return from trips, they grin and say, 'You're back!'"

## **Step 2: Guerrilla Warfare Education Strategy**

After health, Mr. Liang's second priority was education. Tibet had free compulsory education but enrolment was low. "Shuanghu people are nomadic and don't see the benefit in education," Mr. Liang said. "In most of China, people may measure worth by houses or cars, but herders count sheep, and their big goal is to enlarge the flock. Families stay together, young and old, to keep flocks large, and the purpose of children is to tend the flock – but a child with an education is a 'sandwich' trapped between two worlds.

"If a young student tests into high school or college and leaves Shuanghu, he has a future, but if he fails, he won't herd sheep, so he is a burden on both family and

society. So telling parents that education was good didn't help. We had to show them, so I used guerrilla warfare education.

"I used two tactics. The first was 'Borrow chicken to lay eggs.' Our teachers were not that good so we sent twelve children to Lhasa Beijing Elementary School. We were deeply moved when, within only half a year, one child was already in the top ten. This proved their problem was not motivation but environment. Photos taken of these children six months after moving to Lhasa show their bright, smiling faces. Their studies improved, their mental outlook changed, and when they returned home they had a very positive influence on their hometown."

Mr. Liang's second strategy was cultivating self-reliance. He said, "We could only send out a few students so we had to cultivate self-reliance, but we needed to improve the teaching. Our 215 teachers, mostly young Tibetans right out of college, have one thing in common: their level is not very high. If they were of high level, other schools would have grabbed them. They continue to teach in Shuanghu only because they get a livable income, but after teaching day in and day out, knowing they'll never see the rest of the world, they lose hope. Education has no hope unless teachers have hope.

"Compulsory nine-year compulsory education for all children is good, but this is a flood strategy. To really change things, we had to concentrate our attack like guerrilla warfare, focusing our strengths to break through one point with a 'surprise education attack'. We put good students with good teachers – but how could we improve the teachers? So we held a meeting and asked the teachers, 'What exactly do you want?'

"To motivate people, you must first know what they want. I thought they'd want money, bonuses, special recognition. But they desired only one thing: to leave Shuanghu. So in 2017 we set a policy that if a child was admitted to a Tibet class in another province, the teacher would receive 30,000 Yuan and we'd help the teacher transfer out. By 2018, we already had three students pass the entrance exam for college – a small number but it had a powerful impact. Many came to the ceremony and saw the proud parents wearing their red ceremonial flower. From that time on, education has improved!"

Hopefully, those teachers who had initially planned on leaving are now encouraged by their students' success to continue on in Shuanghu.

### **Step 3: Industrial Development (Eco-Nomads)**

Mr. Liang's third tactic was to develop industries according to local conditions. Shuanghu was still one of China's most impoverished counties, with 21.9% still below the poverty line—far higher than the national average of 1.7%. "If quality of life is considered," Mr. Liang said, "these would be the poorest people in all China."

Sustainable poverty alleviation requires a shift from aid to self-reliance, so after careful research, Mr. Liang focused on three pillar industries: brine shrimp eggs, tourism and livestock.



Since the 1990s, Shuanghu County's Xiangcuo Lake's brine shrimp eggs have been one of the county's main sources of income, but local workers' and officials' ignorance of the market allowed unscrupulous buyers to create de facto monopolies and force unfairly low prices. To break the monopoly, Mr. Liang proposed transparent and fair bidding. But from 2017 to 2018, not only the bidders and buyers but Mr. Liang himself received anonymous threats. Mr. Liang pressed on.

In 2019, Mr. Liang e-mailed each bidder to explain the strict requirements to keep the process open and fair, and if worst came to worst, promised that the government itself would buy the brine shrimp eggs at a fair price. His hard work, attention to detail and absolute refusal to be intimidated paid off. The eggs earned an unprecedented price.

In September, 2018, Mr. Liang used a 13.8 million Yuan donation from Petro China to build a 10-acre brine shrimp egg processing plant in Naqu. Processing the eggs locally helped the community recover profits formerly taken by many middlemen, and over twenty formerly impoverished herders now each have salaries exceeding 6,000 Yuan per month.

Mr. Liang also helped create brands of local health foods and specialties after researchers found that Shuanghu brine shrimp eggs are rich in unsaturated fatty acids such as EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) which play an important role in human health. "Highland Hailing Brine Shrimp" health food has now completed the pilot test and will soon be available nationwide

## Eco Nomads

One of Mr. Liang's greatest challenges was protecting the environment without uprooting Tibetans from their traditional herding lifestyle. "Ecological protection is even more important here than other parts of the world," Mr. Liang explained. "The Dead Zone has no trees and few plants. Our grass is nothing like yours in Xiamen, which is lush and must be cut often. If we remove one shovel of grass here, it will take decades to grow back. Desertification would be a disaster for the great rivers that start in Tibet. But Tibetans cannot understand how grass is far more valuable than their herds. Their cattle and sheep are worth some 510 million Yuan but the grassland's value is incalculable – even more than 51 billion Yuan. If it were just economics, we would simply kill the cattle and sheep and relocate everyone. That would be easiest, but it would not be right. To protect the ecology while still respecting Tibetan's ancient traditions we sought a middle ground."

Mr. Liang hit on the idea of "collective herds", with families pooling their herds together and receiving shares for each animal. Now they knew exactly how many animals they had (before they were never quite sure), grazing all of them together helped avoid overgrazing the fragile meadows, and it solved a deeply rooted cultural issue. "Many would not sell for slaughter an animal they had raised themselves, but in a collective, it's not clear whose animals belong to whom, so they're fine with

selling them! Last year, our herdsmen's per capita income exceeded 9,000 Yuan, with about 8,000 of it from the dividends on cattle and sheep that were sold."

For the first time, these Tibetans now have money for a more varied and nutritious diet than just mutton, beef, tsampa (roasted barley) and buttered tea. But, ironically, the improved environment has created new problems. The number of wild donkeys has grown, and since they're a nationally protected animal, Mr. Liang is searching for ways to scientifically balance the population.

## **Shuanghu Person, but "Three Fears, Three Sames"**

Mr. Liang now says that he is not a visitor or passing through but a Shuanghu Person, but even so he admits to still sharing the same "three fears" and "three sames" that beleaguer other anti-poverty officials.

The "three fears" are loneliness, nights and estrangement. Mr. Liang fears the loneliness of weekends on the vast, sparsely populated land; he fears nights because the lack of oxygen keeps him awake; and he fears estrangement from his family – especially his daughter, who is growing up without him.

The "three sames" are "sleep", "eating" and "appearance". Sleep deprivation leaves him lying in bed with eyes closed but not asleep, or drifting off by day with eyes wide open. Mr. Liang also tires of eating the same simple food day in and day out. "I have no appetite." And the lack of sleep and appetite has affected his appearance, his face haggard, clothes rumpled.

"So why not flee the Dead Zone?" I asked. "You've already done so much."

"This is a critical period," he said. "We must grit our teeth and stick it out for the sake of those who've put their trust in us – the Party, Petro China (which since 2016 has donated some 390 million Yuan for 113 projects), and the people of Shuanghu."

Although Mr. Liang has been recognized for his work, he knows that the remaining work, such as improving tourism or preventing people from sliding back into poverty, may be even harder.

"This is a long-term process that requires perseverance," he said. "Tibet is far more complicated than I imagined. For many people, Lhasa is Tibet, but most of Tibet is far different. Tibet is vast, and varies greatly. We thought we could duplicate what we did in Lhasa in Shuanghu but it was simply impossible."

"What is left to be done?" I asked.

"The initial focus was hardware," he said. "Infrastructure is much better, but we paid a huge price for it. We spent 930 million Yuan paving the 220 km dirt road to the Naqu hospital, and spent 320 million Yuan – some 100,000 Yuan per person – on solar power for 3,000 people. There is no economic benefit with such few people. We do it so they can have light at night. But hardware is okay now. Going forward, our focus must continue to be the software – health, education and industry."

"And you insist on going forward?" I asked. "What drives you?"

"One of my teachers started me on this path," Mr. Liang said. "Zhang Huan, an academician, was director of my postgraduate period, and on his 80th birthday, he

gave a lecture instead of a party. He shared how, as a student in 1937, he heard the Japanese' first bombs hitting Jinan, Shandong. The school relocated to four campuses in Sichuan, but they were often hungry and sick, and so many students died that they called the cemetery the '5th campus.' Mr. Zhang visited the 5th Campus every few days to pay his respects to his departed classmates.

"The most exciting day of Prof. Zhang's life was when he heard the Japanese had surrendered. He cried at the recollection and we students were deeply moved. Prof. Zhang then shared how China had overcome so many problems, and he said, 'You are all well- off now, but no matter where you go, remember my words: give back to your country. *Do* something. This is my advice to you as a teacher.'

"Prof. Zhang Huan died in October 2019. Today, Beijing life is very comfortable, but a good life can have real value only when it is good for everyone in China. It is very easy to enjoy a blessed life in Beijing, but this is the age to *do* something! Maybe in the next age you'll want to do something like this but will have no opportunity. Tibet is China's last place to eradicate poverty, and Shuanghu County is the last place in Tibet. It makes sense for me to do this work and it is worth doing."

Mr. Liang went silent for a few moments, and then added, "I will stay in Shuanghu until I finish my work. And if one day the Tibetans say, 'You are no longer needed,' that will prove my work is finally done."

## China's 5th Great Invention at Work

After hearing Mr. Liang's story, I'm amazed that a man who majored in economics and automation would have the creativity, versatility, and sheer commitment to effectively tackle such disparate problems – health, education, development and ecology. The more people like Mr. Liang that I meet, the more I'm reminded of the classical Confucian scholar-bureaucrats who for over 2,000 years met the needs of China's vast population by tackling every problem from farming (bio-pesticides 2,000 years ago), medicine (smallpox inoculation 1,000 years ago) to weaponry that could have subdued the world 1,000 years ago had the Chinese such ambition.

I've researched ancient Chinese inventions for years and I suspect the list is endless. But I increasingly agree with the English politician Eustace Budgell who, in 1731, said that the whole world agreed that of all Chinese inventions, the greatest was the "Art of Government".

Mr. Liang and many like him are living proof that modern Chinese are just as capable and committed as their polymath predecessors, and that China's "5th Great Invention" is still at work.

And that work is bearing fruit in the lives of people like Yixi Danzeng. Xiamen University's first Tibetan student and now a professor at Tibet University in Lhasa, Yixi Danzeng shared with me a Tibetan man's Chinese Dream.

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## Chapter 9

# Yixi Danzeng: A Young Tibetan's Chinese Dream



Quality education is pivotal to alleviating poverty, especially for minorities isolated by geographic, cultural and language barriers, and since Liberation in 1949, countless Han Chinese have volunteered to teach in the most challenging regions. But if poverty alleviation is to be sustainable, education, like economy, must also emphasize “blood production, not blood transfusion”. Yet training and retaining excellent indigenous educators is easier said than done.

Mr. Liang Nanyu discovered in Shuanghu, Tibet that the best teachers are recruited right out of college by the best schools, and those who ended up back in remote schools have but one goal: “Get out.”

I can't blame these youth who've caught a glimpse of the world outside for wanting a better life, but how can China kindle within them a vision and passion for helping their own people?

Fortunately, it's getting easier to lure youth back to their rural homes thanks to vastly improved rural infrastructure, education, healthcare and business opportunities. Twenty years ago, China boasted about “Garden Cities”; today, Garden Countrysides are helping slow down urbanization as youth return to seize the growing opportunities right at home. But even with better environments, it is still a challenge to get excellent minority teachers to return home—which is why I was so impressed by Yixi Danzeng's passion for Tibetan children's education.

### Xiamen University's First Tibetan

Yixi is from a tiny Tibetan village but he had the world at his fingertips as he studied in Beijing, Xiamen, the U.S. and Singapore. But unlike many people, his success gave him a deep sense of responsibility, not of entitlement. He rejected lucrative opportunities in China and abroad to unwaveringly pursue his goal of improving Tibetan education and “helping build my homeland”.

I'd like to think that Yixi's dedication to Tibetan education was reinforced by his time at XMU, where he was the first Tibetan student. Yixi said the faculty moved him by their "spirit of gratefulness, responsibility and dedication". Yixi also learned how XMU graduates have for 70 years volunteered to teach in the most difficult circumstances in Tibet—people like Ms. Ye Xueyin, now 91 years old, who began teaching in Tibet in 1950 after graduating from XMU's biology department.

When I met Yixi in Lhasa, he looked more like an undergrad than an associate professor of Tibet University teaching English and comparative studies on Chinese, Tibetan and foreign languages and cultures. He wore a baseball cap and t-shirt and he grinned as he showed me a 15-year-old copy of my "Amoy Magic" guide to Xiamen. "This is how I learned about Xiamen!" he said.

## Giving Back to the Motherland

It was hard to believe that he did not start learning Chinese until age 13 at the Beijing Tibet Middle School. And after mastering standard Chinese, he began to learn English and majored in English at Xiamen University. His English was so flawless, right down to mannerisms and gestures, that we conducted our entire conversation in English. No wonder so many people want to recruit this talented youth.

"After my graduation from Xiamen University," Yixi said, "I had opportunities to stay in Xiamen." Friends running a business asked me, "Do you want to join us?"

I can't believe Yixi wasn't at least tempted. After all, many Chinese dream of living on our garden island, which even the UN has said is a world class livable city. But Yixi had a higher goal.

"I was sent to study in other provinces because of the relatively higher level of education," he said, "so I thought I should return to Lhasa and use my education here. After four years in Xiamen, I returned to Lhasa to work at Tibet University. Three or four years later, I had the chance to study in the U.S. so I spent two years at Kansas University getting my master's degree in higher education. Those two years were a good experience in understanding American culture and getting to know a little bit about Western culture in real life."

Yet Yixi was as single-minded in the U.S. as he'd been in Xiamen. A soon as he finished his first of two masters, he packed his bags, said no thank you to the American Dream, and returned once again to continue teaching at Tibet University.

In 2016, Yixi went to Singapore Nanyang Technological University to get his second master's degree. "I stayed there for one year and then returned to Lhasa again to continue teaching at Tibet University. This is a very short story of my journey of education."

I was astonished that this youth from a tiny Tibetan village had foregone so many opportunities to keep returning to Tibet University, but in his eyes he gave up nothing at all because the more he learned about the rest of the world, the more he appreciated being Tibetan.

## Deeply Rooted in China

“I think this experience of studying in Tibet, in Beijing, and in America and Singapore, gives me this feeling of being deeply rooted in the Tibetan culture, as if I was a tree. But now I have two very strong branches. One is embedded in Chinese culture, and the other is maybe a little bit in Western culture. So I see myself like this tree.”

Yixi is determined to use his education to help Tibet because he does not take his opportunities for granted. Although privilege gives many people a sense of entitlement—I deserve even more—Yixi’s privileges have given him a deep sense of gratitude and a responsibility to pass on the good fortune that he’d have missed had he been born a generation earlier.

“I’ve seen the changes in education over the years and, frankly, if it was twenty five years ago, I don’t think a young guy like me from a common family would have the kind of opportunities I have been given to obtain such a rich education. And, you know, it was all free tuition!”

Yixi smiled broadly as he shared his vivid memories of Xiamen University. “Because I was a minority, and their first Tibetan student, Xiamen University looked after me very well and sometimes even gave me small gifts. I had to return to Lhasa a few times and the university even paid for my journey. That gave me very strong feelings for Xiamen. To this day, every time we have a visitor from Xiamen, I feel like they are a relative because I spent four years in Xiamen and have a lot of friends there. This was an important episode in my life.”

## New Life Through Education

Yixi credits his education opportunities to the rapid changes in Tibet. “Education transformed my life because I was from a very common family in a very small village. But then I got all of those opportunities to study in so many big cities, and I returned to take this chance to contribute to my community.”

“Do you have many siblings?” I asked.

Yixi smiled broadly. “Yeah, we have five children in my family – a younger brother, two older brothers and an older sister.”

“And were all of them well educated?”

“I am the first one,” Yixi said.

“And how big is your home village?”

“About 200 people,” he said.

“It’s amazing that someone from such a tiny village could study in Beijing, Xiamen, the U.S. and Singapore! So how is life in your home village now compared with when you were young?”

## Entrepreneurial Tibet

Yixi smiled. "I think life was pretty simple back then. When I was a kid, we didn't even have a television. We really wanted to watch some cartoons, but we not only didn't have a television, we didn't even have a radio. Life was pretty simple, but now the living standard has improved tremendously."

"Do they have a television now?" I asked.

Yixi laughed. "Televisions, refrigerators, internet, WeChat – it's amazing to see how technology has changed the way of life even in such a very small village. Nowadays, they all keep in touch with WeChat – even the villagers. It makes communication very straightforward."

"Yes, I know," I said. "In Inner Mongolia, even herders use China's Beidou satellite and microchips on cows to track herds. It's amazing."

"And Tibetan houses are more beautiful than they used to be," Yixi said. "People in the villages now have very big houses like in the Midwest in America, and their own vehicles, like cars and trucks."

"But how can they afford such big new houses?" I asked.

"I think that in some families, the children go to school and then get jobs in the city. Then they send money home to their village, and some villagers work as contractors or in other careers. Some do paintings, you know – traditional Tibetan paintings. Some are architects and others are woodsmen or carpenters. More and more money is coming into Tibet and the better economic conditions provide more opportunities. Some villagers are even doing very big business."

"What kinds of business?" I asked.

"Like real estate," Yixi said. "They construct buildings in the city. And sometimes villagers have a better life than city people thanks to special subsidies. For example, they don't have to pay for electricity and water."

"That's a lot different than 30 years ago!" I exclaimed.

In the mid 1990s I felt it was very unfair that farmers paid more for electricity than city people, but I slowly realized the government had no choice. Power was so inadequate that even in Xiamen, a Special Economic Zone, within one hour the current could plummet from 220 to 100 volts and shoot back up to 260 volts. I wrote to family and friends in the U.S. that I fried more electronics than veggies. Power was out daily, and sometimes for several days, so we always kept candles and kerosene lamps on hand. I even carried candles to Zhongshan Road's Xinhua Bookstore because it had no windows and was pitch black during its frequent power outages.

I'd have never dreamed in the early 1990s that within two decades the entire country would have electricity, water and phones. And no one, of course, dreamed of the internet, which even science fiction writers failed to predict, or that China would have the most extensive web of netizens on earth and thousands of "Taobao" e-commerce villages scattered across the countryside.

So I'm not surprised that some Tibetans are given free electricity. In some places like West Yunnan, the Lisu people were even given keys to free homes—and then



given free furniture, bedding, cookware and firewood because, at the start, they didn't have a penny to their name. But the government's faith in these minorities has been well-placed, as I learned when I met a young Lisu lady who started out as a laborer and now has her own construction business and drives a BMW.

## Tibet's New Passion for Education

"Another big change from 25 years ago," Yixi said, "is that families back then would rather keep their children at home to labor for money than let them go to school. But that has changed today. People see that education is more important than the fast money they can earn on the construction field, so more and more families are sending children to school. Both education and healthcare are better than before."

"How has healthcare improved?" I asked.

"Village healthcare is better now, but if villagers want to see a doctor in the city, the government pays part of the bill, maybe 70% or 80%."

"Tibet really is changing fast," I agreed. "But what are your own plans for the future?"

"Ah, my plans for the future?" He thought a moment, and said "I am just about to publish a book, *Faraway Tibet*. And I want to continue my education. I have two masters, but I want to get my doctoral degree in Sichuan University. This time, my major will be Tibetan history, society and economy. No matter where I have traveled, I've always returned to the land of my birth, so now I want to know more about my own culture. But after my studies I will definitely return to Tibet University."

"Why do you keep returning to Tibet University?"

"As I've said, I have had opportunities that many of my friends could not have dreamed of. I think it is my responsibility to return and share what I have learned, what I have seen and what I have experienced out there with my friends and my community here. I have been helping my peers to learn English, and not just at the university. I also voluntarily help students learn English, and help them apply for universities both in other provinces and in some Western countries because I know how the university systems work both here and there. So I can help, and I think this is the main reason that I keep coming back. Tibet gives me a very strong sense of belonging, because you can't find such a culture as this anywhere else, you know."

"You feel Tibet has a rich culture?"

Yixi laughed. "Ah, it is very rich! And it's very unique. And I like the atmosphere of Tibet. So I think those are the two main reasons I keep returning to Tibet."

"So what is your book about? What you saw outside of Tibet or maybe how the world sees Tibet?"

"Ah, my book. I didn't really cover how the world sees Tibet," Yixi said. "It's very subjective. I wanted to share with my friends here in Tibet what I saw and experienced, and my feelings, when I was in Singapore and the U.S., and how I missed Tibet. And I also wrote a lot about how education has been changing over time by recording my friends' experiences. I have one article named 'Tibetan Youth'

in which I wrote about five or six young Tibetans my age, and what they are doing, thinking and experiencing. I think it is a record of very typical youth at this time, and may be of some value in the future when people look back and want to see what youth of this time were like.

“But I also wrote this book to encourage my friends, my students, my children to keep working harder, and to dare to dream. Every time I have a lecture or a class, I also tell my students that you have to dream big because look at me – I did it! I went to all these places and you can do it too. You don’t need to fear that you’re a very little boy from a little village – you can do it. And that’s the encouragement that I have been giving them. I hope that I can help inspire my students as well as my friends. And I think it has been working because some of my friends around me are trying really hard to learn English and to apply for universities in Australia. One of my friends actually went to Australia for his master’s degree. I helped him improve his English and to apply.”

## **Tibet’s Future—Prosperous and Inclusive**

“One last question!” I said, though I could have spent days plying him with the dozens of questions I had jotted down. “Do you have any thoughts about the future of Tibet?”

“As I’ve noted, I think people’s life quality has been improving in terms of education, in terms of healthcare, in terms of public transportation. The improvements are fast, and I think they will continue for a very long time. And I see a good picture because I’m a very inclusive and culturally tolerant person. And I think Lhasa is a very diverse place. Actually we have mosques. To be exact, I found out that we have three mosques. One is right next to a temple that is a center of Buddhism. And Lhasa has people of all kinds of ethnic groups from all over the country. I think Lhasa is a very tolerant and diverse city. I enjoy this, and I think it will continue to become more and more diverse.”

“Thanks so much for sharing your story,” I said to Yixi.

“Sure thing,” he said. “I think that in this interview, the best part is my own story. Stories such as the national housing projects for villagers – people have heard that before. But the real story here is the story of my education – how my journey of education transformed me from a little village boy to an associate professor at a higher institution.”

“We have this kind of environment encouraging young people. Some of my friends are doing business and the government has all kinds of preferential policies to help young Tibetans become entrepreneurs. Some of my friends are lawyers, teachers and professors. And that’s the main point for me – that China has these policies and environment to help young minority students receive an education. And this is my story.”

And quite a story it was. I could have spent days with Yixi, but I’ll see him again soon because he agreed to coauthor *Magic Tibet* with me.

On my next trip to Tibet, I hope to interview some of Yixi's students, because I've heard how he inspires in the classroom with his passion, urging students to not just read but to experience the richness of languages and cultures in the real world.

And maybe as Yixi and I write *Magic Tibet* I can sit in on some of his classes. After all, as I learned when our 51-year-old Xiamen University gate guard got his law degree last summer, in China, learning is truly a lifelong adventure.

Thuk-je-che, Yixi Danzeng. I could probably write an entire book about Yixi, but I was to learn even more about Tibetan culture from a Han Chinese teacher, Yang Yuanjian, who with his wife not only volunteered to teach Tibetans in the inhospitable environment of Ganzi, Sichuan, but also taught Tibetans about their own culture!

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## Chapter 10

# Yang Yuanjian: Barefoot Teacher to Tibetans



The keys to combating poverty in any country include good infrastructure (“We were ‘frogs in a well’ until we got roads,” said farmers in Ningxia and Yunnan) and good healthcare because the body is the capital not just of the revolution but of the fight against poverty. But the key to making the fight against poverty sustainable is education. Yet as we saw in Tibet’s Shuanghu, recruiting good teachers in poor regions is a challenge when good schools snatch the best teachers right out of college and poor schools are often left with teachers who could not get a better job elsewhere.

In China, fortunately, ever since the 1950s, passionate teachers from good schools across the country, including my own Xiamen University, have volunteered to live and serve in impoverished regions. And happily for Ningxia, Tibet and other remote regions, these teachers are the cream of the crop—including award-winning teachers like Mr. Yang Yuanjian, a Han Chinese who not only helped improve education for Tibetans but also worked to help them better understand and respect their own Tibetan culture!

One might wonder why such a multi-talented man as Mr. Yang would even choose to be a teacher, given the pay was very low until the 1990s. But teaching in China is not just a profession but a well respected privilege. What other country sells “Dear Teacher” greeting cards not just on Teacher’s Day but 365 days a year? And once you’re someone’s teacher, you’re their teacher for life. In the mid-1990s, at a 1,000-year-old Taoist temple on Fujian’s Taimu Mountain, I met 30 people celebrating a reunion with their teacher. I assumed she’d been their high school or university teacher, but not so. She was their kindergarten teacher whom they’d not seen in 30 years!

## Teaching in the Blood

After three decades in China, I understand why Teacher Yang is passionate about teaching, though I discovered he has another reason: teaching is in his blood.

“I was born in the countryside,” Teacher Yang said. “My father was a rural teacher, and my mother a farmer. Their greatest gift to me was to teach me to live simply and work hard.”

That lesson was put to the test in 1988 when he was sent to a rural elementary school for his first teaching post. “The school was half an hour from the bus station and conditions were hard. My first class had students from grades one to six and, back then, China’s education was very test-oriented. Some had just started talking about ‘quality education’ but no one knew what it meant – only that it was supposedly better than exam-oriented education. Teachers suffered as much as students from the fixation with exams. We believed education should be more holistic, covering morality, physical education, aesthetics and labor, so we started exploring new pedagogies.”

## Unexpected Football Coach

Teacher Yang had never been very sports-minded but after becoming head teacher he formed a class soccer team—never dreaming his ragtag bunch of barefoot country kids would become champions. “They played barefoot in bad conditions,” Mr. Yang said, “but I hoped it would give them an outlet from study and help improve their health. But the principal complained it would hinder their studies and when I refused to back down, he took my ball. I just bought another ball with my own money, but people were angry. When word got out the principal had confiscated my ball. All he cares about is exams and scores!”

It is easy, of course, to fault the principal, but he himself was under great pressure. At that time, Chinese students for 12 years prepped for one goal only—pass the college entrance exam. Not only were schools evaluated by success in exams but parents also criticized teachers whose students didn’t excel. There had been talk of reform but that was easier said than done. So I admired Teacher Yang’s tenacity but I also sympathized with the principal, who would soon become one of Teacher Yang’s ardent supporters.

For two years, Teacher Yang’s students played under the radar, even getting training in his hometown of Zigong, Sichuan. “Each child spent two dimes – one for the 200 km bus trip and one for lunch, which was one bowl of tofu for two people. I helped cover costs for those lacking the 20 cents, though my salary was only a few dozen Yuan a month.”

After a leader heard about Teacher Yang’s secret soccer team, he gave them several balls, and the principal reversed his stance and began following their progress—especially when they became city champions.

“Our team’s style was like Barcelona’s – lots of ball-passing,” Teacher Yang said. “The team had played together since first grade, so they passed so well that the other teams could not even touch the ball. We defeated the city’s best teams, and then shocked everyone by winning our first district game 8 to 0. No one could believe it. In the 2nd district game, we beat the city’s best team 3 to 2. Sadly, we lost the third game 1 to 3, but that was because even though our country kids had stamina, they were slow because they were smaller than the city kids, 1.2 meters versus 1.4 or 1.5 meters. But we were thrilled even with 4th place – especially after they gave out prizes. The top awards were 150, 100 and 50 Yuan, and nothing for 4th place, but the Education Bureau leaders were so impressed they gave us a special prize of 200 Yuan – 50 more than 1st!”

“Was the number one team upset that you received more than they did?” I asked.

“Not at all!” Teacher Yang said. “And later, our team placed second in the city. People thought I was a physical education teacher but in fact I had never studied or taught physical education. I was just a language teacher, but I felt education needed changes so I just explored some options and chose soccer.”

## **Passionate Teacher, Passionate Students**

After postgraduate work at Sichuan Normal University, Teacher Yang was sent to teach Chinese at Longquan, Sichuan, where leaders said, “You finished graduate school, so you get the worst classes. If you can improve them, you are really great.”

Teacher Yang’s students were indeed undisciplined but he put his heart into the task. “In the end, they made great progress,” he said. “The biggest reason students listened to me was they believed I really cared for them and devoted my attention to them. It was a struggle to win their hearts and kindle their passion for education, but I did that with one class after another.”

## **Volunteering for Ganzi**

In 2005, Teacher Yang obtained his master’s degree and wanted to pursue postgraduate work at Southwest University, but though his exam scores were very good, the teacher did not accept him. It was a bitter experience but he pressed on, and the school rewarded his perseverance by making him office director, which was essentially an assistant to the principal.

“As office director, I learned that each year we need teachers to teach Tibetans in Ganzi, but it was a very difficult place to live. So in 2012, I asked the school to let me teach in Ganzi and they agreed.”

Teacher Yang taught at the Ganzi County #2 Comprehensive Primary school, where half of the teachers were Tibetan and half were Han Chinese, and the school’s

10+ classes had 600 or 700 students—mostly Tibetan. Teacher Yang was assigned to teach science—and he tackled science with as much passion as he had soccer and Chinese.

## **Hands-on Education**

“To my surprise,” Teacher Yang said, “they had no full-time and only a few part-time science teachers. Students did not do any science experiments at all. They did have equipment but no one used it – probably because they did not know how.”

Teacher Yang immediately captivated his budding young scientists by leading them in daily experiments with jars, beakers, alcohol lamps, etc. While other teachers had stressed traditional rote memory to prepare for exams, Teacher Yang avoided memorization altogether, stressing “learning by doing”. His results spoke for themselves. All of his classes ranked either first or second in the county exams.

Teacher Yang also endeared himself to local teachers by helping them with virtually any problem they had, from writing a transfer request letter to fixing a machine. “If a teacher’s computer crashed, I fixed it. If they needed computer training, I gave it. If printers or photocopiers broke, I fixed them or unstuck paper jams. I myself had no idea how to resolve many problems but I studied and taught myself and then taught them. The teachers appreciated my help and we formed a very close relationship.”

“Teachers also asked for help with multimedia equipment, but in fact, I’d never used it myself,” Teacher Yang said, “so I studied and then taught others. Ganzi had better equipment than schools in the rest of China because the central government invested more on education there. I had never seen such advanced equipment anywhere else.

“They had a 100,000 Yuan Sony video camera with a several-hundred-page manual that was better than cameras at the Ganzi TV Station! They were so worried about damaging it that they bought a safe to hide it. ‘I’m not afraid of taking it out,’ the secretary said. ‘But I’m afraid of breaking it!’ So I studied the manual and then showed them how to shoot videos. But then we didn’t have anyone who could edit them, so I studied a book I bought on video editing and taught them everything I’d just learned. Later, someone joked, ‘You are our one-stop for writing, videography, photography, scripting, editing, etc. – for everything!’

“The more I learned and taught, the closer our relationship grew. That year in Ganzi went so quickly, and teacher’s usually only stay there one year because of the health problems.”

## Another Year?

On Teacher Yang's last day, the Party secretary said, "If you stay another year, the school will rent you a house. If the school won't, I'll cover it from my own pocket. Will you stay?"

Teacher Yang was deeply moved. "I liked the people here," he said, "and my work was very meaningful. I'd helped students and also changed teachers by showing them how to use technology. They were no strangers to technology, after all. They used iPhones. So I'd started with technology, won their trust, and then they listened to me."

## Teaching Tibetans About Tibetan Dance

Teacher Yang was also proud that he'd helped Tibetans better appreciate their own culture! "Tibetans have a saying," he said. "They can dance as soon as they can walk; they can sing as soon as they can talk." Ganzi schools capitalize upon this love for music by teaching children the Tibetan tap dance, *duixie*, which in 2008 was added to China's list of protected oral and intangible cultural heritage. Though the dance had won many national medals, the Tibetans knew little about the dance's background.

"*Duixie* is over 700 years old but has no written records," Mr. Yang said. "Where did it come from? What was its purpose? But no one had any answers. So I wrote a 20,000 word research report on the secrets to Ganzi children's *duixie* dancing."

Teacher Yang wrote about *duixie*'s origin and history, how it came to Ganzi, how locals had adapted and evolved the dance, and why it continued to be popular. He also recounted the Ganzi *duixie* dancer's achievements and experiences and how he expected it to develop in the future. "I gave my paper to the Provincial Department of Education. As soon as they'd read it, they FAXed a hearty thanks to the Ganzi County Education Bureau. The Ganzi County Education Bureau then told me, 'You did a good deed for this school and for the county's cultural bureau and publicity department. You did something they never did!'"

## Hazards of High Altitude Life

Teacher Yang is enthusiastic about how *duixie* dance reflects the Ganzi people's positive outlook in the face of adversity. "Life in Ganzi is really difficult," he said. "Everyone has altitude sickness; mine was so bad that I could not sleep for half a month."

"Isn't Ganzi about the same altitude as Lhasa?" I asked.



“Yes,” Teacher Yang said, “but conditions are worse. Fierce winds shriek like a banshee and howl like a wolf. In winter, liquids in the home freeze solid and vegetables freeze as if in a freezer. We don’t have refrigerators because we don’t need any!”

“We dared not get sick because recovery was hard, and sickness easily led to death. In three years, I lost two colleagues. One, a female in her 40 s, felt dizzy, returned home, lay down and never got up again. And an overweight teacher, who played Mahjong every weekend because he had nothing else to do, walked out of his door, dropped to the ground, and died on the spot. I almost died myself once! It was just a cold but I felt like my life was over.”

“Yet in spite of this, you stayed on?” I asked, impressed by his courage and commitment.

“In 2012, every time I returned home for a visit, the Party secretary drove me to the station. You rarely see this in other places today. I was so touched. So I agreed to teach just one more year, but this time I brought my wife, who stayed with me for two years in Ganzi, and the Tibetans really respected her.”

## Embracing Other Cultures

Teacher Yang felt his years in Ganzi were the most meaningful three years of his life. Though he was the teacher, he also learned much from the Tibetans. “When I was young, I’d do reckless things like rebel against exam-oriented education. But in Ganzi, I learned that social change must be carried out step by step. People won’t stand for rapid reform. My attempts at rapid change gave me a headache and had no effect.”

“Did you experience any culture shock?” I asked.

“Everyone does,” Teacher Yang said. “Tibetans’ thoughts, emotions and concepts are so different from ours.” But Teacher Yang had read the works of noted Chinese anthropologist and sociologist Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005), a professor of sociology at Peking University who had studied China’s ethnic groups and introduced Chinese culture to the world. “Prof. Fei advocated multiculturalism and relativism and said that no culture is better or worse than another one. It is wrong to say some people are ‘barbarous’. At first we felt Tibetans looked scary, dark and strong, but we learned that they are very kind people.”

“I remembered my own first impression of Tibetans that I met in Amdo in 1994. I almost cringed when I was surrounded by three tall, sun-darkened Tibetans in colorful costumes, long daggers dangling from broad belts. I was about to hand over my money when they grinned and, using hand motions, asked if they could have a photo with me!”

“My three years in Ganzi,” Teacher Yang said, “gave me a deep respect for Tibetans. First, they are so optimistic even in such a harsh environment. Second, they have strong beliefs and do not kill. A female teacher planting a tree accidentally dug up an earthworm and cried as she wrapped it in toilet paper. And third, Tibetans

have deep, pure emotions. I once heard loud crying and thought someone was being bullied, but it turned out to be a teacher who did not want to bid his students goodbye.”

## **Farewell, Ganzi**

When Teacher Yang bid his own students goodbye on his last day of class, “Two children cried as if someone at home had died. I wrote an article, ‘Farewell Ganzi, My Second Hometown’, about the Party secretary’s visit to my house the night before I left Ganzi. At 5 AM the next morning, he drove me to the station, and even that early, all of the students’ parents had gathered to see me off. Such pure, simple feelings are not so common today in some cities.”

“So have you returned to Ganzi since you quit teaching there?” I asked.

“No,” Teacher Yang said, “though we’ll visit our sister school the last half of this year. But the students often visit us and we keep in close contact. The Han and Tibetan peoples are closer now, and help each other. This kind of brotherhood is good for the long-term stability of our country.”

“I’ve seen that life has improved throughout Tibet. What about Ganzi?”

“Much better now!” Mr. Yang said. “In 2012, the 90 km road to Ganzi took us four hours; now just over one hour. The people have built good houses. And social order is better. If there are issues, they’re usually between Tibetans, not Tibetans and Han Chinese, so we’re not nervous about going out at night – but I have to tell you a story!”

## **Falling for Tibetan Humor**

“I took a taxi home late one evening after work and the Tibetan driver had another Tibetan in the front seat. I told him my address and he took off in the opposite direction, farther and farther down narrow roads. When he took the road out of town, I pulled out my phone to call the school if they tried to hurt me. ‘Where are you taking me?’ I asked the driver.

‘Arabia’, he said, and kept driving. He finally dropped the other Tibetan off and then drove me home. He had only been joking. Tibetans love to joke! I’ve come to learn that Tibetans are very warm and kind.”

I too can vouch for Tibetan’s warmth and kindness—but I’m sure they saw a kindred spirit in Teacher Yang and his wife. This self-taught soccer coach, science teacher, multimedia master, Tibetan dance researcher and general jack-of-all-trades is one of the most gifted teachers I’ve met. He could have easily chosen a career at a leading school but he chose to help Tibetans.

And this is why the world’s most populous nation is winning the war on poverty: top-down visionary leadership and bottom-up grassroots passion by people like Teacher Yang.

And of course there is the grassroots passion of people like Feng Yougen, the son of a Hunan flower farmer who learned to “smell profitable flowers” and has now spent almost 2.5 billion Yuan in fighting poverty and transforming a barren village into a world-class garden and national tourist attraction.

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# Chapter 11

## Feng Yougen, Chairman of Panlong Group: “I’m the Son of a Flower Farmer!”



Feng Yougen is Xiangtan’s richest entrepreneur but as a child he lived with his family of seven in a tiny home and slept beside the coals like Cinderella, the Western fairytale adapted from the 1,200 year old Chinese story of Ye Xian. But Feng’s tale is more wondrous than any fairytale because he accumulated his wealth, and helped lift thousands of others from poverty, not by magic but by passion, persistence and principles.

I asked Mr. Feng how the son of a poor flower farmer could earn enough to spend almost 2.5 billion Yuan turning 5,000 acres of barren village land into a national 4A-level tourist and educational attraction.

“I had a bitter life as a child,” said Mr. Feng. “My mother gave birth to me herself; she even cut my umbilical cord herself. Until the 1970s, our home had only one and a half rooms. One room had a thatched roof, one had tile. We didn’t even have a door.”

### Plunging into the Ocean of Competition

“Because my family was so poor, as a child I was always bullied,” said Feng, “so I struggled, and worked hard to make money. By 1989, I was a section chief on a state farm but that year I quit my job and plunged into the ocean of competition!”

China’s reform and opening up policies created such opportunities that the country was swept by an excitement like the 1840s California’s gold rush. When Mr. Feng told his father that he too planned to seek his fortune, his father supported him but suggested he try his hand in the crowded places where there were more people.

Eyes bright with hope, Yougen bicycled to populous Hedong, only to find that everyone else there was also trying to strike it rich, so competition was fierce. As he pondered how to find his own niche, he chanced upon a machinery factory and saw a tower crane that cost 820,000 Yuan. “The construction boom is just beginning,” young Yougen thought, “and this is a great deal!” Yougen studied the market carefully

before he boldly put all of his eggs in one basket but his well calculated gamble paid off. He bought the crane, sold it for over one million Yuan, and pocketed 200,000 Yuan in profit.

“I used only cash back then,” he said, “so I took the money home. It took all night to count it! My original salary had only been a few dozen Yuan, so that 200,000 Yuan gave me a much brighter outlook for the future!”

## Nine-Tailed Fox Returns to Flowers

Mr. Feng leveraged his 200,000 Yuan windfall to capitalize upon Xiangtan’s robust economic growth and invested in other businesses, real estate and hotels. By 2006, he was Xiangtan’s richest man and called “Nine-tailed Fox” by locals. Yet just as the real estate business started to heat up, he shocked friends and family alike by investing everything he had into transforming a barren village into the 800 hectare Panlong Grand View Garden. “I’m the son of a flower farmer!” Feng exclaimed to skeptics. “From my youth, flowers have influenced me. Flowers are my passion!”

Within less than a year, everyone recognized that Mr. Feng’s timing and choice of location for his grand garden had been perfect when Xiangtan was recognized as one of China’s top ten livable cities.<sup>1</sup> From early on, Xiangtan had emphasized national guidelines for protecting the environment during development, which of course was in keeping with Hunan’s ancient Taoist philosophy of “Man follows nature.” Mr. Feng’s Panlong Grand View Garden was simply following Xiangtan’s trend, though he took it to an entirely new level.

Feng was quick to prove that even a passion for flowers could turn a profit. His father had taught him not only how to raise and sell flowers but also to discern which flowers made money and which did not. “Orchids made money,” Mr. Feng said, “so when I was young I searched the mountains for orchids. I could smell them!”

## New Era, New Agriculture

Feng quickly realized that the traditional agriculture of his youth was no longer a path to success. “In the past,” Feng said, “People struggled for food and clothing, and Hunan’s hilly land – all ups and downs! – made modern agriculture impossible. After expenses, one *mu* produced only 1,200 Yuan of profit. We had to be creative.” But reform and opening up ushered in a new era in agriculture.

Thanks to the modern infrastructure that gave Xiangtan access to China’s entire market, as well as favorable business policies and incentives for environmental initiatives, Feng expanded his sights to encompass not only traditional agriculture but

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<sup>1</sup>“China’s Top 10 Most Livable Cities”. [hnloudi.gov.cn](http://hnloudi.gov.cn). Hunan Loudi Official Government. 28 March 2012. Archived from the original on 10 April 2013. Retrieved 4 August 2014.

also landscape agriculture, ecological agriculture and tourism agriculture. Feng said, “Xiangtan was Chairman Mao’s hometown, so in addition to Red Tourism, why not also dazzle the world with Green Tourism?”

A consummate businessman, Feng was careful that every Panlong Grand View Garden venture be profitable. Otherwise, the garden could not be sustainable. But at the same time, he demanded the best experience possible for guests. “I wanted guests to enjoy the park and food so much that they didn’t want to leave, and that they would return often.”

## **Win-Win for Villagers**

I asked what happened to farmers whose land had been used for Panlong Garden. Feng grinned. “I leased more than 5,000 *mu* of land in Zhifang Village – and people were delighted when I demolished their homes! Do you know why? Because we gave them more than just money! The original Zhifang Village was just a barren mountain wilderness, but I transformed it into a lush green garden, and we built the villagers new homes. I also provided livelihoods. Their average annual income has risen from 5,000 Yuan in 2009 to 50,000 Yuan today.”

Yuan Jingang, a Zhifang villager weeding peach trees, told a reporter, “Since Panlong Gardens, our cooperative has never had to worry about selling our peaches, and it gets better every year.” The 536 trees on 70 *mu* of land produce 10,000 kilos of prized yellow peaches each year, most of which are bought by tourists. “At 30 Yuan per kilo, that’s 300,000 Yuan!” Yuan Jingang exclaimed.

Zhifang Village now has many cooperatives that are an integral part of the flower industry chain and use Panlong Grand View Garden’s platform for marketing. And many villagers have opened Nongjiale, with at least 20 of them earning over 400,000 Yuan annually.

“It’s win-win,” Feng said excitedly. “They’re happy to work with us because we’re not just partners but relatives!”

## **Knowledge Is the Best Charity**

Feng’s careful study of national anti-poverty initiatives taught him that the first priority in raising Xiangtan from poverty must be given to infrastructure, so he spent tens of millions repairing or upgrading over 30 km of roads, including roads not directly connected to his projects. But Feng also recognized that another great barrier to prosperity was lack of education. As Feng said, “In fighting poverty, giving someone a fish is not as good as teaching him to fish. Knowledge is the best charity.” Feng employed many of the uneducated villagers in his gardens, restaurants and hotels, but he also invested millions in education for children and adults alike.

Feng invited experts from Hunan Agricultural University and other institutes to teach farmers and staff about flower seedlings, aquaculture and poultry farming, and techniques for cultivation of fruit and vegetables. He also arranged 20 lectures a year to introduce the fundamentals of the market economy. But Feng himself is now recognized as quite an expert. He has spent tens of thousands of Yuan in tuition on his own studies. “I’ve learned as much from failure as from success,” Feng said, laughing. “After long illness, one becomes a good doctor!”

“Some people collect antiques,” Feng said, “but I collect exotic flowers.” His park has over 100 kinds of cherry blossoms, 800 kinds of rhododendrons and over 1,200 kinds of lotus flowers, as well as over 200 kinds of orchids, and over 150,000 trees such as red maple, black pine and Podocarpus. But he learned the hard way that exotic plants require exotic care. He imported 800,000 Yuan of Buddha Belly Bush from Australia; they all died within three years. He also spent 2 million Yuan importing purple sage from Vietnam and Myanmar, only to discover that even though they thrived in neighboring Guangdong, they perished in Hunan. Feng was not discouraged. “Practice, practice and practice,” he said, “and then study, study and study! Either don’t do it, or do it to the extreme.”

Each time that Feng discovered a new exotic flower in Japan, Korea, Canada, the U.S. or other countries, he bought every book he could find on their care and spent millions having them translated into Chinese. To this day, he reads late into the night, and develops technical and management practices that he teaches others. Thanks to his encyclopedic expertise, he now wears another hat—that of graduate tutor at Hunan Agricultural University’s Department of Horticulture.

## **Passionate About Education**

As an advocate of lifetime learning for himself and others, Mr. Feng funds education for learners of all ages, but he is especially keen on awakening city children to the wonders of nature. “Many children who live in cities from birth know nothing of nature!” he said. “So each year, over 300,000 children attend Panlong Grand View Garden programs to learn about diverse plants and flowers from all over the world. Adults like it too, so children of course bring their parents!”

Feng has built two Hope schools and donated almost 50 million Yuan through his “Panlong Education Fund” to help 470 students of all grades. Feng also gives a 20,000 Yuan annual college stipend to four or five exceptional students. “I review their transcripts to select students who are serious about learning. And if their families have problems, I of course help them.”

Ms. Chen Liwen, a former student of Prof. Hu Min, also a Xiangtan native and CEO of New Channel, said, “Mr. Feng is typical of Hunan people: hardiness, endurance, forceful. So he supports youth who show they can grit their teeth and endure.” As Prof. Hu Min says, “If you persist, you will succeed.”

But Mr. Feng also knows that passion must precede persistence, so after checking a prospective student's transcripts, he asks him, "What do you plan to do after graduation?" If he's not certain, Feng would encourage him to find his passion. "There's not much point in spending time and money on a major if one's not planning a career in it," he said.

Ms. Chen Liwen asked Mr. Feng, "Have you met anyone else with as much passion for plants and flowers as you have?"

Mr. Feng hesitated, and then said, "There are some," he said, "but very few. I believe that business success is intimately tied to your hobbies. If your profession is also your hobby and you are passionate, then you have motivation."

Ms. Chen nodded agreement and said, "Then we should find ways to enhance students' love for all walks of life, and educational reform should include career planning courses so students can find their passion and make the right choices."

"You are right," Mr. Feng said. "And theory and practice should be linked. Even as farmers sow crops in fields, teachers sow ideas on blackboards, which lead to new practices, which lead to new ideas. If a professor's theory is not linked to practice, his students can be only mediocre. Practice proves truth."

Mr. Feng warmed to his subject like a teacher in his classroom. "Consider Yuan Longping," he said, "the father of hybrid rice in China. Yuan Longping said, 'Book knowledge is very important, but I am engaged in rice research. There is no rice in the books. Only rice can grow rice. Practice!' Only because Yuan Longping has been rooted in the land for a long time has he been able to produce hybrid rice from generation to generation."

Mr. Feng reminded me of professors I'd met at Harvard Business School (HBS), which has students analyze real-life case studies to deduce on their own the relevant theories and practices. Although HBS sees this as innovative, such practices have been an element of Chinese education for thousands of years. Confucius himself taught by asking questions and forcing students to think for themselves. As he famously said, "If I show one corner and the student cannot deduce the other three, I do not repeat the lesson."

## Passion Plus Principles

Mr. Feng is obviously propelled by powerful passion, but his passion is profitable because he grounds it in four principles:

"First, firmly support the government leadership."

"Second, focus on economic efficiency and benefits."

"Third, respect and obey the law."

"Fourth, treat employees well."

"We must treat employees like family and friends," said Mr. Feng, "because company growth depends upon every employee's contribution. Only this can make us invincible. A boss must know that 'disperse money, people gather; hoard money, people



disperse.’ Why do employees follow us? For a brighter future and a better life! So we must have the spirit of ‘Sow much, reap much; sow little, reap little.’”

“Our focus,” Mr. Feng continued, “should not be posterity but how to benefit society here and now. So I’ve never thought of Panlong Grand View Garden as my own, but as belonging to the state and society. If every boss seeks only his own personal interests, then state and society really have no hope. On the other hand, if everyone gives it their best and gives a little love, then this society must be beautiful.”

For over a decade, Mr. Feng has given his best to Panlong Grand View Garden, arriving each morning at 6 AM and often working late into the night. “I’ve been sharpening my sword for over ten years,” he said, “planting 300,000 trees. Each tree I planted by myself. I myself designed everything in the Grand View Garden. I’ve worked on Grand View Garden a long time, and it will eventually be as beautiful as fairyland.”

## China’s Future?

Feng is confident about Panlong Grand View Garden’s future—and confident about China’s prospects. “China is vast, with so many people, so I think it has far more opportunities than other countries. Chinese used to struggle just for food and clothing, but that problem has been solved! I am 58 years old and I’ve witnessed China’s decades of development firsthand. Today, China’s first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou are in no way inferior to the big cities in the developed countries of Europe. Even in urban development, they are far better than many big cities abroad. I have been to more than 100 countries, and I know from personal experience that we lead the world in our technology and urban construction.”

Feng is also optimistic about rural development. While many look to foreign trade for growth, Feng sees gold in China’s own countryside. “There is actually more room for development in relatively backward places,” he said. “Only 30% of China’s land is in cities; the other 70% is in towns and villages. I think that as society develops, the big opportunities will be in rural areas. Land is an invaluable treasure that lets us respond to change. These 5,000 acres of land of Panlong Grand View Garden is a blank slate upon which we can paint and play at will!”

After a meal of Hunan favorites and regaling us with tales of Xiangtan’s dramatic changes, Mr. Feng gave us a tour of his hotel. The best in town, his hotel still looks new even after a decade. Too often, builders cut corners only to waste far more money later on costly repairs, but Mr. Feng built his hotel to last. He proudly pointed to the lobby’s staircase and columns. “I’ve not had to renovate since I built this 10 years ago!”

Feng is obviously as passionate about his hotel as everything else he puts his hand to. But as he said, “My career proves that the secret to success is three words: sincerity, attentiveness and persistence.”

Yet Feng admits that he owes much of his success to his roots and to reform and opening up. “I am rooted in Hunan. Without my Hunan and China roots, I’d have

not succeeded anywhere in the world. If you can't make it in China, you can't make it anywhere else! That's why my children do not emigrate. I want to bloom where I'm planted – here in Hunan.”

This flower farmer's son has certainly bloomed—and enriched not only Hunan but all of China with his passion, persistence and principles. But the following day I was delighted to learn that even the remotest minority villages in Hunan, such as Eighteen Caves Village, were prospering as youth flocked home from the cities to seize new opportunities right at home.

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## Chapter 12

# Eighteen Caves Village: We Can Do This by 2020!



### Who Is Xi Jinping?

November 3rd is a very festive date for Eighteen Caves Village because residents celebrate the anniversary of Xi Jinping's 2013 visit, and setting his goal to end poverty in China by 2020. But at the time, some villagers did not even recognize Xi Jinping.

"It does look like him," said one villager, as Xi got off the minibus.

"But why visit our remote village?" his friend asked.

Xi warmly grasped the hands of a 64-year-old Miao named Shi Pazhuan, or "Big Sister Shi." She had never left her village or watched TV, was illiterate, and spoke only Miao, so she had no idea who Xi was, but she warmly welcomed the stranger. The village's Party secretary, Shi Jintong, translated as she said, "I don't know what to call you."

Xi Jinping said, "I am a servant of the people."

When Shi saw she was still confused, he clarified, "This is General Secretary Xi. He has come to see you!"

Big Sister Shi asked, "Who is General Secretary Xi?"

"General Secretary Xi is the highest official in all of China," Shi explained patiently.

"How high is that?" Big Sister Shi asked.

Shi said, "As high as Chairman Mao!"

Big Sister Shi's eyes widened. She may have been illiterate but she did know about Mao. The Miao's gifts of supplies and guides through their territory had helped Mao and the Red Army survive the Long March as they fled the Kuomintang. This is no ordinary visitor, Big Sister Shi realized, and she gripped his hand tightly.

Many villagers knew nothing of the world beyond their ancestral village because from time immemorial they had been isolated by impassible mountains and rivers raging through deep valleys. Only in March, 2012, was its isolation ended by the opening of the spectacular Anzhai Suspension Bridge—the world's thirteenth highest bridge. I felt more like I was flying than driving as we crossed the bridge 1,000 feet above the lush valley floor, the bridge's far end vanishing into clouds.

It is no surprise villagers celebrate November 3rd, because they have much to be thankful for. When Xi visited in 2013, their annual per capita net income was only 1,668 Yuan. Roofs leaked and wind wailed through mud patched walls. The village had electricity but few could afford anything but a dim light bulb dangling from the ceiling. Although the village was no longer isolated, it needed a kickstart—which Xi Jinping delivered when he inspected the village and shared his notion of “Precision Poverty Alleviation”.

For over an hour, Xi spoke of ending poverty through self-reliance, of shifting from transfusing blood to creating blood by boosting the local economy through ways unique to its own situation. And he ended with, “I think we can do this by 2020.”

No one could have imagined that during the next six years, China would lift 82.39 million from poverty, with the percentage in poverty plummeting from 10.2 to 1.7%. Even Eighteen Caves Village income shot up from 1,668 Yuan in 2013 to 12,128 Yuan in 2019. The village was declared free from poverty, but Miao villagers needed no official announcement. The droves of youth returning home from the cities was proof enough that Eighteen Caves Village had a bright future.

## The Nation’s Big Sister

But precision poverty alleviation requires precise knowledge of conditions and causes, so Xi’s first step during his 2013 visit was to understand locals’ lives. As he gazed at the dark interior of Big Sister Shi’s home, Xi asked, “Do you have fruit trees, a vegetable garden? Is it enough to feed the family? Is there a pig?”

“No fruit trees,” Shi replied. “In good years, we’ve enough to eat, but not in bad years. As for pigs, we have two.”

“Will you eat the pigs or sell them?” Xi asked.

“How could we eat them?” she asked. “We must sell them for money to live on.”

Xi saw that her threadbare quilt was far too thin for cold mountain nights at 700 meters elevation, and that her rice jar and granary were almost empty. He immediately ordered that all 225 village households be given warm quilts, as well as rice, oil and other daily necessities.

After checking to see if Big Sister Shi’s pigs were fat and strong, he led her by the hand to sit on stools before the fire pit. “How old are you this year?” Xi asked her.

“I am 64 this year,” she replied.

Xi smiled. “You are 64 this year; I am just 60. You are 4 years older than me, so you are my big sister.”

From that day, Shi Pazhuan has been Big Sister to the nation, with visitors from home and abroad flocking to Eighteen Caves Village to take photos with her.

As Xi prepared to leave, he said, “If you ever have any needs or difficulties, be sure to let me know.”

With no hesitation, Big Sister Shi blurted out, “I want to see Beijing Tiananmen Square!”

Shortly after Xi's departure, Shi and two other elders whom Xi had chatted with were invited to Beijing. They'd never ridden a plane, and were thrilled as they toured Tiananmen and appeared on CCTV's “Avenue of the Stars”, and then returned home with enough memories to regale the entire village for years.

Xi's next visit was the home of a couple in their 70s, Shi Chengfu and Long Decheng. With five years of school under his belt, Shi was a scholar by village standards, and recognized Xi Jinping. As they shook hands, the General Secretary asked, “How did you recognize me?”

“I've seen you on TV,” Shi said.

“Do I look the same in person as on TV?” Xi asked.

“The same!” Shi said.

Shi's wife, who had never gone to school, had already led Xi by the hand into their home before learning that he was China's top leader. “I stood right next to him,” she said later, “and only came up to his shoulders!”

After Xi had toured their home and inquired about their harvest, he chatted with villagers for over an hour on the small flat square in front of Shi's house. Xi explained precision poverty alleviation, and suggested they capitalize upon their alluring Miao culture, which intrigues both Chinese and foreigners, by creating pillar industries of cultural tourism and handicraft production. He also suggested they raise fruits such as pear and kiwi (New Zealand's famous kiwi fruit originated in China 100 years ago).

Xi's vision captured the villagers' imagination, but no one was more excited than Yang Chaowen, though he was over 1,000 km away in coastal Zhejiang where he'd sought work after giving up on his home village.

## **Yang Chaowen: Mr. Eighteen Caves Village**

I almost laughed when I saw that the 45-year-old Miao entrepreneur Mr. Yang Chaowen had the characters for Eighteen Caves Village shaved on the back of his head. He certainly has a head for business!

Mr. Yang is now well loved and respected for helping lift his village from poverty, but when younger, he'd fled to the big cities in search of work—and hopefully a wife as well. His village was so destitute that no girl would marry into such poverty.

Even as a child, Yang had dreamed of escaping poverty. He saw no point in wasting more years on schooling that did not help put food on the table so he dropped out of junior high school and tried numerous schemes to get rich. He planted crops, made and sold charcoal, hawked rice noodles, raised chickens and ducks—but success eluded him. “I felt my whole life would be that way,” he said.

Yang finally fled to the cities. “The pace of city life was stressful,” he recounted, “but it beats staying home in Eighteen Caves Village.”

City life was good for Yang. Though he began as an unskilled laborer, his rapid mastery of technical skills and his work ethic impressed his boss, who gave him a generous salary of 5,200 a month and days off. Yang was happy—until he saw the TV news about Xi Jinping’s visit to his home village.

Yang was so excited that he trembled, and could not eat his dinner. He did not want to abandon a good job with a future, but, “I yearned to help lead my village’s elderly and children out of poverty.”

Yang’s wife was doubtful. “What future could we and our two sons have in Eighteen Caves Village? Please don’t quit your job! Just take a leave of absence so you can return.”

So Yang took a leave of absence, and when his wife phoned weeks later to ask why he’d not returned, he said, “You know train tickets are very expensive at the moment. Fares will be cheaper at New Year!”

His wife agreed, but at New Year, Yang’s passion was reignited when the county sent a precision poverty alleviation taskforce to lead villagers in starting businesses. “My wife was unhappy,” Yang said, “but I was confident I’d succeed and she’d eventually join me.”

Xi had suggested cultural tourism, so in the spring of 2014, Mr. Yang asked his older brother’s wife to set up Eighteen Caves Village’s first Nongjiale. They opened their doors with visions of success, only to close their doors two months later. They had few tourists, and the food they prepared for the crowds that never came spoiled because they had no refrigerator.

Undaunted, Yang tried raising chickens. The first seven or eight all died, but he bought a dozen more and they all survived. Emboldened, he bought 700 chickens, but discovered that they were expensive to raise and not easy to sell. Yang looked sober as he recalled, “I lost 20,000 to 30,000 Yuan that year – most of it borrowed from friends and family.”

But Yang’s determination and persistence had impressed his village’s leadership. “You are really capable!” a leader said. “Help us develop the village!” So Yang set his heart and mind to helping promote rural tourism and commercial production. The beautiful traditional Miao wooden architecture was restored, and they built an impressive arch on the newly widened road to the village entrance.

Yang also promoted the rich Miao culture. I was greeted at the village by Miao girls in beautiful embroidered costumes and silver headdresses. They sang, danced and beat massive Miao drums, and afterwards offered me an earthen bowl of corn whiskey—a mellow brew that warmed my already happy mood.

“Our goal was for our village to prosper,” Yang said to me, grinning, “and we achieved that goal!”

## Happy Family Nongjiale

Yang was happy developing his village but he still dreamed of opening a Nongjiale, especially after witnessing the success of Qiaoxífú (Skillful daughter-in-law) Farmhouse, which opened in 2015.

“I wanted to give it another try,” Yang said, “but my family was poor. I had old and young to care for. I had already borrowed and lost money. But my uncle, who treated me like a son, urged me to try again.”

“But I don’t have a house!” I said to him.

“No problem,” his uncle said. “Use my home in the Pear Village for free. If no rent to pay, what are you afraid of? You can do it!”

Villagers grateful for Yang’s help in developing Eighteen Caves Village helped him secure loans for his new project, and the head of the precision poverty alleviation taskforce helped Yang register and obtain his Nongjiale’s official name of “Happy Family”.

By 2018, Yang had so many guests that he opened a second Nongjiale in Bamboo Village. His two farmhouses now employ over 10 villagers, and he has led over ten other households to prosperity through rural tourism. Yang had finally achieved his childhood dream of riches, and he has even greater plans for the future, but he said, “When you drink water, don’t forget who dug the well. When you’re happy, don’t forget the Party. Without precision poverty alleviation and Xi’s concern for us, we’d not have the happy life we enjoy now. We are beside ourselves with gratitude!”

While Yang is grateful for the government’s help, he is also quick to emphasize the need for self-reliance. “We must cheer ourselves on!” Yang said. “Why? Because the government has done a good job on our village appearance and infrastructure, but we must rely on ourselves to be self-reliant and start a business. The government cannot just dole out money to us. This is impossible. We must come up with ideas ourselves. If I have a good idea, I can apply for help and the government will certainly support me – but we must do our own part!”

## The Source of Happy Family

As we ate lunch at “Happy Family” farmhouse, Mr. Yang asked, “Do you know the root of ‘Happy Family?’” It began the day my uncle sat by his fire, tired, and decided to take a stroll. When he opened his front door, he could not believe his eyes when he saw that General Secretary Xi was visiting our village! The village head told Xi Jinpíng, ‘This is our retired teacher.’

“Xi smiled, shook hands with my uncle, and asked, ‘Are you a retired teacher?’ When he answered yes, Xi said, ‘Good! Good! Very good!’”

Xi’s thrice-repeated praise rings in Yang’s uncle’s ears and heart to this day. To commemorate the event, Yang’s uncle wrote three couplets, one of which reads, “Happy Family”.

“And that,” Yang said triumphantly, “was the inspiration for ‘Happy Family’!”

Today, Yang does indeed have a happy family. His wife and children live with him in Eighteen Caves Village and he has achieved his childhood dreams of success.

“Is your wife happy with life here?” I asked.

Yang grinned. “Well, she thinks things could be better, but I’m getting there!”

I laughed. “I’ve been married 38 years and I’m still getting there too!”

“At least tourists are very happy,” Yang said, as we perched on bamboo stools at his low wooden table. He pointed to a dozen lunch dishes and said, “These are all local – fresh mountain vegetables, homemade tofu and duck eggs straight from the duck! People also come for large banquets, or to camp out in the beautiful mountains. We have over 20 outdoor venues!”

“When we worked in the cities,” Yang said, “we were so envious of their high-rises and parks. Why couldn’t we transform our own village? We can’t build high-rises, of course – our buildings must retain traditional Miao architecture – but our village is now much better than anything you’ll find in the cities!” Yang grinned, and added, “And we did it ourselves!”

My young Miao tour guide said, “I too sought my future in the city, but I returned home from Shenzhen.” She smiled and added, “There’s no place like home, especially when it’s prosperous!”

I marveled at the government’s efforts to help one tiny, remote Miao minority village, but it is not unusual. Days later, in S.E. China’s Yunnan on the Myanmar border, we met Lisu people who only a decade ago were some of the poorest people on the planet but today have new lives and new homes—though a few hundred had no idea how to open the new homes’ doors....

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## Chapter 13

# Prosperity Comes to Lisu Land



I expected to rough it when we visited the Lisu people in West Yunnan, one of China's poorest regions, on the very borders of China and Myanmar. Imagine my surprise to find our hotel was a Hilton. When I drove through Yunnan in 1994 on my way home from Tibet, I doubted the entire province had a 5-star hotel, and now even the Lisu have one!

I was delighted by the hotel's enthusiastic greeting as we passed between two rows of colorfully costumed Lisu who danced, sang and played the four-stringed Lisu lutes and bamboo Jew's harps. Such a welcome! I had no idea they knew we were coming. As it turned out, they didn't know we were coming. The greeting was for two busloads of Chinese and foreign competitors for the 2019 International Kayaking World Cup on the mighty Salween River, which plunges 1,749 miles from the heights of Tibet into the Indian Ocean.

### Planet's Most Musical Minority

A half dozen Lisu youth in the hotel lobby played guitars and sang in the beautiful harmony that has captivated audiences the world over, especially since the Lisu "Christian Choir of Mongkuan County" took a special award in Beijing at the International Choral Festival in 2006. Only recently has the world been able to enjoy the magic of Lisu music, thanks to highways that have ended the ancient isolation and eradicated some of the worst poverty in China and heritage protection programs that include village workshops and Lisu music classes in middle schools (much like a very young Xi Jinping encouraged 30 years ago for our Fujian Province's She people).

Like many ethnic groups, until recently the Lisu had no written language so they used songs to carry on their epic traditions and tales, but unlike any other peoples on the planet, they also used music to settle conflicts. The opposing parties sang back and forth at each other while a judge sang out his opinion to the enthralled crowds.

These musical battles often went on for days until either a decision was made or they simply collapsed from exhaustion.

I've longed to hear live Lisu music for decades, so I was excited to learn that my hosts in a remote mountain village had planned a traditional performance the next day. I even joined the band and played a Lisu flute (but very quietly; no point adding a bit of hell to such heavenly music).

As I checked out of the Hilton early the next morning, TV reporters asked to interview me. They quickly lost interest when they found I wasn't a kayaker but I'm certain the stories I was to hear were far more exciting than anything the reporters got from the sports teams. I also met passionate anti-poverty team leaders who frankly divulged both successes and failures. I heard the stories of unforgettable villagers like the 33-year-old Lisu farm girl who rose from poverty to become a businesswoman driving a BMW. She shared her story while her family prepared a festive meal on the rooftop. I could see why James Fraser, who 100 years ago helped invent the Lisu script, said that the beauty of these mountains rivaled that of his beloved Swiss Alps.

I'd wanted to visit the Lisu when I drove through West Yunnan in 1994 on my way back from Tibet, but the roads were not much better in 1994 than a century earlier when the Lisu crossed the river on zip lines, and James Fraser, a veteran mountaineer, spent four days hiking the 44 miles from Tuofeng to Baoshan. Fraser's daughter wrote of her father's trek, "He was going on foot because no mule could negotiate the steep inclines or ford the torrents of the Salween River."

I was thankful that today the trip was a two hour drive instead of a four-day hike like the one that Fraser described in his journal:

Such a magnificent view, wide and sweeping, made me pause awhile to take it in – range upon range of dark mountains swathed in cloud, and in the far distance the forbidding mass of the Salween Divide barring the way like a solid wall. Down, down, down, every now and again stopping to take in the grandeur of the scene until almost sundown when we reached the Lisu village of Shui Chen, wet, bedraggled and weary.

Fraser was enthralled by Yunnan's beauty but even more captivated by the Lisu, whom he first encountered in a Tengyue Chinese market:

You could hardly miss them. They wore turbans, ornamental sashes, and white leggings. The women wore colorful costumes ornamented with shells and beads.

But when Fraser tried speaking to them in Chinese, he found "they didn't understand a single word." Many called Lisu the "monkey people" because they did not speak Chinese and lived in remote hillside bamboo huts. Their prowess with the bow was legendary; youth would shoot apples off their girlfriends' heads just for sport. But in spite of their hunting skills and subsistence agriculture, they still barely managed to survive. Even into the twenty-first century, over 71% were impoverished, and many died young from easily treatable injuries or illness.

In 2012, Yunnan Province formulated its "Overall Plan for Poverty Alleviation in Nujiang Prefecture (2013-2017)", and in October 2016, Nujiang set its goal even higher with its "Comprehensive Well-off Action Plan for Fighting against Poverty in Nujiang Prefecture". The changes I'd see only three years later were astonishing.

In 2019, as we drove up the “Meili (Beautiful) Highway” high above the Salween River, we saw miles of new apartment complexes, replete with solar lights and water heating, that the government had given Lisu for free to help them escape hazardous and short-lived lives in the inhospitable mountains. The change was possible, of course, because of the tremendous investments in funds and manpower made by the government at all levels, but as Chinese leaders learned in the 1980s, money alone can't fix the problem, and if not careful, aid can create dependency. The key to lifting the Lisu from poverty was not simply pouring money into the problem but sending passionate leaders who volunteered to leave careers and families for three years at a time to live and work with the poor they served.

But many of these leaders were shocked when they arrived with grand, good-intentioned goals only to discover that many Lisu were content to remain in poverty, and even fatalistically accept their children's diseases and early deaths, because they had never known anything else. So more important than mere economic aid was the change in the Lisu's attitudes. The Chinese volunteers' passion and perseverance opened their eyes and gave the Lisu the vision and courage to help lift themselves from poverty.

## **Axing the Doors**

Fugong County's Public Relations Chief Guo Jianwen was animated as he shared successes and failures. Given their short, difficult lives on the mountains, Guo had expected Lisu to jump at the chance for free new homes in the valley, but many of them didn't want homes, jobs or education—or money!

“Many people didn't even want money,” Mr. Guo said, “because they didn't see the use for it. Money was useless on the mountainsides where Lisu grew or made everything they used. Only rarely did they descend to the valley floor to sell a chicken for a sack of salt.” Before concrete roads were built up the vertical precipices even to remote villages, some people spent their entire life, cradle to grave, on the mountains, never descending once.

“They had a heartfelt fear of leaving their mountains!” Mr. Guo said, “so we said, ‘Just try it for a while. If you really don't like it, then you can return to the mountain. After all, the mountain land will still be yours.’” Guo grinned. “Not one Lisu who tried life down below ever returned to the mountaintop. After all, everyone wants to live a good life.” But Guo never imagined what would happen next.

Mr. Guo knew that many Lisu were illiterate and could not speak standard Chinese, but he never imagined that they'd never seen a key. “One village had 320 households with new apartments. Within half a year, we had to replace doors and locks for 120 households. They had no idea how to use the keys so they chopped the doors down with an axe.”

Since then, they are careful to teach Lisu how to use keys, electricity, and appliances.

“We don’t just give them keys to a new house but everything else to make them as comfortable as possible because they are completely unused to life in the valley,” Guo said. “We felt we’d done well when we even bought them sofas, curtains and quilts, but they complained they had no firewood like on the mountains to keep warm, so we went out and bought extra quilts.”

“Our officials in the village have no rest days,” Guo said. “Some of us only see our family once or twice a year. We’re like nannies.” Guo sighed. “I did not care for my own parents as well as we do the Lisu.”

In addition to free homes, the Lisu were given vocational training and jobs, and many agreed to work in Zhuhai for over 3,000 Yuan per month. With a 10,000 Yuan government subsidy tacked on, they can earn 50,000 Yuan a year. “A family of six working in Zhuhai can earn 20,000 Yuan a month,” Guo said.

But Guo’s biggest bugbear was education. “No schooling, no future!” he said, but many feared that if their children got an education, they’d leave home and then they’d have no one to care for them in their old age. And even the children themselves saw no practical use for an education. Guo said, “To get children to attend school, we had to go to their homes to get them! And they’d be in school one day and run away the next. So we had to bring the children down from the mountains one by one, buy them school bags, clothes, shoes, and take them to school – and even then some would sneak back to the mountain as soon as we’d left them at the school, and we’d have to go get them again.

“We had one student who dropped out of school so he could work in Jiangxi,” Guo said. “We spent 25,000 Yuan to fly two officials to Jiangxi to track him down and persuade him to return. Other youth went to Tibet, and so we followed them to Tibet. We had no choice because Xi Jinping said, ‘No child left behind.’ So no matter where they went or how much it cost, we had to get them back!”

Some students who moved to Yuanjiang County in south central Yunnan flatly refused to return, so Guo contacted Yuanjiang County officials and arranged for the students to study there. “We give them a small stipend and phone once a week to confirm they’re still studying,” Guo said. “If we lose contact, we send someone to check up on them. If they don’t study, we are held accountable, so we can’t let one student drop out.”

In spite of frustrations, Guo was enthusiastic about the successes already under their belt, and happy to have colleagues like Duan Jiazheng, who is first secretary of the Party branch of Zanli Village and just as passionate as Guo about ending poverty.

## **Passionate Barefoot First Secretary**

Like many other first secretaries across China, Duan put on hold a very promising and lucrative career to leave his family for a three-year stint fighting poverty. As soon as he’d graduated from college, he had risen rapidly in the ranks from agricultural technician to director of agriculture, director of supply and marketing cooperatives and director of development and reform.

“How on earth did you end up here?” I asked, “when you had such a future ahead of you?”

Duan smiled. “I was born in a peasant family, so I am passionate about poverty alleviation.” In 2015, he visited Zanli Village to understand the causes of poverty and wrote a report for the leadership, who set up a poverty alleviation office for Duan. “This was the first time a state-owned company set up such an office,” Duan said.

When Duan first arrived, 68.9% of the people were below the poverty line, so he and his team visited each household to understand their situation and determine the best approach. Today, 100% of Zanli Village’s 150 households and 583 people are above the poverty line. “We left no one behind,” Duan said proudly.

While working at the Agricultural Bureau, Duan had negotiated a loan with the World Bank and British government, so he used his rich experience with farmers, business and government to fight poverty through business. Duan set up a company as a poverty alleviation platform, as well as an agricultural coop and a pig farm. Villagers were dismayed when their pigs were slaughtered during the swine fever epidemic, but Duan rebounded rapidly and led them to raise over 86,000 chickens. “Each registered family was given five chickens per capita,” Duan said, “and 4 kg of feed for each chicken.”

After the swine fever disaster, Duan was careful to avoid putting too many of Zanli Village’s eggs in one basket. The village now has, per capita, 5 acres of grass and fruit, 1 acre of tea and 2 acres of walnuts. He has also promoted industry support with grass and fruit processing plants. “We must shift from public welfare to marketization,” Duan said. “In the past, we used ‘blood transfusion’ to help the poor, and everything was directly given to the people. Now we have a ‘point system management’ that benefits those who work.”

“Zanli villagers’ thinking has changed greatly over these four years,” Duan said. For example, they used to think that bathing was harmful to the body. Now when we visit homes, they are clean, with clothes hung neatly and quilts stacked.

“Our 81 Lisu forest rangers used to destroy the mountains with slash and burn agriculture or chopping firewood. Now they are paid to protect the forests and wildlife, and our forest coverage is over 85%. If we want to turn ecological advantages into economic advantages, we must protect the environment. This is the basis of our development.”

Duan has also promoted infrastructure. “It used to be expensive to build a house because there were no roads to transport building materials, and it was expensive to get produce and products to markets. In 2016, we had 147 landslides. Now, every person in our village has access to roads.”

Duan is also proud of the free houses they’ve given Lisu. Not only are they safe, and clean, but the Lisu are delighted that, like homes for other minorities around the country, they have elements of traditional tribal architecture.

Like Guo Jianwen, Duan was also frustrated with youth who did not want to study. A decade ago, many youth dropped out of school—even elementary school—but Duan no longer has a dropout problem. Fugong County gives one million Yuan yearly to help cover tuition and an 800 Yuan monthly living allowance for poor students who have passed the college entrance exam. “We tell them, ‘Knowledge

makes the future.’ Today, Zanli Village has 234 students, including nine college students and 27 middle school students. Most are elementary school students. I think the change is huge.”

Duan smiled, happy with his village’s achievements. “We are all from the countryside and we are all farmers. We have responsibilities and feelings. We are rural people and have deep roots. There is no reason why we should not do a good job in fighting poverty. General Secretary Xi said that we cannot leave our minority groups behind, or allow any to remain in poverty. Although we may only be a village or a family, we are really doing practical things and benefiting the common people.”

## **Mr. Zhao Yu: A Minority First Secretary**

I was excited to learn of minority first secretaries like Mr. Zhao Yu, Chishadi Village’s first secretary. A Bai ethnic member with a master’s degree, he volunteered in February 2017, to help the Lisu and was sent to Lumadeng Township and then to Chishadi Village.

Zhao Yu was so dismayed by the Lisu’s endemic poverty that he immediately conducted numerous in-depth surveys and met with many Lisu to better understand their problems. He learned that the cause of Lisu poverty was not just economy but also psychology, with villagers waiting idly for aid and lacking the energy or courage to tackle poverty themselves. Zhao addressed this problem with a heavy emphasis on education and motivation.

Chisadi’s impoverished farmers relied mainly on raising pigs and planting tea, grass and walnuts and by the end of 2017, 302 people of 80 households had been lifted from poverty, and another 339 people followed in 2018. Zhao Yu saw that, like most other impoverished areas, Chisadi’s poverty was rooted in poor infrastructure, over reliance on subsistence agriculture, and illiteracy and lack of education which prevented the people from getting vocational training and better jobs. These problems were beyond Zhao’s ability to solve so he asked the government for help.

Many farmers the world over are trapped in poverty because they sell their agricultural products by the ton as cheap commodities with middlemen making about 88% of the profits. But Zhao Yu helped Chisadi villagers recover some of these profits in April, 2018 when he helped acquire thirty acres of tea plantations and tea processing plants worth 1 million Yuan. The 21 households who formed a collective to pick and process the tea each earned over 40,000 Yuan, which was far more than they had earned selling unprocessed tea.

In 2017, Chisadi Village’s total income was 11.35 million Yuan, with farmers’ per capita net income exceeding 6,200 yuan, an increase of 600 Yuan per capita over 2016. The village’s investments are now quite diversified with over 4,530 acres of grass and fruits, producing 2.4 million Yuan annually, 3,450 acres of walnuts, 20 acres of camellia, 98 acres of peppercorns, as well as 2,400 acres of tea that generate 2.5 million Yuan annually. They’ve also built 350 beehives and Zhao Yu trained several hundred people in everything from construction and livestock breeding to domestic

services and the manufacture of fine tea cakes to sell with their increasingly famous black tea.

In July, 2019, Chisadi opened a supermarket and five small scale industries. As a minority himself, Zhao Yu was keen on understanding Lisu folk customs. As Xi Jinping had shown with Fujian's She minority in the late 1980s, and later the Miao and other minorities, ethnic culture, crafts and practices can often be used to create a niche in tourism and manufacturing, so Zhao led the villagers to start four cooperatives that gave three months training to 48 people to produce ethnic apparel.

In keeping with national guidelines, Zhao was careful that development did not come at the expense of the environment. To protect the forests, the government has invested in "electric firewood", including 269,100 Yuan on 69 solar water heaters, and has employed eight villagers as forest rangers.

Not surprisingly, Chisadi villagers have come to love First Secretary Zhao Yu as one of their own—especially after he saved one of their children. On December 6, 2018, Zhao Yu discovered that a man's two-year-old grandson, You Deng, had a fractured thigh that had not been reset for ten days, and the badly infected injury was being treated by a rural herbalist. The family had no money for medical treatment so Zhao Yu gave the father 500 Yuan of his own and urged him to have the child treated in the hospital. The child was saved.

Given these first secretaries' passion and compassion, it is no wonder that they have won the respect, trust and love of the Lisu who only three years ago were the "poorest of the poor" but today are beginning to prosper—Lisu like the farm girl turned-business lady Miss Hu Xiuhua.

## **Entrepreneurial Miss Hu Xiuhua**

Miss Hu Xiuhua, a 33-year-old entrepreneur, shyly showed us around her childhood thatched home with its central fire pit around which the family gathered in the evenings. Today, she has a new, modern home with wall-mounted TV and modern appliances, and drives a BMW up the winding narrow concrete road to her remote village.

Xiuhua is proof that Xi Jinping's emphasis on cultivating self-reliance is the most farsighted approach. Although Xiuhua faced her share of heartaches and failures, today she's confident in the future for herself and her village.

A native of Fugong County's Zhuminglin Village, Xiuhua's parents are typical farmers whose harvests were never enough to meet the family's need for food and clothing. As a child, Xiuhua dropped out of school to help her family. For over ten years, she tried her hand at everything from selling vegetables and agricultural products to mixing concrete at construction sites. When she was in her twenties, her diligence and persistence caught the attention of Heng Lipu, first secretary of Minghu Village, who encouraged her to build upon her experiences. Ms. Hu started an engineering project, mixing sand and cement herself to learn the basics of construction. By 2014, Xiuhua had contracted some small projects on her own, but profits were low,

the work difficult, and she was often embarrassed when she could not pay workers on time. She almost gave up several times, but in late 2018, just as she was about to call it quits, she had a providential encounter with Li Changzhi, who was in charge of the Third Aviation Bureau of China Communications Group Corporation. Li was so impressed by a retaining wall that Xiuhua had built on the Meili Highway that she invited Xiuhua to work with her group, but Xiuhua was leery, given her previous setbacks and failure to pay her workers on time.

“Don’t worry,” Li Changzhi told her. “We will pay on time, and you can always pay your workers on time.”

The pledge of always being able to pay her workers on time caught Xiuhua’s attention, but she was still anxious and unconvinced. Li Changzhi said: “The village leaders and I must have gone to her home at least 10 times to convince her. We want to help the poor,” Li said. “I will not lie to you!”

Xiuhua finally agreed to take her first plane trip to see an expressway construction site. Xiuhua was astonished at the scale of construction and the professional equipment, but also intimidated. She had experience only in small projects, and also worried her team would not leave their valley.

“I’ll arrange a 2,000 sq. m retaining wall as a test,” Li Changzhi said, “and you can see how you do.” Xiuhua was still conflicted, but in her heart she thought, “This company really cares about us. I can’t let the leaders down. I have to at least give it a try.”

When Xiuhua showed up at the construction site with her team of farmers, she was relieved that no one ridiculed her. In fact, the experienced contractor embraced her, and the shy country girl did not hesitate in asking for advice. Everyone chipped into give direction and support, and her team grew from nine to over 40. She won the contractor’s trust and respect by finishing the test project within a month. But what really excited her was that she could pay even the lowest skilled workers over 4,000 Yuan per month and over 7,500 Yuan monthly to staff—and never once were wages in arrears.

Xiuhua was delighted, but First Secretary Heng was not about to let the newly rich farm girl rest on her laurels. “You are doing well,” she told Xiuhua, “but you need to help more villagers broaden their horizon, prosper, and help eradicate poverty.”

Secretary Heng helped develop village labor export policies with subsidies to ensure stable employment and adequate pay. Xiuhua and her fellow villagers were prospering within a year, and she bought her first car—a BMW. Today, she is outwardly rich but inwardly she’s still the same, shy country girl. Every time she returns home, she helps her parents with farm work and visits the village’s elderly. She’s quick to help anyone who is sick or disabled, or unable to go to school. A school dropout herself, she says, “I don’t want any child to have to drop out of school.”

Xiuhua’s fellow villagers are proud of her, but she is quick to point out that without the guidance, encouragement and support of village leaders, she’d have never dared leave her Salween Valley. Today, she says, “I hope to use my personal energy and blog power to help more people in need.”



## Ecological Lisu

My visit to Lisu land ended all too quickly. I could have spent a month exploring Yunnan's innovative anti-poverty program, especially its ecological initiatives. Only a decade ago, for example, Lisu were contributing to deforestation and erosion by their slash and burn agriculture and use of trees for fuel. Today, 13,889 are employed as ecological forest rangers, 2,279 are geological disaster monitoring managers, 1,793 are river course managers, and 891 are border guards. The post of ecological forest ranger alone has increased the income of 48,800 people—fully 30% of the poor population.

The sheer comprehensiveness of the Lisu development programs is mind-boggling, but over the decades, I've driven over 200,000 km around China and seen the same determination in every corner of the country. The more I see and learn, the more I think these invaluable anti-poverty lessons should not be wasted but compiled in manuals to help fight poverty not only in China but also in many countries already benefiting from Xi Jinping's BRI.

But reproducing strategies is one thing, reproducing the spirit behind them is another. I cannot imagine other countries' bureaucrats fighting poverty with as much passion and perseverance as China's first secretaries. It's the age-old Chinese spirit that has kept the dream of ending poverty since Liberation in 1949. This ancient yet forward-looking spirit is embodied in Chinese I've met all over the country, from leaders to farmers in their fields. But as Walt Whitman wrote, quite often the best is right at home—people like my friend, XMU security officer Zhou Dexin, whom I discovered I really did not know at all.

Just as my summer drive was ending, I read in the news that for the past several years, Mr. Zhou had been safeguarding the campus by day while studying by night to get his university degree, finally graduating at age 53.

I've never met a man so driven as Mr. Zhou, and I asked him what moved him to get a degree in law. Surprisingly, his inspiration was an Indian movie about injustice that he saw as a child.

I look forward to people in other nations being inspired by a Chinese movie!

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## Chapter 14

# Zhou Dexin: Chasing the Dream with Mind, Body and Spirit



Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last,  
In things best known to you finding the best or as good as the best,  
In folks nearest to you finding also the sweetest and strongest and lovingest...

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

I've met amazing people all over China, from the mother in remote Inner Mongolia who earns enough making traditional Mongolian snacks to pay her daughter's university tuition to first secretaries who live and work with the poorest of the poor to lift every single household from poverty. And I'm astounded by the sheer number of Chinese who volunteer to serve in extreme conditions like 5,000 m high Tibetan villages. I could write an entire book on each of these people. But Walt Whitman would not be surprised that I've met some of the most inspiring people right outside my own front door.

### How I Failed at Teaching English

In the early 1990s, four campus laborers asked me to teach them English each day during lunch. I politely declined with, "I'm really sorry, but I teach business. I've never taught English." One laughed and said, "No problem! We've never studied it either!"

After three months of little progress, they finally abandoned the idea, though they insisted the fault was theirs, not mine. For months, every time I saw them on campus with shovel or pickaxe in hand, I felt guilty for being such a poor English teacher and for letting down these young men. They gradually moved on, but five years later, one showed up at my office with a large basket of fruit. "I was a poor student," he said. "I barely learned the ABCs. But your faith in us gave me confidence to take night classes in accounting. I then got a good job, worked hard, and over time was promoted. I've just built a new house in my hometown for my family and I hope you will visit!"

I also had two friends who lived in a tiny loft above a clothing shop outside the university. The two of them ran the shop which was so small that with arms outstretched I could touch both walls with my fingertips. They worked 24/7 but were cheerful and optimistic and ready to serve tea every time they saw me. “There’s great opportunity now if you work hard!” they said. Their shop faced Nanputuo Temple, a top tourist spot, so business was brisk and in a few years they opened a second shop, and then a factory to produce their own clothing, and bought a truck for deliveries. They’re now well off with a beautiful home and drive an imported luxury sedan.

## **From XMU Maid to Millionaire Philanthropist**

My favorite story is that of Ms. Yangying, the farm girl with four years of education whose dream in 1981 was to rake in 20 Yuan a month as a Xiamen University professor’s maid. She was already a multimillionaire philanthropist in 1997 when I helped her start Xiamen International School (XIS). Today, Yang Ying still comes across as a shy farm girl but owns several international schools and an innovative biotechnology company. And like many newly rich Chinese, she’s giving back to her country by giving 60 million Yuan to charity, earmarking 300 million Yuan for 1,000 Hope schools and supporting each of the 400+ retirees in her rural hometown. But when I met her in her home, David Wei, XIS principal, pointed out to me that she was still wearing the same 20 Yuan shoes she’d worn for years. She reddened, and said shyly, “Both Buddhism and Christianity teach ‘selfish to self, generous to others.’”

I know many rags-to-riches stories like Yang Ying, but China’s goal is not a nation of millionaires, which is impossible, but “moderate prosperity” for all—and this is exemplified by my friend Mr. Li. For over 20 years he has worked hard as a street sweeper and grounds keeper at Xiamen University. He takes his job seriously, and is proud of his contribution to helping Xiamen University keep its reputation as the most beautiful campus in China. He works rain or shine, and when a typhoon devastated our campus, he was out with his colleagues cleaning up even before the winds and rain had ceased. But Mr. Li’s pride and joy is his son, who attended university. A street sweeper’s son in university? That too is the Chinese Dream.

Walt Whitman was right; truly the folks closest to me are the best, but I completely underestimated one man I’ve seen almost daily for seven years.

## **XMU Gate Guard Scholar**

In the summer of 2019, just as I was leaving for my 20,000 km drive around China, several friends asked if I knew that my friend Zhou Dexin, a 53-year-old university gate guard, had just received a Xiamen University degree in law. “I had no idea!” I said, though knowing Dexin, I should not have been surprised.

For years, Dexin has saluted me sharply every time I enter XMU's gate, and I return his salute (not as sharply, I'm afraid) because I respect this former soldier for his professionalism and discipline. But I never suspected just how driven he was until I learned he had graduated from XMU after five years of part-time study, and two of those five years was honored as an "outstanding" student.

Reporters who knew that Dexin was my friend asked me so many questions about him that I finally suggested a group interview in my apartment because I too wanted to know what put our university gate guard on a path towards the legal profession. Many people have shared that they were influenced by a devoted teacher, or an inspirational book, but Dexin was the first person to tell me that his passion for law was kindled in childhood by a foreign movie.

## Indian Movie Sparks a Chinese Dream

"I'm from Chongqing," Dexin began, "the home of hotpot. I had many brothers and sisters so life was hard for my family, but when I was young, I happened to see a 1951 Indian movie, *Vagabond (Awaara)*,<sup>1</sup> and I was very shaken by the plot. The prejudiced judge believed that a good man's sons are always good and a bad man's sons are always bad. I knew this was wrong, however, and I wondered in my heart if I could find a way to diligently study law, and seek true justice for everyone, showing partiality to no one, whether righteous or evil. But that childhood dream died as I got older and entered technical school. And even then I was unhappy with life so I entered the military to see if I could do better."

"How old were you then?" I asked

"I was not quite 18, so I stretched my age a little so I could join. I was assigned to the Northwest Field Army."

The Northwest Field Army had a proud tradition. In the 1940s, it had repelled a Kuomintang offensive against the revolutionary bases in Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia, which allowed the army to regroup and lead a successful counteroffensive. But in the mid-1980s, conditions across China were difficult—especially in the army. "We mainly ate steamed buns but I was a Southerner used to eating rice. I couldn't stand steamed bread three times a day so I didn't last long in the army."

## Losing the Dream

Young Dexin rejoined civilian life just as China's reform and opening up was gaining steam, and he astutely saw that the future was in the east. "The greatest opportunities were in coastal cities, especially special economic zones like Xiamen, so we moved here," Dexin said. "But as an outsider I felt lost when I arrived. I first labored in

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<sup>1</sup>In 2012, *Awaara* was included as one of TIME Magazine's "All-time 100 Greatest Films".

a factory and then ran a small shop for myself, but after a dozen years I finally realized there was no future in this. By 2013, I no longer had clear, long-term plans – just the same, simple goal as any other wage-earner. But then I got a job at Xiamen University as a gate guard, and on occasion I'd see in the news that Peking University had accepted gate guards as students, and I wondered if that would be possible at Xiamen University.”

## **XMU Rekindles Zhou's Dream**

Peking University was a pioneer in giving free training to migrant workers but the target was young people around 20 years old, and the classes were in career development, culture and work skills. But in 2014, Xiamen University went a step further when it boldly offered degree programs for campus staff and workers.

Dexin's childhood dream of studying law was rekindled and he applied. “It was not easy,” Dexin said. “I was one of the last people to receive the admission notice. At that time, the university was not that keen on me because they feared that, being so old, I would give up halfway.”

“Yes, this attitude towards older people is a problem,” I said, “but it is improving, probably because more and more people in China are old like me!”

“Things are improving,” Dexin agreed. “At that time, only Xiamen University gave such an opportunity, and they'd only started in February 2014. Today, everyone offers such opportunities – so I really want to thank the school for leading the way. I buckled down for five years, working by day and studying by night. But I also received much help from many Xiamen University teachers and students, and after five years of hard work I reached my small goal.”

“Small goal?” I laughed. “Xiamen University is one of China's Top 30 schools. Even full-time students find it challenging but for you it was just a ‘small goal’?”

## **“Bigger Utensil Takes Longer to Make”**

Mr. Zhou started late in life, but I suspected he still had further plans. “What do you plan next?” I asked.

“My next step,” he said, “is to take the national legal qualification examination at the end of this month. After the exam, I will do an internship at a law firm for over a year, and then take the exam for the lawyer's professional qualification certificate. That's roughly my plan.”

“You've obviously changed a lot since you quit the army because you could not stomach steamed bread three times a day,” I said. “What does your wife think of your achievements?”

“My wife and child now live here in Xiamen with me, but they are very stolid about my ambitions. Regardless of what I do, or whether the media seek me out or

not, in their view I’m still the husband, still the father. They neither support me nor object to anything I do. I accept that, but I never imagined that society at large would look so favorably on what I’ve done.”

## **Zhou’s Greatest Lesson**

“So what has been your greatest lesson in all this?” I asked Dexin.

“In summary, I would say that study can improve our own knowledge while also heightening our awareness of the world around us. But, frankly, another purpose for my study was to show people that if I could do it, they too could certainly do it. I’m over half a century old, and my memory obviously can’t compare with that of young people. So I just want to tell young people that in today’s social environment, and especially in Xiamen University, they can change their destiny through study.

“For example, after getting an undergraduate degree, you can take the law test. After that you can be a lawyer, prosecutor and judge. As a law student, you can have an advantage in competing for any civil service position, or else get a relatively easy job in any work unit. Every work unit needs legal persons to deal with the contradictions encountered in some daily affairs. So—be sure to study!

“If you lack ability or talent to achieve your dream, you can only improve yourself through your own efforts. Just calm down and study. The beauty of life is in the struggle, not in sitting back waiting for glory to come to you.”

Dexin must be a mind reader, because just as I was thinking he epitomized the Chinese Dream, he said, “Everyone talks about the Chinese Dream, but what is it? It is the dream of the Chinese civilization, nation and people – the dream of learning and the dream of passing the college entrance examination. Learning is the way for everyone to realize their dream. That is why Xi Jinping has always emphasized that China must be a learning power. Only through learning can we know and understand the world.”

## **Zhou’s Chinese Dream**

“What is your Chinese Dream, Mr. Zhou?” a reporter asked.

Dexin thought a moment, and then replied, “My dream is that I will have opportunities to learn throughout my entire life. Then together we can carry forward the spirit of our nation. The soul of a nation has a great impact on a person. We must have backbone. But nowadays the Chinese Dream has a physical problem, too. Many Chinese, young and old, are potbellied and sickly. They don’t have the constitution to carry out the Chinese Dream, or cope if we face an emergency.”

“You remind me of Mao Zedong’s first published article,” I said, which he published in 1917 when he was 24. “In ‘A Study of Physical Education’, he encouraged people to exercise because if the people were not strong, the country could not be strong.”

Mao wrote: “The only calamity that can befall a man is not to have a body. What else is there to worry about? If one seeks to improve one’s body other things will follow automatically.”

Dexin is certainly not sickly. He pushes himself as much physically as mentally with such a strict military regimen of exercise that from the neck down he looks just like the Kung Fu legend Bruce Lee—not an ounce of fat on his body.

Dexin smiled. “As Mao Zedong also said, ‘The body is the capital of the revolution.’”

“And today,” I added, “the body is the capital of reform and opening up.”

Dexin sombered as he went silent, then said, “Six of my classmates in my junior high school photo have already passed on. People need to be alive and healthy, to eat and drink, and to read and learn. In this way, the dream of happiness is in reach of everyone – or that’s my understanding, at least.”

## **Zhou Dexin’s Philosophy of Life**

A reporter said, “I think Mr. Zhou has his own philosophy of life.”

“Yes,” Dexin agreed. “What is most beautiful is to let nature take its course. Only in this way can we be more relaxed, and have the time and energy to achieve our goals one by one. And if we succeed or fail, what does it really matter? I’m not the only one to fail at something.”

“And your dream is still to pursue law?” the reporter asked.

“Yes, I’ve always been interested in law, and law is very practical for the world today. Just look at China and the United States, for example. What were once called trade wars were then labeled trade disputes and are now simply trade frictions. There are many key issues between nations because countries, like people, may be selfish.”

The reporter had one last question. “Now that you are famous, Mr. Zhou, and getting more and more attention, what changes do you expect in your life?”

Dexin chuckled. “Regardless of circumstances, my priority is always to continue doing my job well. The job of campus security is very challenging, but overcoming these challenges can improve both myself and my entire team.”

As Mr. Zhou and the reporters left, I was thankful that I live and work daily with people like him. As I’ve often said, China has a common language but does not have any common people. Thank you, Zhou Dexin, for showing not just your team but the rest of us as well that to achieve the Chinese Dream, we must fortify mind, body and spirit.

And if I ever need a lawyer—I’ll call Zhou Dexin.



## How China Enlightened Seventeenth Century Europe

It was good to be back in Xiamen after driving 20,000 km in 32 days, but I only had one night in my own bed before heading to the Fuzhou capital, where I felt honored to give a lecture to provincial government leaders.

I've watched how China produces leaders during my three decades in Xiamen. Xi Jinping, for example, was a very young Xiamen vice mayor until the summer we moved to China. He was then assigned to Ningde, one of China's 18 poorest counties. He tackled poverty so passionately that he was promoted to provincial leadership, then on to Shanghai and up the ranks to president. He was promoted because he was passionate and proficient. I've also known others who did only what was required, and they were not promoted. And that's ok, because we also need people with experience at the bottom levels as well.

China has been a meritocracy for most of 2,000 years, which is why many seventeenth and eighteenth century European leaders felt China's greatest innovation was not its four great inventions but its "Art of Government". China's government was so unlike the West's staid hereditary aristocracies that the Jesuits' translations of Chinese political and social philosophies helped stoke Europe's seventeenth–nineteenth century Age of Enlightenment.

I hope that New China will inspire the world to seek an Age of Moderate Prosperity—and that might happen, thanks to people like Dr. Huang Chengwei, former director of the National Poverty Alleviation and Education Center of the State Council Poverty Alleviation Office. I was honored to meet Dr. Huang in his Beijing office and gain a better grasp of China's fight against poverty—and not just at home but abroad.

But first—an introduction to China's 5th Great Inventions, which continues to this day to produce leaders like Dr. Huang.

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**Part II**  
**China's 5th Great Invention: Art**  
**of Government**

## Chapter 15

# China's 5th Great Invention



... Chinese had Bells, Gunpowder, Lodestone, Compass, and Art of Printing for many ages before Europe: But that what they are universally allowed, even at this day, to excel all other Nations in, is, The Art of Government.

Eustace Budgell, English Politician, 1731

As a leadership and strategy professor, I've been most impressed by how the world's most populous nation has conducted its complex anti-poverty campaign so thoroughly and rapidly at every level from provincial to county, city, village and even household. It is a miracle of both management and motivation. No wonder the eighteenth century English politician, Eustace Budgell, wrote that China's greatest innovation was "The Art of Government".

Even 2,000 years ago, Emperor Han Wudi engaged in many reforms that today we consider "modern". In attacking corruption, he removed all non-central government road tolls—as modern China did in the mid 1990s—and returned many of the sycophantic noblemen to the countryside. These idle aristocrats were furious when he replaced them by recruiting talented commoners for government positions and this meritocracy was so successful that it lasted for most of 2,000 years.

## How China Influenced Western Government

China's meritocracy-based government impressed Western governments so much that, in 1832, England adapted the imperial exam to India, and in 1846 applied it to England as the British Civil Service Exam. British nobility were as indignant as the Chinese nobility had been 2,000 years earlier. In a parliamentary debate on July 17, 1863, an indignant English nobleman complained, "The English people did not know that it was necessary for them to take lessons from the Celestial Empire [China]."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol. CLXXII, Cornelius Buck, London, July 1863.

As it turned out, the entire world was to take lessons from China. In 2013, the BBC wrote that all “modern job recruitment” had been inspired by China’s ancient system of hiring people based on ability rather than social connections.<sup>2</sup>

A cursory overview of China’s history reveals why Budgetell was so enthralled by Old China’s “art of government”. Over 2,000 years ago, the Chinese government supported research in everything from poetry and music to agriculture and engineering. About 256 BC, Governor Li Bing transformed Sichuan into West China’s breadbasket with the Dujiangyan irrigation project, which to this day irrigates over 5,300 squ. miles of land—and without the environmental issues of modern dams. From 1916 to 2016, the U.S. destroyed 1,384 dams because they hindered the natural migration of fish, but Dujiangyan has provided irrigation and controlled flooding for 2,300 years—all without hindering the free passage of fish or ships. This is because Li Bing’s engineering marvel met many needs at once by following a wise 4,000 year-old Chinese philosophy of “divert, not dam.”

When I helped Chinese cities compete in the international competition for livable communities, one of the European judges’ favorite mantras was “joined-up thinking,” which means “thinking about a complicated problem in an intelligent way that includes all the important facts”—not in isolation but as part of a whole. That was a new concept to the West but holistic thinking has been part of Chinese philosophy, government and even medicine for thousands of years.

## **Ancient Scholar Bureaucrat Innovation**

The scope of Chinese scholars’ research and innovation to meet the needs of China’s vast population is astounding. China used biological pesticides 2,000 years ago, and the “Dutch plow” patented in Europe in 1730 was actually invented in China 2,300 years ago. Chinese built bridges with bio-engineering 1,000 years ago. As for medicine, modern China has not had smallpox since 1952, but even 1,000 years ago, Chinese inoculated for smallpox and steamed clothes to reduce the spread of infection.

In 1856, the “Bessemer process” of modern steel making was patented in the UK but the head of China’s astronomy bureau, Shen Kuo (1031–1095) had written about this very process almost 1,000 years earlier. In addition to astronomy, Shen Kuo wrote about biological pest control, climate change and prevention of deforestation, raised relief maps, pinhole cameras, and music and math harmonics. His fields of expertise included geology, archaeology, math, pharmacology, magnetic, optics (he explained rainbows), hydraulics, metaphysics, meteorology (and UFOs!), climatology, geography, cartography, botany, zoology, architecture, agriculture, economics, military strategy, ethnography, music and divination.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23376561>.

Anyone who thinks China’s “rigid” Confucian imperial exams squelched scholars’ creativity have not read about scholars such as Shen Kuo, or Zhang Heng (78–139), who was a scholar, statesman, scientist, engineer, artist, poet and inventor of a seismograph that detected an earthquake 1,000 miles away. Or Su Song, who 1,000 years ago in my home of Xiamen, compiled the vast *Materia Medica* and invented the world’s first water-powered astronomical clock and the chain drive that was the precursor to modern mechanization.

## Old China More Market-Driven Than Europe

Old China also surpassed the West in economy and trade. In the 1700s, China and India accounted for 2/3 of the global GDP, and in 2014, *Harvard Business Review* wrote:

The Chinese invented gunpowder, the compass, the waterwheel, paper money, long-distance banking, the civil service, and merit promotion. Until the early 19th century, China’s economy was more open and market driven than the economies of Europe.<sup>3</sup>

No wonder seventeenth century Europeans marveled at China. It was innovative, cultured, and rich. But imagine what Budgell would think of New China, which today is not only No. 2 in GDP (USD 11 trillion—14.8% of global GDP) but also No. 1 in PPP (Purchasing Power Parity, “a measure which adjusts a country’s wealth based on what people can afford to buy.”)

The world should be grateful that China is No. 1 in PDP because it is Chinese’ newfound wealth that is driving global tourism. McKinsey forecasted that 160 million Chinese would travel abroad in 2020, and Chinese spend so much abroad (over USD 250 billion abroad in 2017) that London’s Marylebone Railway Station now makes announcements in Chinese.

“A true treasure” should never be exchanged for any other “fake treasures” that may harm the environment.

Xi Jinping, November 1, 2014

## Growing and Greening

While Chinese government has been influenced by Confucian morality, Taoism helps account for the ancient emphasis on harmony with the environment (as seen 1,000 years ago with Sun Kuo’s studies of climate change, deforestation and biological pest controls). Some 2,500 years ago, Lao Zi said in the *Dao De Jing* (Chapter 25), “Man follows the earth, Earth follow Heaven, Heaven follows the Tao, Tao follows what is natural.”

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<sup>3</sup>Abrami, et al., “Why China Can’t Innovate,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/03/why-china-cant-innovate>.

China has faced many hurdles in attempting to balance growing and greening, but as with its war on poverty, it has done at least as well as or better than the nations that criticize it. In 2017, *National Geographic* noted the world had lost one third of its arable land over 40 years to erosion and degradation.<sup>4</sup> But since 2000, China has accounted for a quarter of the world's greening—two fifths of it from expanding forests—even though China has only 6.3% of the world's landmass.

When I drove around China in 2019, many of the wastelands I'd seen in 1994 in Ningxia, West Fujian and Gansu had been transformed into lush grasslands and forests, including Inner Mongolia's "Great Green Wall" of trees in the Gobi desert. Begun in 1978 and projected to end in 2050, the project has already planted 66 billion trees.

China now invests more in green technology than any other country, has over half of global electric car sales, and has 99% of the world's electric busses.<sup>5</sup>

Speaking of busses—China also has the world's best transportation network. When I drove 40,000 km around China in 1994, I averaged only 300 km a day, driving 10 to 12 h daily. Today, thanks in part to breathtakingly beautiful bridges and tunnels so long that they have electric light shows to keep drivers awake, China has the world's most extensive highway and railway networks. This infrastructure, coupled with internet to even the remotest villages, is helping to drive rural development and innovation and lure young people to return home from cities.

China is on track to become the world's biggest filer of patents. In 2018, China had 46% of the planet's patent applications—some 1.5 million applications compared to 597,141<sup>6</sup> from the U.S. applications. China also filed for 53,345 international patents (21% of international patents), including 473 of the world's 608 artificial intelligence patents.<sup>7</sup> But thanks to government programs to promote rural industry and entrepreneurship, rural Chinese are proving to be as innovative as their urban peers.

China has over 4,300 "Taobao" villages, which Alibaba defines as a village in which over 10% of households run online stores and village e-commerce revenues exceed 10 million Yuan yearly. Farmers receive training in Alibaba's logistics and services to sell local farm products and specialties online. I saw firsthand in a remote Lisu minority village in West Yunnan and a She minority village in Northeast Fujian the extensive government services and training provided to lure young graduates back to help develop their ancestral hometown. Even remote Tibetan herdsmen buy and sell online through mobile phones.

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/04/china-great-green-wall-gobi-tenger-desert-ification/>.

<sup>5</sup><https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/06/china-by-numbers-10-facts-to-help-you-understand-the-superpower-today/>.

<sup>6</sup><https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccafannin/2019/10/20/a-look-at-china-beating-the-us-on-patents-can-be-misleading/#2aec6564302c>.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/06/china-by-numbers-10-facts-to-help-you-understand-the-superpower-today/>.

I was astonished when I first saw a Ningxia farmer using his cell phone for e-commerce. I thought back to the early 1990s when, even in coastal Xiamen, a Special Economic Zone, I had to spend USD 450 and wait three years to get our first phone.

## Prosperity Helps Fight Poverty

China's greatest achievement, to me at least, is that it has consistently used its newfound wealth to tackle poverty. As provincial leaders explained to me, China learned early on from other nations' examples that development alone does not necessarily benefit impoverished people. There must be programs that deliberately and strategically tackle poverty. But once China did begin to prosper, it also consistently increased the scope and efficiency of investments to tackle absolute poverty—and the results have astounded the world.

Between 1981 and 2011, global poverty dropped 50%, which is heartening, but during that same period, China's number of poor plummeted 90% from 838 million to 84.17 million, and was less than 700,000 in 2015.<sup>8</sup>

In 1993, He Kang, former Chinese Minister of Agriculture, received the World Food Prize:

... for implementing the reform policies that enabled China to become self-sufficient in basic food for the first time in modern history. This major accomplishment – which Minister He was able to achieve in little more than a decade – becomes all the more impressive when one considers that China, with over one billion people, has 22 percent of the world's population yet only 7 percent of the world's arable land.

In September, 2000, all 191 UN members signed the UN Millennium Declaration with its eight goals to achieve by 2015, number one of which was “to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty”. China was the first developing country to achieve this goal, feeding nearly 20% of the world's population with less than 10% of the world's cultivated land.

In 2013, Xi Jinping told a group of Miao minority villagers in Hunan's remote Eighteen Caves Village that he thought China could end absolute poverty by 2020. It seemed an off the cuff remark, but the nation took it to heart. Only four years later, the UN secretary-general said, “China's precision poverty alleviation is the world's only way to help the poor and reach the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” which aims to eliminate poverty in all forms, everywhere.

In December, 2019, the World Economic Forum noted that between 1990 and 2015, China had accounted for over three fifths of the reduction in global poverty. And today (2020), even with the 2020 deadline breathing down its neck, China continues to be confident and committed to ending absolute poverty in every corner of the country, regardless of what it takes. But why?

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/12/chinas-long-road-to-poverty-elimination>.

## Why Fight Poverty?

For over 30 years, I've watched how China has evolved its fight against poverty, but I've also wondered "why" the nation should be so single-mindedly in its determination to eliminate poverty, especially since Xi Jinping became general secretary of the whole Party in 2012.

Many nations of course give lip service to fighting poverty but never has another nation made abolition of poverty the cornerstone of society, government and economy.

When I compare the sacrificial anti-poverty efforts of China, a developing nation, with the token efforts of wealthier nations that dole out money in simplistic programs that often engender greater dependency than self-sufficiency, I think of the old argument about whether the pig or the chicken contributes most to a breakfast of ham and eggs. The pig argued, "You are just involved, giving eggs that you can easily replace; but I must give my life."

For 70 years, China has kept anti-poverty work as the core of its very existence. Even in the 1950s, Mao Zedong said that a socialist nation could not coexist with poverty, but for thousands of years before that, China's Confucian code of ethics and morality actually mandated that government care for its people and follow the "Five Constants" of Benevolence, Righteousness, Rites, Knowledge, and Integrity. Chinese history is full of examples of rulers and entire dynasties that were overthrown after violating this "Mandate of Heaven".

Even my own province of Fujian has outstanding examples of wise and benevolent government. Almost 1,000 years ago, Quanzhou City, ancient start of the Maritime Silk Road and Marco Polo's port of departure from China, saved grain during good years to help feed its people during lean years or after natural disasters such as typhoons. And of course we've already looked at the Dujiangyan irrigation project that for 2,200 years has fed much of West China.

## The Modern Mandate of Heaven

China's leaders today, like their ancient forebears, labor under the same moral imperative to provide the people with basic food, clothing, shelter and healthcare.

Modern rulers, like the ancients who had to prove themselves by surviving the grueling imperial exam (which some Europeans called "the test from hell"), must graduate from university and then prove themselves capable before they are moved up in the ranks of leadership.

Hong Kong-Apec Trade Policy Group executive David Dodwell wrote in 2017, "The main difference between the U.S. and China is not that one is capitalist and the other communist. Rather, it's that one is run by lawyers, and the other by engineers."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup><https://stansberrypacific.com/china/china-technology-is-ten-times-better-than-you-might-think/>.



Given China's success with hi-speed trains, supercomputers, and the first landing on the dark side of the moon, it appears that China's engineer bureaucrats are doing well.

And New China, like Old China, has strict policies to minimize corruption and inculcate within leaders a sense of moral responsibility. Again, like the ancients, modern young leaders are first sent to areas far from home and friends. Xi Jinping, for example, was sent to Xiamen, and then to Ningde, one of the 18 poorest counties in China, where the 35-year-old thought up many of the anti-poverty philosophies and practices that were later adopted throughout China. His conscientiousness and creative approach to solving poverty in Ningde led him to the governorship of Fujian Province, and then on to Shanghai and Beijing—but he had to prove himself each step of the way.

The government also works unceasingly at grilling into the minds and hearts of the populace that fighting poverty must be New China's cornerstone. This may sound simple in theory but in practice it is not easy to get people living comfortable urban lives to really care about starving farmers living in remote mountainous or desert regions.

## **China's Anti-poverty Straight from the Horse's Mouth**

China's war on poverty is so multi-faceted, embracing 70 years of evolving philosophies, policies and practices, that my own understanding was at best patchwork—until I had the honor of flying to Beijing and interviewing Dr. Huang Chengwei, the man who had been in charge of the entire nation's anti-poverty program.

As he shared how China's war on poverty began, and has evolved, I slowly began to understand many of the changes I'd witnessed. I also gained a much greater respect for the sacrifices the leadership and populace had made to achieve them—from "barefoot doctors" to "barefoot first secretaries".

But my greatest takeaway from interviewing Dr. Huang was that China has much to tell the rest of the world about eradicating an evil that should no longer exist in a world as technologically advanced as ours today.

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## Chapter 16

# Dr. Huang Chengwei: Leading the Fight Against Poverty



For more than two decades [1990-2015] China served as the most potent anti-poverty weapon the world has ever known.... Of every five people in the world who escaped poverty during this span – a total of roughly 1.1 billion people – three were Chinese.

World Economic Forum, February 3, 2016

It's hard to find an article about China's poverty alleviation that doesn't have Dr. Huang Chengwei as author, co-author or consultant. But that's not surprising, given he is the former director of the National Poverty Alleviation and Education Center of the State Council Poverty Alleviation Office.

I've read several of Dr. Huang's papers but it wasn't until I interviewed him in his Beijing office that I fully grasped the sheer magnitude and complexity of China's war on poverty—and why the world has so much to learn from China.

Dr. Huang was born in 1965 in Lingshan County, in S.E. Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and judging from his accomplishments, I don't think he has slept since he was born. Dr Huang helped research and develop China's national poverty alleviation policies, including Xi Jinping's precision poverty alleviation strategy. As if that wasn't enough, he is also a part-time professor and PhD tutor at Wuhan University and Huazhong Normal University, visiting professor for the Chinese Academy of Management Science, part-time professor at several other universities, and chair of some 50 research studies, including many supported by the National Social Science Fund.

In his free time, Dr. Huang has published over 100 papers in journals, authored or co-authored 25 books, and won awards while working as chief editor of 45 publications related to poverty reduction and development. He has also served as the leader of teams in the World Bank, United Nations Development Program, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the Asian Development Bank, Australian Development Agency, Department for Overseas Development of the United Kingdom, Hong Kong Oxfam, International Action Assistance, etc.

On top of all of that, he is constantly fielding demands from the media, universities and government for lectures and interviews, so I felt somewhat guilty for also taking his time, but I took it anyway, because no one understands China's fight against

poverty better than Dr. Huang—with the exception, perhaps, of Xi Jinping, who has tackled poverty since he was sent to the countryside as a teen.

## People-First Leadership

Dr. Huang had adjusted his busy schedule to fit me in but when he entered the room, he was relaxed and affable, and acted as if he had all the time in the world. This attitude of Chinese leaders has impressed me since I moved to Xiamen in 1988. The first time I called unexpectedly on our dean at his home, he set aside his work and served tea and oranges. In 1988, oranges were for holidays and tea was a treat; even our famous Anxi tea farmers were so poor they could not afford to drink their own tea and brewed herbs or weeds instead. But our Dean, Dr. Ping, was the epitome of a gracious Chinese host, serving the best he had, and we chatter for two hours. Only the next day did I learn from his secretary that he had stayed up until 4 am to finish the work I'd interrupted.

I've taught leadership in China for 32 years but have not yet mastered this "people first" leadership trait. And as Dr. Huang explained, it is this ancient "people first" mentality that has been the bedrock for China's 70-year fight against poverty.

Dr. Huang's schedule was tight so I expected terse, simple answers to my questions, but he replied with precise and thorough answers, ticking off policies and practices with topics and subtopics. No wonder so many grad students seek him out as a PhD advisor.

The way Dr. Huang answered every question with facts and figures reminded me of former Premier Wen Jiabao, whom I'd met in a few Beijing meetings. A European reporter once said that Premier Wen's head had "a computer, not a brain". After meeting leaders like Wen Jiabao, Director Huang, and even Xi Jinping a couple of times when he was still in Fujian, I can see why Dodwell wrote in 2017 that the biggest difference between China and the U.S. is that the U.S. is run by lawyers and China by engineers (just like old China that was run by engineers).

## Poverty Amidst Plenty Is Immoral

"So when did China first start fighting poverty?" I asked him.

"I'd like to answer this question in three parts," Dr. Huang said, settling back in his chair like a professor with his student.

"First, the background of China's rural poverty alleviation strategy and how it has persisted and evolved over 70 years. Second, why we target rural areas. And third, the main problems overcome at each stage."

"Poverty alleviation began on the very eve of New China in 1949," Dr. Huang said, "because from day one the Party's primary task has been to serve and meet the

needs of the people – especially the poorest people. But practices have evolved with advances in knowledge and economy.”

Dr. Huang explained that the Party has had both ideological and pragmatic needs for fighting poverty. Ideologically, poverty amidst plenty is immoral. But pragmatically, it had to meet the needs of its greatest constituency—which was poor farmers. So like any political party, “the Communist Party knew it could ensure the stability of its power only by giving people a better life. In 1956, Mao Zedong warned that a nation without prosperity for all was not truly a socialist nation; socialism, by its nature, dictates the elimination of poverty.”

As many developing nations have discovered, so-called “trickle-down economics” does not work, so China has fought poverty from day one by keeping government people-centered. “If people are not the center, the focus is poverty reduction through national development with the expectation that poor areas will keep up,” Dr. Huang explained, “but according to our experience, this is impossible.”

For 70 years, poverty reduction has been the core, not an afterthought or by-product, of every stage of development. “Fighting poverty,” Dr. Huang said, “has always been the core work of the whole Party, the whole country, the whole society. Everyone is concerned about developing the poor areas.”

## Survival First

Not surprisingly, anti-poverty measures had to evolve over the decades from good-intentioned but naïvely simplistic aid, which fostered dependency, to a more sustainable enablement approach that inculcated self-sufficiency. “From 1949 to 1978, China used a planned economy as a broad-based poverty reduction strategy,” Dr. Huang explained. “In 1952, China tackled peasant’s landlessness with land reform and the commune system’s public ownership of rural property, but leaders gradually realized this hurt peasants’ work motivation and was extremely inefficient.”

With rural China so extremely backward in every measure, they were forced to initially focus on guaranteeing basic survival rights—food, clothing, basic medical care, etc.—as well as industrialization of the nation, but the situation deteriorated further because of the famines of the 1950s and 1960s, and an over reliance on top-down relief-type poverty reduction (transfusion-type). “Relief-type poverty alleviation met the needs of the extremely poor,” Dr. Huang said, “but failed to develop their abilities or fix the fundamental causes of poverty, which only exacerbated their dependency. Relief rescued the starving, but not the poor.”

In spite of setbacks and missteps, China’s economy slowly gained momentum, and the nation shifted its focus to raising rural productivity through national development of infrastructure, improved irrigation, establishment of a rural science and technology service network, rural cooperative credit system and rapid development of rural basic education.

## World's First Universal Healthcare

China also created the planet's first universal healthcare system with their famous army of 1.5 million "barefoot doctors". This program was so innovative and effective that in 1974 the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare printed an English version of the Hunan's *Barefoot Doctor's Manual*. To this day, the barefoot doctor program is held up as a model for developing nations to assure basic medical care for the poor.

But barefoot doctors were neither barefoot nor doctors. They were peasants who received 3–6 months of intensive training in both Chinese and Western medicine to enable them to give basic first aid and treat a couple hundred of common ailments, the emphasize being prevention over cure—which has been China's focus for millennia; in Old China, doctors were paid to keep patients healthy. But as medical volunteers in poor regions around the world have found, simple first aid can often spell the difference between life and death—or a lifetime of blindness or lameness.

These health workers were said to be barefoot because they endured the same communal living conditions and received the same remuneration as the farmers, who often did work the fields barefoot. But living and working side by side with their patients gave barefoot doctors an intimate familiarity with both the environment and their patients' unique needs. A 2008 World Health Organization report titled "China's Village Doctors Take Great Strides", told the story of former barefoot doctor Liu Yuzhong:

Another of the barefoot brigade, Dr. Liu Yuzhong, still offers basic healthcare to his fellow villagers after 43 years' service. Now 69, he is known by patients as a caring, skillful doctor, though he says, "I learned something of everything, but specialized in nothing." He adds: "There are great advantages to having a barefoot doctor in the village. The patients are all my neighbors. I know each family's situation, lifestyle and habits. Since I see my patients very often, even if I cannot diagnose precisely the first time, I can follow up closely and give a better diagnosis the next time.

It is no wonder China revered its barefoot doctors, some of whom went on to advanced medical studies in China and abroad. Dr. Liu Xingzhu, today the program director of the U.S. National Institute of Health's Fogarty International Center, was himself a barefoot doctor from 1975–1977. He remembers being given only a bag of basic medicines with two syringes and ten needles<sup>1</sup>—but it saved peoples' lives, and set him on a lifelong career in medicine.

While China's medical feats were impressive, its economic growth was lackluster. From 1950 to 1973, China's economy had been dominated by state ownership and central planning and averaged only 2.9% per year growth. China had implemented a basic rural social security system with "five guarantees"—adequate food, clothing, medical care, housing and funeral expenses, as well as relief for the extremely poor, yet by 1978, a quarter of China's 956 million people were still under the poverty line.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/12/08-021208/en/>.

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/sl/201902/t20190221\\_800157313.html](http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/sl/201902/t20190221_800157313.html).

The nation needed a fundamentally new approach—hence reform and opening up and “market socialism”—a uniquely Chinese approach to socialism.

## **Reform and Opening up**

In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping spearheaded rural reform with new policies to promote production and development. The “people’s communes” in the countryside were dismantled, China opened to foreign investment and Chinese entrepreneurs were encouraged to go into business. “Some will get rich first,” Deng Xiaoping famously said, trusting that those who prospered first would help lift the rest into common prosperity.

From 1978 to 1985, China redoubled its attack on poverty by reforming the rural economic system, including rural land, market and employment systems, and increasing agricultural product prices. Per capita output rose dramatically and farmers’ per capita net income rose from 133.6 Yuan in 1978 to 397 Yuan in 1985. The number of rural poor plummeted 50% from 250 million to 125 million—but no one celebrated yet because 125 million was still over half of the entire U.S. population at that time.

The government gradually realized that much of the most intractable poverty was due to natural, geographic, historic and cultural factors such as the language barriers that hindered some minorities from obtaining education and better jobs. In 1982, China began a series of national, large-scale poverty alleviation efforts with the “Sanxi Program” in poor regions of Gansu and Ningxia, and in 1984 began improving its rural education network and introduced an innovative system of using “labor for relief” for social engineering projects. Much like the U.S.’s CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) during the Great Depression, this project provided jobs while improving the rural infrastructure that had been one of the biggest obstacles to effective poverty alleviation.

## **Fine-Tuning Poverty Alleviation**

In 1986, China took anti-poverty measures to a new level by establishing the Leading Group of Poverty Alleviation and Development Under the State Council (central government) to standardize and institutionalize rural poverty alleviation and development. This group identified poor counties, set a national poverty line, and created special funds for poverty alleviation, with a key priority being food and clothing for the poorest of the poor.

In spite of ambitious efforts like the Sanxi Program, the disparity between coastal and interior development became even greater, so from 1986 to 1993 the government fine-tuned its focus. Although this regional focus did benefit county economies, it lacked direct contact with poor farmers. This shortcoming, coupled with a slowdown

of rural economic growth and the extremely complex challenges facing the remaining poor, led to an increase of 7 million in absolute poverty between 1985 and 1989 according to World Bank estimates. In response, then President Jiang Zemin and his successor Hu Jintao again reemphasized the Party's fundamental belief that, "The minimum requirement for common prosperity is to solve the problem of poverty."

China finally remedied the problem of direct contact with the poor in March, 1994, with inauguration of its national 80-7 Poverty Alleviation Plan. This ambitious plan mandated meeting 80 million people's basic needs of food and clothing within only seven years, but this time the leadership zeroed in on the household level to ensure stable conditions for each poor family's subsistence. At the same time, the Party made its efforts more sustainable by shifting from "relief poverty" (blood transfusion) to "development-driven poverty alleviation" (blood production)—from aid to enablement. As ancient Chinese said, "Give a fish, feed for a day; teach to fish, feed for a lifetime."

From 1995 to 1999, the funds for poverty alleviation loans, work subsidies and development funds increased 1.63 times. And even as individual poor households were targeted from the bottom, the nation also worked from the top down on macro-economic policies that accelerated economic development in the central and western regions. This juggling of bottom up and top down strategies was incredibly complex, yet even as I drove around China's most remote regions in the summer of 1994, only months after the 80-7 Plan had been put into effect, I could already see the effects of this marriage of macro policies and targeted household poverty reduction.

The humanitarian aspect impressed me but not the economics. How on earth, I wondered, could China justify investing hundreds of millions in extremely poor, sparsely populated regions like Ningxia or northwest Tibet? Years later, as I began to appreciate China's farsighted vision, I was reminded of Sony founder Akio Morita's 1989 book *The Japan That Can Say No*, which had a section entitled, "America Looks 10 min Ahead; Japan Looks 10 Years."

Chinese, I've learned, look ahead centuries.

Thanks to measures such as minimum living assistance, technology poverty alleviation, labor transfer, and ecological migration, poor farmers' per capita net income tripled from 483.7 Yuan in 1993 to 1,321 Yuan in 2,000 and the number of rural absolute poor plummeted from 80 million to 32 million. The Chinese government proudly announced that it had met the basic goals of the 80-7 Poverty Alleviation Plan—food and clothing for China's rural poor. Yet even as China celebrated, the leadership recognized that the last bastions of poverty would be the hardest to defeat.

## Whole Village Promotion, Two Wheel Drive

In 2001, China targeted 94 million people in 592 poor counties and 150,000 poor villages for its "whole village promotion" and "two-wheel drive" (linking poverty alleviation with development) poverty reduction strategies. By 2010, the three-pronged focus on village advancement, industrial development and labor transfer had



paid off and farmers' income in key counties had almost doubled to 3,273 Yuan—yet again faster growth than the national average. But in response to international standard and domestic development needs, China adjusted its “poverty line”, which raised the official number of poor from 28.88 million to 43 million.

From 2011 to 2020, farmers' incomes continued to rise faster than the national average, yet the number of “poor” increased yet again when China again raised the rural poverty line by 92% to 2,300 Yuan per capita net income. Yet regardless of the poverty line issue, it was obvious that China had solved the problem of food and clothing for the vast majority of the poor and strengthened the national economy by narrowing the gap between urban and rural areas so well that many started moving back to the countryside.

## **Garden City, Garden Villages**

Over half of the world now lives in cities, and urbanization has plagued China as well, but thanks to improved rural infrastructure and natural environments, urbanization in China has slowed and, in some cases, even reversed.

Twenty years ago, China boasted many “Garden Cities”; today, we're seeing more and more “Garden Villages”. In Hunan, Yang Chaowen, a young Miao minority entrepreneur, said, “When we worked in the big city, we were envious of the high-rise buildings and parks... Although we cannot build high-rise buildings, our village is much prettier than the city. We just had to build it ourselves!”

His village is now like a garden—both beautiful and prosperous. A young Miao girl in Mr. Yang's village said, “There's no place like home—especially if prosperous.”

As Dr. Huang noted, youth don't dare return to their ancestral homes unless they can afford to live there, so China has developed financial policies, subsidies and training programs to promote rural entrepreneurship—especially e-commerce, which is made possible across China thanks to nationwide internet coverage and the planet's best highway and high-speed train networks. When I drove around China in 2019, I saw fleets of delivery trucks even in remote Tibet.

## **4,300+ Taobao Villages**

China's youth are especially excited about the 4,300+ “Taobao villages” in 25 provinces. In 2018, these villages' 660,000 online shops generated 195 billion Yuan in rural e-commerce sales—up 30.4% from 2017 and outpacing e-commerce's 24%

overall growth.<sup>3</sup> The Taobao village model benefits about half of the rural population, often creating a “virtuous circle” where growth in rural production in turn drives consumption.

Decades of fine-tuning its numerous programs has slowly led to success in fighting poverty, but no one expected the seismic shifts in policy and practice that would follow Xi Jinping’s rise to power in 2012, and his announcement that China would use “precision poverty alleviation” to end absolute poverty by 2020.

As Dr. Huang explained, “When Xi Jinping became general secretary of the Party in 2012, the fight against poverty entered a new stage.”

For Xi Jinping, however, this “new stage” was merely a continuation of a battle he’d begun in his teens.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.alizila.com/taobao-villages-driving-inclusive-growth-rural-china/>. November 25, 2019.

# Chapter 17

## Standing on Giants' Shoulders: Xi Jinping's Precision Poverty Alleviation



If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.

Isaac Newton, in a letter to Robert Hooke, February 5, 1676<sup>1</sup>

When Xi Jinping became president in 2012, China still had nearly 100 million poor people—greater than the population of all but 11 of the world's 233 countries and regions at that time. But far from being intimidated, in 2015, President Xi declared to the world what he'd said to Eighteen Caves' villagers in November, 2013—that China could vanquish absolute poverty by 2020.

Xi Jinping had good reason for confidence. Like Isaac Newton, Xi stood on the shoulders of giants who, within 60 years, had lifted more people from poverty than any nation in history. But the last few million were proving to be the most intractable because of their remoteness, cultural and language barriers, or natural environments decimated by over-population, over-utilization and global warming.

### Anti-Poverty No. 1; Precision at All Levels

Determined to reach these last few millions, Xi made two decisions. First, he declared that poverty alleviation and development must become the No. 1 priority for governing at every level—and not just on paper but in practice, with every leader at every level held strictly accountable. As Dr. Huang Chengwei noted, elimination of poverty had of course been the Party's goal since 1949, "However, this idea is constantly developing. When Xi Jinping became president in 2012, the fight against poverty entered a new stage. A society cannot be said to be well off if there are still tens of millions of poor people! The main contribution of President Xi has been to prioritize poverty reduction and mobilize the entire Party, entire country and entire society through a series of innovative strategies ... to use China's wisdom to reduce poverty."

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<sup>1</sup>Isaac Newton, "Letter from Sir Isaac Newton to Robert Hooke", Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Xi's second decision, to focus on precision poverty alleviation, was to have a great influence upon the war on poverty not only in China but in the rest of the world as well—especially China's Belt and Road Initiative. Xi of course built upon the successes of those who went before him but he also relied heavily upon his own experiences as a 35-year-old Party secretary tackling poverty in Ningde, Fujian—one of the nation's 18 poorest counties. Many of his policies and practices from that early period later came to be used nationwide, including Xi's emphases on finding the specific causes and cures of poverty in each unique situation, building upon the peoples' strengths, and giving extra aid to minorities hindered by geographic or cultural isolation.

## **Dr. Huang's Overview of Precision Poverty Alleviation**

In 2015, on a World Bank blog,<sup>2</sup> Dr. Huang gave the world a brief overview of the whys and hows of Xi's precision poverty alleviation:

Rural farmers' per capita incomes have risen faster than the national average, and farmers have benefited from improved infrastructure and public services, including highways and railways, access to electricity and internet, universal access to compulsory education, a rural minimum living standards guarantee scheme, and extensive rural cooperative medical care.

But Dr. Huang also divulged the formidable challenges still facing the nation:

By the end of 2015, 55.75 million Chinese people still lived in poverty, equivalent to the population of a medium-sized country [actually, larger than 174 of 198 countries in 2015!]. The nation still has 14 poor regions, 832 poor counties, and 128,000 poor villages. It will be a hard task to help the remaining poor, as they live in deep poverty and lack self-development capacity. And it will become increasingly difficult and costly. But there is no time to lose. To eliminate extreme poverty by 2020, 10 million people have to be lifted out of poverty each year for the next four years. Their vulnerability means that they are very likely to fall back into poverty due to disaster, illness, education and housing costs.

In the next five years, China, as the biggest developing country in the world, is entering a critical stage of its efforts to build a well-off society, and is facing a number of new challenges in poverty reduction...

China faces many new problems, such as economic slowdown and industrial restructuring, inadequate targeting mechanism, poorly defined responsibilities, inefficient allocation and use of resources, and lack of effective policy coordination among poverty alleviation approaches, rural minimum living standards guarantee, new rural cooperative medical care, medical assistance, dilapidated housing rehabilitation and education assistance, and lack of adaptation to local conditions and specific guidance.

The government has set a target to lift all rural poor people and poor counties out of poverty by 2020 as part of the goal to build a well-off society. In the next five years, China will pursue precision poverty alleviation policies and strive to reduce poverty through development of industries, labor migration, relocation, and minimum living standards guarantee scheme. The government will increase fiscal spending and financial support, strengthen land policy, mobilize private resources, and create a favorable environment. It also focuses on defining poverty

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<sup>2</sup>“Ending poverty in China: Lessons for other countries and the challenges still ahead”.

alleviation responsibilities of governments at all levels, developing a rigorous monitoring and evaluation system, and establishing an exit mechanism for poor counties.

By taking these and other actions, China is working hard to achieve its goal of eliminating extreme poverty by 2020.

But as Dr. Huang explained, Xi's precision poverty alleviation was possible only because he also demanded precise accountability with no room whatsoever for inefficient or inappropriate use of resources. All leaders, at all level, are held accountable for "six precisions", including precise support objects, precise project arrangements, accurate fund use, accurate household-level measures, accurate village assignments, and accurate poverty alleviation results. But the linchpin holding the entire program together is the "first secretary"—though I feel "barefoot first secretary" is a more appropriate title.

## **Barefoot First Secretaries**

In 1951, only two years after Liberation, Beijing declared that all villages should have basic medical care by medical workers living right in the villages. By 1957, the nation already had over 200,000 barefoot doctors, and eventually some 1.5 million. Today, China no longer has barefoot doctors but it does have first secretaries who are just as barefoot—at least in spirit.

Even in the 1980s, the government realized that a great weakness of the national anti-poverty programs was that they did not connect directly with the very people they were designed to help—the poor—hence the first secretary. Like barefoot doctors, first secretaries are "part of the community, understand the community, care about the community and are trusted by the community". They get to know each village member and their condition, and work to change not only conditions but also attitudes—to instill a spirit of self-reliance and courage, to promote innovativeness and entrepreneurialism.

This idea of closer official-masses relationships arose in part from Xi Jinping's experiences of living seven years in the poverty-stricken village of Liangjiahe, where he came face-to-face with China's endemic poverty. "From General Secretary Xi," Dr. Huang said, "we can see that if an official does not have a deep understanding of the reality of development imbalances, it is difficult for him to excel at managing and governing."

But sometimes the realities these barefoot first secretaries face are almost overwhelming. "I could not understand their language and they didn't understand standard Chinese!" one first secretary said to me. "I wanted to help them but they had no idea what I was saying – so we communicated with lots of sign language and lots of rice wine!"

"Did you ever learn their language?" I asked.

"No," he said, laughing. "They learned mine. They're smarter than I am!"

But one first secretary shared his shock in learning that some people simply did not want to be helped. “Some do not want to escape poverty because they have never known anything else. They have no idea that they’re poor, or that their child’s deformity or fatal illness could have been avoided with even the simplest medical care. It’s heartbreaking. But once they’ve a taste of a better life, they do not want to go back to the old ways. So Xi Jinping was right – we must prove to them they can have a better life.”

I’ve been deeply moved by the first secretaries I’ve met in Ningxia, Fujian, Tibet—or even in my own home province of Fujian. Some were flabbergasted by problems that seem unbelievable and almost comical in retrospect. One first secretary happily gave minority members the keys to their new houses—only to have to replace over 100 doors because they’d never seen keys before and used axes to batter down the doors. Since then, he’s careful to give lessons on using locks and keys.

Although some first secretaries were assigned to their tasks, quite a few volunteered to give up their comfortable, well-paid jobs in provincial capitals and even leave their families for a three-year stint serving in poor villages and living in the same conditions. But what really surprised me was that many ask for another three years after their first term is up, even though they only see their families a few times a year, and many suffer serious health issues—especially in high altitude Tibet. One told me, “Not everyone has obvious symptoms of altitude sickness, but our bodies weren’t designed for these heights. At this elevation, even Tibetans are affected over time. No one escapes unscathed. My friend, another Han Chinese who had served in Tibet two years, seemed perfectly healthy – until the day he keeled over dead.”

“But if it hurts your health, why did you volunteer for another three years?” I asked. “Why don’t you return home to your family?”

He sighed. “Yes, my health has suffered – but I’ve never before done anything more fulfilling.”

With such dedicated “barefoot leaders” undertaking China’s ambitious national policies, it is not surprising that farmers’ situations are improving rapidly. From 2010 to 2015, the per capita net income of farmers in poverty-stricken counties doubled, with a higher growth rate than the national average for five consecutive years. At the same time, rural social security was improved, including medical and retirement, and infrastructure was improved to the point that some 90% of villages have access to highways, electricity and telephones.

## **Precision Pummels Poverty**

But Dr. Huang was quick to clarify that this improvement was not because of China’s economic growth alone. “Many nations prosper and still do not help the poor.” China’s success has been possible only because of precision poverty alleviation strategies honed over the decades. And thanks to Xi Jinping’s contribution since becoming president in 2012, and the lessons learned by China’s army of first secretaries, Dr.

Huang is confident that China can also help other countries fight poverty—especially China’s partners in the Belt and Road Initiative.

“The results have been obvious!” Dr. Huang said. “China’s changes have been holistic and comprehensive, with improved infrastructure, education, health, science and technology. Visit any impoverished area and you can see the tremendous changes that have taken place there, especially in terms of people’s livelihood. The changes are huge. The roads in poor areas have been repaired, the courtyards of poor families are quiet and peaceful and they are using hygienic toilets. These are revolutionary changes.”

“Revolutionary indeed!” I thought, as I remembered the rural and urban toilets of the late 1980s.

“The country has also changed the industrial format of entire impoverished areas,” Dr. Huang said, “including e-commerce poverty alleviation, photovoltaic poverty alleviation, consumer poverty alleviation, and other new types of poverty alleviation methods.

“From 1978 to 2012, per capita income and consumption level of rural residents increased by 11.5 times and 9.3 times, respectively. Per capita disposable income of rural residents in poverty-stricken areas in 2018 was 10,731 Yuan, which was 1.99 times that of 2012 – and higher growth than the national average. In 2018, the per capita consumption expenditure of rural residents in poverty-stricken areas in 2018 was 73.9% of the national average in rural areas.”

## **Pride in Self and Nation**

“These great changes have also dramatically improved the mental outlook of the poor,” Dr. Huang said, “giving them self-confidence and pride.” He also noted it has strengthened solidarity. “Only when the people at the grassroots level and the poorest people say that the Communist Party and our president are good can we prove that our Communist Party is really good and capable of governing.”

I resonated with that. I’ve asked many farmers why their lives had improved so much, so quickly. Several farmers in different parts of the country told me, “Good policies.”

“But why good policies?” I persisted.

“Policies are good because leaders understand our needs and care for us.”

But several farmers added, “Of course, policies aren’t enough. We must do our part as well.”

But before China built rural infrastructure, farmers couldn’t do their part even if they had wanted to. A Ningxia farmer said, “Before we had roads, we could not escape our remote valleys to sell anything or seek work. We were like frogs in a well.” He grinned, and held up his Huawei cell phone. “Now we’re free!”

China’s success in fighting poverty has not only reduced unequal development between urban and rural areas but has also helped improve the social atmosphere. Dr. Huang said, “In the old days, how could a family in Beijing know that family life

in Qinghai was so difficult, that the children couldn't afford school and had no hope if they fell ill? But now through social mobilization, through poverty alleviation, through consumption of rural products, etc., many people in large cities have learned about the lives of people in poverty-stricken areas, and they know that many people have much worse living conditions than them. People's hearts are good; it is very important to stimulate and activate this kindness. After seeing a doctor, you can't forget your disease; likewise, after seeing poverty, we can understand that, regardless of our situation, there are still tens of millions worse off than I am."

## Urban-Rural Citizen Exchanges

As Dr. Huang spoke of projects bridging city and country, I thought of some of the rural-urban projects I had seen across China. Some cities organize monthly fruit fairs so city dwellers can head to the countryside, pick their own seasonal fruits—different fruits each month—and pay the farmer directly. Farmers earn more, town and country come to understand each other better, and some people, like Feng Yougen, a rich Hunan entrepreneur, seize the opportunity to teach city children about nature. Mr. Feng said, "Nowadays, many children have grown up in the city since birth. They have never been in contact with nature and know nothing about animals and plants. So each year we have 300,000 children come to Panlong Grand View Garden to see very diverse plants and flowers from every country of the world."

China also has many programs in which rural and urban children become pen pals, or city children tutor children online. A 16-year-old student at New Channel Education Group headquarters in Beijing told me that in spite of her heavy academic schedule, she spends several hours a week tutoring rural children in math. "Do they pay you?" I asked.

"No," she said. "My family is not well off, but we have more than they do. I'm thankful I can help."

Rural tourism has also benefited the entire nation, with Nongjiale providing income for farmers and affordable country getaways for city people – and quite often, lifetime friendships between hosts and guests.

"This fight against poverty provides a model for the development of all mankind," Dr. Huang said. "We can't have some people live the good life while others are hungry, cold and sick. Those who prosper cannot forget those who lag behind. As a thinking, advanced animal, man cannot allow this to happen."

"So what can the rest of the world learn from China?" I asked Dr. Huang.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Huang had answers right at his fingertips.



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# Chapter 18

## China's Anti-Poverty Lessons for the World



China's seven-decade fight against poverty is both impressive and significant in its scope and pace, but I wondered if other countries could duplicate China's success.

"What can the world learn from China's fight against poverty?" I asked Dr. Huang.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Huang ticked off enough lessons for the world that he could probably single-handedly run a global anti-poverty institute (which, like China's 500+ Confucius Institutes, could have a very positive influence on bridging the gulf between East and West, North and South).

### China Surpasses Global Standards

"In Xi Jinping's understanding," Dr. Huang said, "his entire set of concepts and ideas for poverty alleviation has surpassed the current international theoretical system of poverty reduction in many aspects. We can now contribute Chinese solutions and insights to global poverty reduction because the success of our large-scale poverty reduction is mainly guided by thought, strategy and policy system.

"Many foreigners have seen our achievements in poverty reduction, but they often only know a single story and case. We hope they can see how our ruling party and governments care about the poor during the entire process of our country's governance. China's new era anti-poverty model can be summarized as "two lines and one force", Dr. Huang said. The "two lines" are economic development and social safety nets, and the "one force" is the government's leadership.

But China's social and political systems are unique. "Can other nations copy China's practices?" I asked.

"For other nations to emulate China," Dr. Huang said, "they would do well to follow its example in drafting strategies according to their unique historical and geographical context, and then to focus on comprehensive development such as

improving rural infrastructure, education and health, etc. And of course, development must be sustainable, which requires protection of resources and ecological construction.”

## **Learning from Mistakes: Less Aid, More Enable**

The world could learn from both China's triumphs and mistakes, Dr. Huang said, such as initial over-reliance on simplistic “aid”, which breeds dependency without fostering the self-reliance needed to make anti-poverty programs sustainable.

“To shift from ‘aid’ to ‘enablement’, there must be a focus on increasing the poor's income by relying on scientific and technological progress, optimizing varieties of crops, improving quality, increasing efficiency, and improving information, technology, and sales services to maximize production and income.”

I was reminded of China's 4000+ Taobao villages. With improved infrastructure, such innovations could be duplicated in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Dr. Huang also emphasized the importance of agricultural industrialization, which can help provide poor farmers with pre-, mid-, and post-production serial services, and form a one-stop industrialization operation integrating trade, industry and agriculture, production, supply, and sales. I had seen this strategy at work in Ningxia and Western Yunnan, near the border of Tibet.

China has also expanded labor export in poor areas by improving labor skills, setting up an employment information service system, and working to safeguard transferred laborers' legitimate rights and interests. (I've met some of these migrant workers, who went on to establish profitable businesses that lifted their entire home village from poverty).

## **Vulnerability of Minorities**

Minorities are especially vulnerable, as Xi Jinping discovered in the late 1980s when working with the She people in Fujian's Ningde, one of China's 18 poorest counties. Minorities have long enjoyed special privileges such as exemption from the one-child policy, but geographical, cultural and linguistic isolation have until recently been insurmountable barriers to development. But a small boost can work wonders. I've met many minority students from around China who were accepted to Xiamen University in spite of slightly lower marks on their entrance exams, but they surpassed their more privileged classmates and returned to help build their hometowns.

## Regional Inequity

Regional poverty is yet another problem the world over. “China has made great achievements in promoting poverty alleviation and development through stages and regions, on the basis of respecting regional differences and national culture,” Mr. Huang said, “with specific strategies for developing the western region, revitalizing northeast industrial bases and developing the central region.”

China has also learned the importance of international exchange of experience and knowledge and cooperation with institutes such as UNICEF and UNESCO. But increasingly, other nations are looking to China for insights, and Dr. Huang says the most important lesson for any nation is strong leadership.

### The No. 1 Lesson Is Leadership

“First off is Party leadership,” Dr. Huang said. “Many foreigners cannot understand China’s Party leadership, but in my opinion, in human development, no matter what political system you follow, the core demand of every politician should be to seek the happiness and welfare of the people. Republicans, Kuomintang, Communists.... These are just different forms. But if a political party is in line with the law of human development and has the people’s support, it must focus the leadership’s attention on eliminating poverty. Any political party that fails to solve the problem of the survival of the poor is not a political party that is in the interest of the people.

“Take our country as an example,” Dr. Huang said. “We have promised to completely eliminate absolute poverty by 2020. If we fail in this goal, other countries will say the Communist Party does not keep its word and is not honest. And China’s people will also feel that the Communist Party is just big talk but does not really represent the interests of our common people.... If a country’s incidence of poverty exceeds 30% and the country cannot resolve it, no one will believe their systems and political parties are advanced. So what system is advanced?”

I did not answer, so Dr. Huang answered for me. “At present, most believe that the capitalist systems of Europe and the U.S. are advanced. The capitalist system represents the direction of the development of advanced productive forces. But it has created and exposed some problems. Of course, we cannot say that these problems are insurmountable, or that they will inevitably lead to the division of society, but at least it can be said that the capitalist system is not a perfect system.

“Of course, we do not expect to say that the United States must recognize China, or say China is good. But we can at least explore ways to form a model, including our Party leadership, that can be used by other developing countries. The same is true for poverty alleviation. Without the Party leadership, poverty alleviation in China is simply impossible.”

“But other nations don’t have China’s system of government,” I said. “Can they still learn from China?”

“Can other countries learn from China? I think so,” Dr. Huang said. “We have a billion people in China and hundreds of millions of poor people, yet we can provide good governance. So would a country with only tens of millions of people, or even a country with only millions of people, fail to govern? As long as they commit to implementing the poverty alleviation plans we have used, they will definitely see benefit.”

## **Transparency and Constant Reform**

Dr. Huang also emphasized that all nations, China included, must engage in constant reform and opening up to promote development of the entire economic and social system, otherwise poor areas will always lag. “And if it is not open and transparent,” he said, “there will be no information exchange. Closed areas and impoverished areas will always lag behind and will never be able to adopt new technologies.”

“So what did you think of the UN secretary-general’s letter praising China’s poverty reduction strategy?” I asked Dr. Huang.

“I think this evaluation is very relevant,” he said. “It reflects the international community’s affirmation and recognition of Xi Jinping’s precision poverty alleviation strategy.... I think General Secretary Xi’s greatness lies in his ability to help solve the global problem of poverty in an easy-to-understand manner. And China’s vibrant practices show the international community that it is indeed possible to undertake a complete set of effective systems for poverty governance.”

## **Social Mobilization**

One thing that sets China apart from other nations is the society’s keenness in undertaking social projects. When I represented Chinese cities in an international competition for livable communities, many leaders from around the world asked me, “How does China get so many volunteers?”

Dr. Huang feels that this social mobilization at all levels, from first secretaries to urban volunteers, is key to China’s anti-poverty programs.

“Social mobilization is indeed a pivotal factor,” Dr. Huang said. “The whole society must be mobilized to help the poor. Many countries in India and Africa have used the methods of European and American countries to help the poor through social organizations. Of course, this method has its advantages. On a small scale, it can be implemented very well, though it has to be conducted in a very careful manner. Its disadvantage is that it is difficult to achieve poverty reduction on a large scale and in a holistic manner, thereby promoting the development of the whole society.

“Only by mobilizing all levels of society, and reminding the rich that their country still has poor people, can poverty be solved. High officials must know what is

happening in poor areas. In our country, even the ministers need to know the specific conditions of poor areas. This is social mobilization.

“Eastern and Central China have developed but the western region still faces challenges and needs the help of the eastern regions, or the development of the entire country will be fragmented.”

## **China Fights Poverty Abroad**

“Can other countries mobilize society as China has?” I asked, doubtful.

“They can!” Dr. Huang said. “When I was working at the China International Center for Poverty Alleviation, I did a demonstration village in Tanzania. I introduced to them China’s experiences in poverty reduction. Eventually, they implemented China’s methods across the entire province to help poor villages and drive their development. This shows that whether capitalism or socialism, in many ways governance and management systems are the same. From the perspective of governance, as long as there are higher-level arrangements, the entire society can be mobilized.”

## **Self-Reliance: When Loess Becomes Gold**

But regardless of what kinds of programs, or how well society is mobilized, in the final analysis, “the poor must also be willing to help themselves,” Dr. Huang said. He recalled Xi Jinping’s experiences as a young leader in Ningde, which was a microcosm of poverty reduction across China, and many of the practices Xi implemented in Ningde have now been adopted across the country – especially the emphasis on enablement rather than aid – of “blood production rather than blood transfusion”.

“If ordinary people lack internal motivation,” Dr. Huang said, “it is useless to rely on the idea of ‘waiting for my needs’ to be met. In Ningde, one of Xi’s key emphases was, ‘If you have faith, the loess becomes gold.’ This very important idea shows the pivotal role of inner motivation.”

Dr. Huang also emphasized not just increasing the investment in poverty alleviation but also being sure the money is spent properly. “Since the Second World War, Europe and the United States have dominated global aid, with aid to African alone exceeding USD 2 trillion. With so much invested, why is sub-Saharan Africa still impoverished? The main reason is how the funds have been used. We need to not only expand investment but also improve the structure, as well as the supervision and use of funds.”

Dr. Huang gave China’s micro financing as an example of wise use of funds to help farmers escape poverty. “It cannot be guaranteed that China’s current microfinance is completely successful, but many successful precedents have emerged, indicating that it is universally applicable.”

## **East-West China, North South Hemisphere**

Imbalances in North-South economic development could also benefit from China's experiences in resolving imbalanced growth between China's eastern and western regions, Dr. Huang said. In fact, he claimed that, at present, the international community has no effective practices to address this issue. "Developed countries have promised 0.7% of their GDP to the UN for development assistance, but how can we improve effectiveness and make it more comprehensive and win-win for both parties? At present, there are no effective global institutional mechanisms but China has such a mechanism, so its experience is very important for the governance of global development. For example, we are now promoting poverty alleviation by purchasing products such as tea or college students' food from poor areas. This innovative, pioneering work is possible because of the expansion of investment in impoverished areas."

Dr. Huang also thinks China has much to tell the world about assessing global poverty issues. "So far, I feel that large-scale international assessments have not been successful, but China's practice in recent years has been successful. We have explored methods to evaluate the performance of all levels and set a comprehensive series of clear poverty alleviation standards and channels. These practices could also be of use to the international community. Our practices may not be complete, but our experience does show that the Chinese solutions and insights on poverty can contribute to the war on global poverty. But the foundation is leaders with firm ideals and conviction to help the people."

## **Three Ways Xi Jinping's Anti-Poverty Programs Influence the World**

"What does Xi Jinping's example in fighting poverty mean for the world?" I asked Dr. Huang.

"There are three points," Dr. Huang replied. "From China's perspective, it is the foundation for building a modern, well-rounded, well-off socialist society, and also the starting point of China's new journey of socialist modernization. We cannot build a well-off society without first eliminating poverty."

"For the world, China has contributed its solutions and insights to humanity and global poverty reduction. In his keynote speech at the 2015 High-level Forum on Poverty Reduction and Development, held in Beijing on October 16, 2015, Xi Jinping stated that eradicating poverty remains the greatest global challenge facing the world today. We must build consensus, help each other, overcome difficulties, focus on accelerating the global poverty reduction process, strengthen poverty reduction and development cooperation, achieve pluralistic and independent sustainable development, and improve the international development environment. We must work tirelessly to build a community of human destiny without poverty."

“Some people are skeptical,” Dr. Huang admitted, “but this is our vision. We’re not saying that poverty can be completely eliminated in the world, but it does mean that human development should work in this direction. And China’s solutions to fighting poverty can be adopted in other countries to solve their own problems.

“A development path that cannot solve the problem of poverty is definitely not a good path or a good system. China’s solution to the problem of absolute poverty has, to date, been in line with the direction of human development.”

Well aware of foreign skepticism, I asked, “But how do overseas media and think tanks evaluate China’s poverty reduction policies?”

“Many question whether China’s poverty reduction has been driven by overall development or by special poverty alleviation programs, but both had their roles. Economic development is of course needed to fund the fight against poverty, but special poverty reduction policies are also indispensable.”

“Before reform and opening up,” Mr. Huang said, “poverty alleviation policies were all inclusive. Since reform and opening up in 1978, development and poverty reduction have been separated. In other words, both are indispensable. The poverty alleviation of more than 700 million poor people in China is the result of the combined effect of the two forces.”

China also has lessons for the world about the importance of multi-dimensional assessments of poverty.

Dr. Huang said the world had been skeptical of China’s poverty standard, which initially was lower than the World Bank guidelines but was gradually raised until, by 2011, it has actually been slightly higher than the global standard. “If we add our other standards and social security guarantees,” Dr. Huang said, “our levels are actually much higher than international standards. In addition, the United Nations has always questioned the multi-dimensionality of our poverty determination, but now our multi-dimensional standards are recognized globally and this criticism has gradually disappeared.”

## **Four Factors for Sustainability**

Many international experts doubt the sustainability of China’s poverty reduction program, but Dr. Huang says this doubt is weakening thanks to four factors. First, leaders are held clearly accountable so poverty alleviation funds are used as planned. I thought of a first secretary in a remote Yunnan village who told me, “We don’t dare waste a penny!”

Second, “China requires green development; poverty alleviation cannot come at the expense of the environment.” I saw this myself when I drove around China and saw areas that were once desert now covered with meadows and forests.

Third, “China emphasizes not just aid (transfusion) but enablement, because aid alone is not sustainable.” I saw this new spirit of self-sufficiency across the country. As two farmers in different provinces told me, “We have good policies now, but they’re of no use if we don’t do our own part.”



Fourth, “China’s poverty alleviation is sustainable because it is market-oriented, with close interaction between government, market and society.” But this in turn works only because of an entrepreneurial populace that take advantage of the markets—people like Mr. Lin Zhengjia, who had only four years of schooling and didn’t wear shoes until he was a teen but is now one of China’s top experts in tunnels and a philanthropist funding education for thousands of rural children.

“But experience so far has shown us that market-oriented is generally not enough,” Dr. Huang said. “For example, developing many industries requires consideration of short-term and long-term relationships, the problem of local resources and the needs of the entire market, and the fragmentation of small-scale and large-scale standardized market requirements. For poor areas, it is impossible to say all of these issues can be solved in one or two years, but at least we are aware of these issues and paying attention to them in our policies.”

## After 2020?

Clearly, China has much to tell the world, but I still had one last question for Dr. Huang. “Xi Jinping said China will end absolute poverty by 2020, but what comes after that?”

“The government just met to discuss this issue,” Dr. Huang said. “The word ‘winning’ shows that comprehensive poverty alleviation has timeliness. Whether it is 2020 or 2021, there must be a clear time, and there can be no endless delay. But what kind of governance model will China provide to the world in 2050? China will definitely continue to battle poverty, and establish a long-term mechanism to solve relative poverty. It is difficult to foresee China’s future path but it will have several elements:

1. We must modernize the country’s governance system and capacity and consider the solution of relative poverty.
2. The governance of relative poverty must have standards such as goals, scope, strategy and systems. We are even now researching how to do this.
3. We must further capitalize upon Xi Jinping’s concept of precision poverty alleviation.
4. Some effective basic experience in solving poverty and developing poverty alleviation formed during the decades since the founding of New China will surely persist and carry forward. For example, the advantages of social mobilization, assistance in the village, precision poverty alleviation and east-west cooperation in poverty alleviation.”

## **Belt and Road Poverty Alleviation**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will also benefit from China's experience. Dr. Huang said, "Adding elements of poverty reduction during the Belt and Road cooperation process is part of our country's foreign aid and diplomacy. All foreign development assistance programs related to the BRI must incorporate poverty reduction elements, with a focus on improving people's living standard. Over the past 17 years, China has invested 100 million Yuan in Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar on community poverty reduction projects.

"We are also looking at integrating all aspects of poverty development in some other countries and making sure that poverty reduction there is more sustainable. But this is a new field for us; there are still many problems. For example, many domestic social organizations are still in the early stage of development and have many imperfections and challenges. Cultivating entrepreneurs in other countries is also problematic. But in fact, the most important thing is that when enterprises go global, they go global with ideas that are within the context of other nations' laws, culture, and customs. If there is no legal awareness, it is hard to implement abroad what may have worked well at home. Lack of cultural awareness can also create problems abroad. Poverty alleviation must have cultural and social integration to be sustainable."

If solving poverty at home has been challenging, tackling it abroad seems even more overwhelming. But Dr. Huang said, "I am still full of confidence. By 2050, if our country does not make serious mistakes in the development process, then many countries will learn from China's development model."

Dr. Huang's enthusiasm was contagious; I share his confidence. In spite of seemingly endless challenges and setbacks, the nation has for 70 years pursued its ideal of a moderately prosperous society without poverty. And even though China has accomplished more than any other nation in alleviating poverty, it is not resting on its laurels but continuing to learn and advance and, most importantly to me, sharing its experience with other nations.

I look forward to interviewing Dr. Huang again in 2050!

## **Supplement: Twenty-First Century Barefoot Doctors for the World**

Some 300 years ago, Westerners believed that China's "Art of Government" was an even greater accomplishment than its four great inventions. In the 1800s, Britain was first in the West to adapt China's ancient imperial exam to hire civil servants based on ability instead of relationships or hereditary privilege, and in 2013, BBC claimed China's meritocratic system was the basis for all modern recruiting.

That was Old China, of course—but New China, with only 70 years under its belt, has even more to teach us—especially the lessons from such anti-poverty programs as barefoot doctors—the world's first attempt at truly universal healthcare.

In the *Harvard Public Health* magazine's Fall 2018 issue, Chi-Man (Winnie) Yip, professor of the Practice of Global Health Policy and Economics of the Harvard T.H. Chan's School of Public Health, shared her vision of "21st-Century Barefoot Doctors".

"Fifty years ago, during the Cultural Revolution in China, a cadre of 'barefoot doctors' – some 1.5 million peasants who received intensive three- to six-month training in anatomy, bacteriology, birth control, maternal and infant care, and other topics – were dispatched to provide basic healthcare for their rural communities. Even in the midst of the revolution's social upheaval, this low-tech medical corps (named for the fact that many worked in their own rice paddy fields when they weren't tending to their neighbors) was highly successful, significantly reducing infectious disease and boosting life expectancy.

"In the 1980s, with market reform, the barefoot doctor system came to an end. But the program served as a model and inspiration for the famous 1978 Alma-Ata Declaration on primary healthcare. Chi-Man (Winnie) Yip, professor of the practice of global health policy and economics, believes the program continues to hold lessons for today.

"The barefoot doctor program was a low-cost strategy that achieved high health outcomes. Its core principle was to keep people healthy. And the program reached everybody – it was universal healthcare in its very core. Just as impressive, barefoot doctors were part of the community, understood the community, cared about the community, and were trusted by the community.

"Today, many low- and middle-income nations are trying to build strong primary care systems that provide health promotion, disease prevention, accurate diagnosis, effective treatment, timely referral, and management of non-communicable diseases – such as hypertension, diabetes, even some cancers and mental health problems. Unfortunately, lack of highly trained staff is a major bottleneck in building such systems.

"My idea of a 21st-century barefoot doctor is someone with two to three years of training post-junior high school, who will be enabled with artificial intelligence and big-data-assisted decision support. Apps or web-based tools will use data analytics to prompt the doctors to ask the right questions, supply the likelihood of various diagnoses, and recommend treatment. It's an algorithm decision tree, but supported by big-data analysis.

"Twenty-first-century barefoot doctors will be most suitable in areas that are remote and rural and have older people left behind in the global wave of migration to cities. These doctors will need to be respected as the foundation of the healthcare system. They will also need to earn a decent income – although income alone is not what will keep them in their jobs. If 21st-century barefoot doctors become a reality, it could transform today's treatment-centric healthcare systems into systems that keep people healthy and at scale."

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# Chapter 19

## Raising Submerged Economies



My goal is always the same: to invoke the past as a shield for the future, to show the invisible world of yesterday and through it, perhaps on it, erect a moral world where men are not victims and children never starve and never run in fear.

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Laureate (in “A Personal Response”)

History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives.

Abba Eban, Israeli politician

The world has much to learn from China’s 70-year war on poverty, but even as doctors must diagnose a disease before curing it, so we must unearth the roots of poverty if we are to vanquish it. Trying to end endemic global poverty without addressing its causes is little better than treating malignant skin cancer with a Band-Aid.

Scholars struggle to coin a term for poor countries that is both neutral and politically correct—developing countries, less developed countries, third world countries, emerging nations. I prefer “emerging nations” because “emerging” betrays the fact that they have been “submerged”.

The deliberate submergence of nations persists to this day, though the mechanisms that perpetuate poverty are more insidious than the in-your-face colonialism of a century ago because they masquerade as modern political and business practices given a veneer of respectability by academia and media.

### Blood Diamonds, Blood Opium

The 2006 movie *Blood Diamond* shocked the world, but we also have blood copper, blood coffee, blood bananas and chocolate, blood copper, tin and oil. Even in this enlightened twenty-first century, massive profits are made at the expense of the poor—who are then blamed for their predicament, absolving the perpetrators of guilt. But fake news is nothing new.

The U.S. is outraged—and rightfully so—by Mexican drug lords’ smuggling drugs into America, but their profits pale in comparison to the billions made by the

West's century of opium sales to China to pay for China's tea, silk and porcelain. The nationalized drug trafficking in nineteenth century enriched the West while at the same time destroying China economically and morally.

Three hundred years ago, China and India accounted for two thirds of the global GDP. Even *Harvard Business Review* noted that China's economy was "more open and market driven than the economies of Europe." But by the 1940s, both were destitute and, not surprisingly, the Western opium-based economies basked in unprecedented wealth.

When America's first multimillionaire, John Jacob Astor, died in 1848, the empire he'd leveraged from nine years of opium smuggling in China was worth USD 20 million—USD 140 billion in today's money.

## Boston Built on Opium

In "How Profits from Opium Shaped 19th Century Boston," Martha Bebinger wrote, "In a city steeped in history, very few residents understand the powerful legacy of opium money... Boston's elite – the Delanos (grandfather of president Franklin Delano Roosevelt), Cabots, Cushings, Welds and Forbes built their fortunes, and built Boston, on China opium smuggling."<sup>1</sup>

Perkins, a wealthy Boston merchant, sold over 150,000 lb of Turkish opium from just one shipment, and according to John Rogers Haddad, a professor of American Studies at Penn State University, made millionaires of many others. "China had a really strong economy in the early part of the 19th century and the Americans were able to tap into that by exchanging tea for opium," Haddad said. "Opium was really a way that America was able to transfer China's economic power to America's industrial revolution."<sup>2</sup>

Bebinger wrote:

Tax revenue from the trade funded Massachusetts police and fire departments, roads, bridges, courthouses and schools. Opium profits funded many leading Boston institutions. The Perkins brothers helped found Massachusetts General Hospital, McLean Hospital and the Boston Athenaeum. The names of other opium barons are engraved on university buildings, high schools and public libraries. "There was an unwitting dependency in Boston on profits from the opium trade," says Towson University associate history professor Elizabeth Kelly Gray. "But today, that history is largely buried. Most institutions contacted for this story did not know their benefactors got rich selling an illegal drug in China."<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese emperor tried, repeatedly, to stop the opium trade, and Lin Zexu wrote to the Queen of England asking why they forced on China what was illegal in their own nation. "Such conduct is repugnant to human feeling and at variance with the Way of Heaven."

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2017/07/31/opium-boston-history>.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2017/07/31/opium-boston-history>.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2017/07/31/opium-boston-history>.

“The Way of Heaven,” Lin explained, was:

...fairness to all; it does not suffer us to harm others in order to benefit ourselves. Men are alike in this all the world over: that they cherish life and hate what endangers life. Your country lies 20,000 leagues away; but for all that the Way of Heaven holds good for you as for us, and your instincts are not different from ours; for nowhere are there men so blind as not to distinguish what brings profit and what does harm....

But on April 6, 1843, the *Times* summarized Prime Minister Robert Peel’s position:

Morality and religion, and the happiness of mankind, and friendly relations with China, and new markets for British manufactures were all very fine things in their way; but that the opium trade was worth to the Indian government £1,200,000....

Lin Zexu finally confiscated Britain’s opium, and even paid for it, though it was illegal. As he burned it, he noted that the English would certainly feel shame at their actions and the opium trade would end. England’s response was not shame but war—with fake news to justify it.

## Opium Trade a Human Right?

America’s first reference to China’s human rights was in the 1840s when ex-President Adams tried to drum up American support for Britain’s 1st Opium War. He whipped Americans into a frenzy of righteous indignation with his revelation that China’s refusal to engage in trade was a “violation of the rights of men and nations.” He never noted that China refused to import only one item—opium.

Although China lost the 1st Opium War, the drug remained illegal. Had England required legalizing opium in the Nanking Treaty, it would have been tantamount to admitting the war was over opium, which Western powers deny even to this day. But as opium profits mushroomed, the West chafed at China’s restrictions, so Britain fought a 2nd Opium War to legalize the trade.

This time around, England’s entire parliament objected to a second war, which Lord Derby argued was “the shedding of the blood of unwarlike and innocent people without warrant of law and without the warrant of moral justification.”

Lord Palmerston simply accused them of disloyalty, dissolved Parliament and sent them home, and set the Fake News machine in gear by telling the British people that China had dishonored their Queen with “acts of violence, insults to the flag and infraction of treaty rights.” Again, he did not mention opium, but after this war China was forced to “legalize” the deadly drug.

By 1900, all of Asia was reeling from the West’s drug trade. Opium accounted for 60% of Britain’s Asian income in 1916 and it was estimated that up to a quarter of Chinese adults were opium addicts. But opium addiction also spread to the West.

## Coming Home to Roost: Opium Addiction in the West

Eighty years earlier, Lin Zexu had prophetically warned the West, “For so long as your subjects make opium, who knows but they will not sooner or later take to smoking it?” By the twentieth century, opium addiction was global, and international conventions were held in 1912 and 1925 to debate the causes. Britain was selling 500 tons of opium annually to India and 700 tons yearly to China. Opium accounted for 60% of Britain’s Asian income, including 48% of their Singapore revenue and 100% of their North Borneo revenue. But the Western experts concluded the global opium epidemic was caused solely by China’s opium because the West’s opium was legal, whereas China’s opium, grown and sold only in China, was illegal.

China had begun growing its own opium only in the hope that increased production would saturate the market, destroy the high profits and the West would abandon the trade. When that failed, China burned its opium fields and renewed its anti-opium campaigns, though they had “legal” power to stop the West’s drug trafficking in their own country.

India, like China, had also begged Britain to stop the opium trade. Britain responded that her opium monopoly was a humanitarian service to India, as it had been to China, and that to end the opium trade would be a “mockery; to many millions it would be sheer inhumanity”. Britain kept its opium monopoly right up into the 1940s, when the profits were no longer vast enough to justify the embarrassment of a civilized nation engaged in drug trafficking.

## Catastrophe or Statistics?

Major-General Clive had once called India a “rich and flourishing kingdom”, but during England’s 190-year rule of India, farmers were forced to grow opium instead of crops. With nothing to eat but opium, some 60 million starved to death during Britain’s rule. But these numbers are simply too large to move ordinary people.

During the Nuremberg War trials, a former SS officer said that Eichmann, who organized the extermination of the Jews, was asked what would happen after the war if people asked about the missing millions. Eichmann replied, “One hundred dead are a catastrophe; one million dead are a statistic.”<sup>4</sup>

The West made billions from the opium trade and millions of Asians suffered, but the numbers are so vast that they go right over our heads and hearts. In the 1700s, China and India accounted for two thirds of the global GDP. By the 1940s, they were destitute—and we blame them for their failure. If we do speak of the opium wars, we maintain the fiction that they were over free trade, not opium.

In “China as ‘Victim’? The Opium War That Wasn’t”, Harry G. Gelber, visiting scholar, Center for European Studies, Harvard University, writes:

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<sup>4</sup>Simon Wiesenthal, “The Holocaust: A Warning to the Murderers of Tomorrow”, in *Encyclopedia of Genocide: A-H.*, Israel W. Charny, Jan 1, 2000.



The 1840–42 Anglo-Chinese war (the so-called “Opium War”) is almost universally believed to have been triggered by British imperial rapacity and determination to sell more and more opium into China. That belief is mistaken. The British went to war because of Chinese military threats to defenseless British civilians, including women and children; because China refused to negotiate on terms of diplomatic equality and because China refused to open more ports than Canton to trade, not just with Britain but with everybody. The belief about British ‘guilt’ came later, as part of China’s long catalogue of alleged Western ‘exploitation and aggression.’

## **Blood Trade: Today’s “Opium”**

While the era of nationalized drug trafficking at gunpoint is behind us, today we traffic in blood diamonds, oil, chocolate, bananas, sugar—anything that turns a profit—and we are as adept today as a century ago at blaming the victims for their poverty, and from our wealth we dole out medical aid to those we deny a living wage.

Consider Africa today. The Dark Continent is so large that it could hold China, the U.S. and Europe and still have room left over. And this vast land is the richest continent in natural resources, yet also the most destitute continent. These nations are now “liberated”, but they are still run by puppet governments or military dictatorships backed by the former colonial powers to maintain trade advantages. It is no surprise that most wars in Africa are not between countries but within countries—corrupt governments fighting rebels, who are labeled freedom fighters or terrorists, depending on what nation has armed them.

In 1980, Africa accounted for only 0.4% of global manufacturing. In 2002, the figure had dropped to 0.3%. By 2004, it had inched up to 1.5%—still miniscule but at least an improvement—and largely because China had started to help build Africa in the same way as it had helped its own people—not through aid, which engenders dependency, but through building fundamental infrastructure that created opportunity, and fostered self-sufficiency. For as China learned too well: aid enfeebles, enablement empowers.

My youngest son Matthew and his wife do volunteer medical work in Africa, and even in the remotest places, they see Chinese building highways, railways, dams and power stations. No wonder my African friends who are graduate students at Xiamen University like Braughham’s book, *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of Africa in China*.

## **Fair Trade, Not Aid**

TED Talks has three talks addressing aid in Africa that I have watched many times. “Aid for Africa? No Thanks” by Andrew Mwenda; “Free Trade, Not Aid” by Dambisa Moyo, and “Aid Versus Trade” by Ngozi-Okonjo-Iweala—these should be required

viewing for anyone with even the slightest interest in practical, sustainable poverty alleviation and the dangers of simplistic aid.

Latin American and Asian countries have shared the same fate as Africa. Malaysia's British colonial overlords cited Ricardo's 1817 "law of comparative advantage" as justification for building Malaysia's economy on mining and agricultural exports and restricting any Malaysian manufacturing that would compete with British imports. But Prime Minister Mahathir came into power in 1981 and by 1988, manufacturing exports surpassed those of primary commodities for the first time and Malaysia became the world's top exporter of semiconductor chips. This economic success in turn helped the nation improve education, healthcare and living standards—but Malaysia was an exception. Many Asian, Latin American and African countries are still shackled to economies dependent solely upon exporting their natural resources.

Scholars like Kenichi Ohmae warn poor nations to avoid this "resource trap" but he does not address the fact that these nations have no choice. Attempts at reform are met with swift and brutal retaliation. Since the 1940s, the U.S. alone has engaged in almost 100 attempts at "regime change"—ostensibly to preserve human rights and democracy but in reality simply to keep in power those leaders who best protect "American interests" (sugar in Cuba, copper in Chile, coffee in Columbia, bananas in Guatemala, cheap fruit and veggies in Peru).

As an American, I too believe we should protect American interests—but that should not include waging war or installing a murderous dictator in Chile to ensure cheap coffee or in Africa to secure exports of cheap diamond, cobalt and uranium.

A century ago, the so-called World Order allowed the opium trade and blamed the victims for their poverty. Today, neither China nor India fear such foreign intervention, but smaller poor nations have as little hope today as they had 100 years ago—even if they could duplicate China's measures for ending poverty. They've no choice but to rely on "aid" that serves largely to keep them in their place.

Some 33% of U.S. foreign aid is for military assistance and 11% is for political intervention. Although 42% is earmarked for long-term development, over half of this is for health<sup>5</sup>—but of what use is improved health to people who are denied a living wage?

As Dr. Viktor Sidel said to the U.S. government in 1979 about China's improved health:

Part of this change in health in China in the course of one generation has nothing whatever to do with medicine. It has to do with what people eat, the houses which they live, the way in which they're clothed, and the ways in which they live together... Food distribution is a far more important determinant of health than is medical care.

Proffering medical and educational aid to people enslaved by institutionalized unjust trade is simply lifting them up by one hand while drowning them with the other hand.

There is hope, of course. Only this morning, I read about Bill Gates investing millions in healthcare for the poor. I admire Bill and Melinda Gates and applaud

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.cfr.org/background/how-does-us-spend-its-foreign-aid> James McBride, "How does the U.S. spend its foreign aid?" October 1, 2018.

their efforts. But unless they use their wealth and influence to help address the very causes of poverty, they too are just slapping Band-aids on a malignant cancer.

There are signs, however, that some companies have a conscience—if it's not too costly. Nestle, for example, has boosted its own profits while increasing farmers' earnings by helping them to improve efficiency and protect the environment—successful measures that could have been taken from China's own anti-poverty playbook.

## **Fair Trade: A Good Start**

I am also thankful for the growing number of “fair trade” organizations. I buy fair trade products, even though they cost more than others, because I know the fig farmer in Turkey or cocoa farmer in South America was paid a fair price for their product. Of course, to be sure this is legitimate fair trade and not just more fake news, I look for the “fair trade” seal. As the website [Fairtradecertified.org](http://Fairtradecertified.org) urges:

“Seek the seal, make a difference. The Fair Trade Certified™ seal represents thousands of products, improving millions of lives, protecting land and waterways in 45 countries and counting. Purchases have sent USD 610 million to farmers and workers since 1998.”

Yes, USD 610 million over 22 years is a pittance compared to the billions in annual trade—but it is a start. As Fair Trade Certified notes in an article about cocoa, “Brands worry that consumers would not be willing to pay more for a product, even if it's supporting the well-being of workers and their communities.” The article then concludes by urging us, the readers:

“Tell your favorite brands that you want to know how they source their cocoa and other ingredients and tell them you care enough to buy fair trade. Brands are listening to you, and you can make a big difference for people like Kakou and Awa.”

You and I may not be able to change government or corporate practices but we can make a difference by our own individual choices.

## **Precision Poverty Alleviation Abroad Through BRI**

As China has proven over the past 70 years, and especially since Xi Jinping's adoption of precision poverty alleviation, enablement, not aid, is the solution to poverty. Aid is sometimes necessary, especially during disasters, but even better is to help foster self-reliance in nations and peoples—as China is now attempting with the Belt and Road Initiative in other nations.

I do know the Belt and Road Initiative has shortcomings, but with no historical precedent for lifting an entire nation from poverty, Beijing made mistakes even in its own country. There is even less precedent for one nation—a developing one at that—to engage in such a massive, truly global infrastructure project to build other nations as it has its own.

Only last week, the U.S. warned the world against the Belt and Road Initiative, saying it could do better than China has. I don't doubt that, given its wealth. Yet so far, these wealthy nations have only criticized China's actions while taking few of their own—with the exception of programs like the "Africa Military Command" to protect the governments that secure their profitable business ventures.

I hope that the West does indeed embark on its own infrastructure projects in Africa. But Africa is big enough and needy enough for both East and West to help.

Or we can continue to do nothing, for as Edmund Burke (1730–1797) wrote in a letter to Thomas Mercer,<sup>6</sup> "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing,"

But Burke's longer version of the problem is as incisive today as it was 250 years ago:

**Whilst men are linked together, they easily and speedily communicate the alarm of any evil design.** They are enabled to fathom it with common counsel, and to oppose it with united strength. **Whereas, when they lie dispersed, without concert, order, or discipline, communication is uncertain, counsel difficult, and resistance impracticable.** Where men are not acquainted with each other's principles, nor experienced in each other's talents, nor at all practised in their mutual habitudes and dispositions by joint efforts in business; no personal confidence, no friendship, no common interest, subsisting among them; it is evidently impossible that they can act a public part with uniformity, perseverance, or efficacy. In a connection, the most inconsiderable man, by adding to the weight of the whole, has his value, and his use; out of it, the greatest talents are wholly unserviceable to the public. No man, who is not inflamed by vain-glory into enthusiasm, can flatter himself that his single, unsupported, desultory, unsystematic endeavours, are of power to defeat the subtle designs and united cabals of ambitious citizens. **When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.**

Today's instant, global communication links the world more closely than ever in history—but if we do not work together, we may survive but the poor nations "will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle."

Today's instant communication has potential for uniting us, but online interactions and a glut of information can also serve to desensitize us. When Pope Francis visited the U.N.'s World Food Program in July, 2016, he warned that we are bombarded with so many images of pain and poverty that we accept poverty as natural, as "just one more news story," rather than acknowledging that poverty results from "a selfish and wrong distribution of resources" and abuse and exploitation of the earth.

"The key to ending extreme poverty and hunger," Pope Francis said, "is to recognize that behind every statistic, there is the face of a person who is suffering... Without faces and stories, human lives become statistics and we run the risk of bureaucratizing the sufferings of others..."<sup>7</sup>

Wealthy of the world, unite. With today's technology, and the experience of nations like China, for the first time in history we have the means and the methods to end poverty. We lack only the will.

<sup>6</sup>Edmund Burke, "Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents" (1770), *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 1, p. 146 (Liberty Fund ed. 1999).

<sup>7</sup><https://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2016/extreme-poverty-is-a-reality-not-a-faceless-statistic-pope-says.cfm>.

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**Part III**  
**Taking the Chinese Dream Global**

# Chapter 20

## China's Precision Urban Poverty Alleviation; Lessons for the World



I am 58 years old and I've witnessed China's decades of development firsthand. Today, China's first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou are in no way inferior to the big cities in the developed countries or places like Europe. Even in urban development, they are far better than many big cities abroad. I have been to more than 100 countries, and I know from personal experiences that we lead the world in our technology and urban construction.

Feng Yougen, Chairman of Panlong Group, Xiangtan, Hunan

### Urban Apocalypse

In 1800, only 2% of humanity lived in cities; today, it is 55%, according to the UN. In the next 33 years, the population will grow by 2.9 billion—equal to another China and India—and 80 to 90% of the people will live in cities—but what kind of cities?

In 1960, Lagos, Nigeria, had less than 200,000 people. The population today is 21 million and projected to reach 85 to 100 million people by 2100—and the urban poverty will be mindboggling—even in “richer” nations like Mexico, just across the border from the U.S.

Mexico boasts the world's 15th largest economy but 60% of its people are in the informal economy.<sup>1</sup> They pay no taxes but also have no medical, education or retirement benefits. They don't exist on paper but their poverty is far too real and economists see no hope for them.

Given the horrors of runaway urbanization, China surprised the world when it announced its massive “National New-Type Urbanization Plan, 2014–2020”, with a goal of moving 100 million people from rural areas to cities by 2020, and 250 million by 2026. But unlike in other nations, China's urbanization is planned with precision as the next step in alleviating rural and urban poverty—and it offers some lessons to help the rest of the world escape an almost apocalyptic scenario.

China's improved rural living conditions over recent decades have helped slow urbanization and even in some cases helped reverse it. But some areas such as areas

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.oecd.org/mexico/2019-economic-survey-of-mexico-may-2019.htm>.

of Ningxia, Gansu or Yunnan have such poor natural conditions that workers are thankful for government sponsored programs to guarantee reliable, well-paid jobs and safe living conditions in cities. The problem with this strategy is that it sometimes separates families—hence China’s move to help rural families relocate to cities.

But can Chinese cities absorb 100 million people without spawning the slums and poverty seen in other nations? I had my own doubts until 2002, when I helped Xiamen compete in The International Awards for Livable Communities (Livcom) in Stuttgart, Germany.

I had witnessed Xiamen’s dramatic transformation over 14 years but until I spent eight months preparing for the competition, I had no idea of the complex, holistic long-term plans and strategies behind the city’s success. I was not surprised when one of the six international judges told me, “Xiamen is not only No. 1 but No. 2 is far behind.”

I assumed Xiamen’s success was unique in China until I helped Quanzhou compete in the 2003 competition in the Netherlands. Our neighbor 60 km to the north, Quanzhou was the start of the ancient Maritime Silk Road and Xi Jinping’s inspiration for the Belt and Road Initiative. Called Zayton by the Arabs, Quanzhou was the greatest port in the Middle Ages:

And I assure you that for one shipload of pepper that goes to Alexandria or elsewhere, destined for Christendom, there come a hundred such, aye and more too, to this haven of Zayton; for it is one of the two greatest havens in the world for commerce.

*The Travels of Marco Polo*

But modern Quanzhou people are as formidable as their seafaring forebears.

## How Could Quanzhou Win the Gold?

Quanzhou not only won the gold in 2003 but also landed a second gold for heritage management. I was on cloud nine until reporters in Quanzhou asked me as soon as I stepped off the plane, “How on earth could Quanzhou win the gold?”

I was shocked, but a year earlier I’d been just as ignorant as they were of what it takes to make a livable city, so I quickly wrote a newspaper article explaining why Quanzhou well deserved its double golds.

Part of the problem was translation. Livcom was translated into Chinese as “International Garden City Awards”, so Chinese, like many foreigners, shared the misconception that Livcom was about flowers and gardens, but landscaping was one of six categories that went into the holistic creation of a humane, livable community. And Chinese cities, as I discovered, excelled in all six categories because their urban development was planned, not piecemeal as in many other countries.



## Does China Have Tall Buildings?

I was proud when a European leader said in the Netherlands in 2003, “We need to learn how to get community involvement like the Chinese do.” In 2005, a Canadian mayor in Spain said, “Chinese cities are so creative at solving the problems we all face.” But I was reminded in 2007 in London that the world still had much to learn about China when a well-traveled, university-educated European mayor said, “I did not know that China had tall buildings.”

Over the following decade, all but one Chinese city I worked with won the gold, and three won double golds, but after the first couple of cities I was no longer surprised. The more I learned, the more impressed I became at the consistency of urban practice across the entire country. National, provincial and municipal plans were thoroughly coordinated and integrated, though each city had leeway to incorporate unique elements of their geography, climate, history and culture.

I slowly discovered that China tackled urbanization with as much precision as it did rural poverty, but with 1.4 billion people, it could not afford to do otherwise. The consequences of failure would be catastrophic. But I also discovered, to my dismay, that cities in other countries did not have such farsighted urban strategies. When an Australian leader said, “I’m so surprised China has cities like this,” I wanted to reply, “I’m so surprised the rest of the world does not have cities like China’s!”

I could write an entire book on how Chinese cities uniformly excelled in all six Livcom categories, but below are just a few examples to prove that China, unlike the rest of the world, is not only coping with urbanization but actually capitalizing upon it to improve lives in both city and country. My hope is that the rest of the world will take heart and learn from China’s example.

### Livcom Category One: Landscape Management

It was challenging on Xiamen, a small island, to improve the infrastructure while preserving its pristine “garden island” environment, but Xiamen did so by building miles of tunnels through its hills to create a largely invisible highway network all the way from my university to the airport and beyond. Xiamen also built gardens and parks with vast parking areas and shopping centers, and used “vertical greenery” (plants on walls, bridges, roofs). The statistics speak for themselves. From 1980 to 2001, even as Xiamen’s skyscrapers mushroomed and the population more than tripled from 491,000 to 1,651,000, urban green space grew from 13 to 35.7%.

Quanzhou’s GDP averaged 26% annual growth from 1992–2002, yet urban green space doubled from 16.1 to 31.2% even as the city built 115 km of new roads (90% of which were green belts). In 2002, Quanzhou received the U.N.’s top 40 “Dubai International Award for Best Practices in Improving the Living Environment”.

Changxing City’s green coverage doubled from 21.1% in 2003 to 43% in 2008 and public park green space per capita grew from 2.2 sq. m in 1998 to 20 sq. m

in 2008. Even the entire roof of Changxing's city hall is a beautifully curved expanse of lush green lawn.

Beijing's Dongcheng District, which competed in 2010, managed to expand green coverage from 35% in 2005 to 41.9% in 2009—amazing given the constraints in the nation's capital.

## **Livcom Category Two: Heritage Management**

I was amazed to learn that even little Xiamen island has 139 protected heritage sites, including a 1,300-year-old temple and China's oldest Protestant Church. Chinese cities protect and promote numerous forms of intangible cultural heritage—martial arts, Chinese paper cutting, Kung Fu tea ceremonies, Chinese hand puppets and marionettes, Chinese opera, calligraphy, dragon dancing and dragon boat racing. And most cities that I visited had had primary to high school textbooks of both national and local heritage, including the heritage of local minorities. Each city had numerous museums (17 in Xiamen alone), but even more creative was the extensive use of open-air displays of history and heritage so people could enjoy history in daily life even without visiting museums.

Quanzhou's restoration of Zhongshan Rd., which 1,000 years ago was considered the richest street in the world, won the UNESCO Asia Pacific Cultural Heritage 2001 Award of Merit. Changxing spends 3% of local revenues on heritage management, including its 1250 years of silk and tea, and its schools teach the children folk opera, dragon dancing and Chinese chess and Go.

## **Livcom Category Three: Environmentally Sensitive Practices**

Xiamen spent over 2% of its GDP on environmental protection (and Nanjing, one of China's ancient capitals, spends 3.5%). As former Xiamen Mayor Hong Yongshi told me, "We're not following the Western model of destroying the environment to develop and then repair it. We'll protect the environment as we grow." Over a 20-year period, Xiamen was No. 1 in growth and No. 2 in greening for cities of its size. Of China's 27 national indexes for environmental protection model cities, 23 were developed in Xiamen. Xiamen banned DDT and BHC in 1985, and promotes biological pest control (which Chinese first used at least 1,700 years ago). Beijing Dongcheng District cut pesticide use by 50% by planting 95% indigenous drought-resistant species and using biological pest control. Not only many cities have 12 years of environmental study texts and programs for children but many of them involve the children in designing and implementing their own programs.

Chinese cities' eco-innovations seemed endless. Songjiang low-flush toilets saved 720,000 tons of water annually. Most cities used solar heating and street lamps. Some recycled waste into flooring, construction materials and waste cans. Organic garbage was transformed into safe, organic livestock feed. Gray water is recycled for parks irrigation. Wujin, which spends 3% of its GDP on the environment, safely incinerates garbage to produce electricity, transforms silt into construction bricks and fuel, recycles straw to produce 4% of China's laminated boards, and uses bio-gas to generate rural electricity.

Changxing requires that all new structures be built with energy-efficient windows and doors and thermal materials, many of which are locally produced from recycled wood and bamboo.

Nanjing, with a population of 10 million, spent 3.5% of its GDP on the environment and cut the use of all energy by 50% between 2006 and 2010.

## **Livcom Category Four: Community Involvement**

Foreign leaders' most common question for me was, "How on earth do they get such broad community participation in everything?" Since the internet's availability in the 1990s, Chinese cities have had e-government websites with real-time updates on key issues and numerous avenues for public feedback. As a result, many urban innovations are bottom-up initiatives by citizens. Xiamen's mayor's hotline became a model for the entire country, with its strict deadlines for responses and emphasis on transparency, accessibility and involvement.

Chinese are especially keen on environmental, cultural, sports and educational initiatives. Citizens will plant a tree at the drop of a hat—or for birthdays, weddings and anniversaries. Quanzhou volunteers planted almost 6 million trees from 1998 to 2002, and Changxing volunteers planted 30% of the 11,869,000 trees planted from 2003 to 2008. Volunteers also provide free medical care for senior citizens or disadvantaged residents, free legal service and medical care for migrant workers unsure of their rights, free classes and training. Rural/urban cooperation programs are also increasingly popular. I've met many teens like the girl at New Channel in Beijing who volunteers for online math tutoring of rural children.

## **Livcom Category Five: Healthy Lifestyle**

Urbanites the world over face the same health issues caused by aging populations, over-crowding, increasingly sedentary lifestyles, poor diet, etc. But Chinese philosophy and medicine has for over 2,000 years emphasized prevention over cure through a healthy lifestyle—a notion that has caught on in the West only during the past couple of decades. Many cities not only provide free health checkups but also promote healthy lifestyles through free courses in traditional cultural arts and

practices—everything from martial arts and dragon dances to basketball, soccer, volleyball, cycling, sailing, wind surfing, hiking and mountain climbing, marathons and triathlons.

## **Livcom Category Six: Future Planning**

As an Englishman said in 2017, the U.S. and China’s biggest difference is that one is run by lawyers and the other by engineers. But in spite of the “engineer leaders” proven prowess, they don’t try to reinvent the wheel. Every city I visited had sent delegates to other cities in China or abroad to “learn the best from the best”. Urban teams learned city management from Paris, France; cultural preservation from Venice, Italy; water environment treatment from Sydney, Australia; urban architecture from Aberdeen, Scotland; environmental sanitation from Singapore; waste water management from German cities. And their visionary long-term plans were often developed in partnership with leading global firms such as RIA (Japan), Sarl Frederic Rolland International (France), KOLL (USA), HRP (Australia), SANCHO-MADRIDEJOS (Spain) and GN (USA).

And sometimes the way forward was backward. In 1988, bicycles were luxuries. A decade later, everyone wanted cars. Today, healthy clean cycling is making a comeback as cities design self-contained communities so everything is within a bike’s ride on designated bike lanes. Wujin boasts that even police ride bicycles. I asked how cops on bikes could catch a thief in a car? They reassured me that Wujin criminals have promised to ride bicycles to give the police a chance to catch them.

Nowadays, of course, most people don’t own a bike. We use our mobile phones to rent everything from bicycles to umbrellas on a rainy day.

### ***Precision Planning or Piecemeal Initiatives?***

In summary, urbanization is inevitable in today’s world, but whether it leads to apocalyptic dystopias like the UN’s projections for Lagos, Nigeria or Delhi, India, depends entirely upon world leaders’ resolve and determination to attack the problem head-on—and not with a hodgepodge of piecemeal initiatives but precision planning and accountability as China has demonstrated with its precision poverty alleviation, or precision urban planning—or even its precision epidemic alleviation during the COVID-19 crisis.

Even as I write this, China is handling the pandemic with unwavering resolve, regardless of economic cost, because the priority today, as when New China was founded in 1949, is that most basic of human rights—life. But this people-first conviction predates even New China’s founding in 1949, when Chinese leaders first voiced the Chinese Dream of a moderately prosperous society in which no one was left behind.

Chinese leaders' passion for their people goes back at least 2,500 years to the days of Confucius, from whom came the idea of a meritocracy of scholar bureaucrats who were morally mandated to prepare themselves as well as possible to serve China's millions to the utmost of their ability. And whether 1,000 years ago or today, they've proven they are quite capable.

I hope the rest of the world can take heart and learn from their example.

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# Chapter 21

## China's Confucian Moral Meritocracy: A Model for Tomorrow?



### Study the Past to Understand the Present

“Know yourself and know your enemy,” Sun Zi wrote in *The Art of War*, but although China has learned much about the world, the world still knows little about China, harboring such naïve misconceptions as “Chinese are not good at business” (Yoshinari, 1988), “Chinese can’t innovate” (*Harvard Business Review*, 2014) and “China is a threat to world peace”—a tenacious trope since Liberation in 1949.

In reality, Chinese have excelled at trade for over 3,000 years, been exceptionally innovative and inventive, and have such an aversion to war that even Sun Zi’s *Art of War* warns violence is only the last resort when all other measures fail, the supreme art being to “subdue enemies without fighting.”

China has survived and thrived on every front through the ages only because of a system of moral governance so unique and revolutionary that it helped shape the European Enlightenment.

Some 2,400 years ago, Plato advocated a meritocratic utopia led by intelligent, wise, reliable philosopher-kings, but Plato probably had no idea that 7,000 km away and 150 years earlier, Confucius had already set in motion a meritocracy—but he went one better than Plato. Rulers in Plato’s utopia held hereditary offices but Confucius called for leaders chosen solely for morality and merit, regardless of ancestry. Over 2,000 years later, European philosophers fed up with the “divine right of kings” were astonished at what they read in Jesuit missionaries’ translations of Chinese classics.

Voltaire (1694–1778), the greatest thinker of the Enlightenment, claimed that China was a nation ruled by philosophers, and displayed a portrait of Confucius on his library wall. He wrote, “They have perfected moral science, and that is the first of the sciences.” Voltaire wrote in 1764, “One need not be obsessed with the merits of the Chinese to recognize at least that their empire is in truth the best that the world has ever seen.”<sup>1</sup> Voltaire even suggested that Europe replace its ailing monarchies

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<sup>1</sup>Bill Schwarz, *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity and Cultural History*, Psychology Press, 1996, p 229.

with a Chinese meritocracy. "What should our European princes do when they hear of such examples?" Voltaire asked. "Admire and blush, but above all imitate."

The mathematician Leibniz wrote in his 1697 book, *Novissima Sinica* (Latest News from China): "I almost think it necessary that Chinese missionaries should be sent to us to teach the aims and practice of natural theology, as we send missionaries to them to instruct them in revealed religion."

Francois Noel (1651–1729), poet and Jesuit missionary to China, wrote in the introduction of his translation of China's six classics that he wanted the reader to not only "become acquainted with what the Chinese have written, but that you may put into act what they have rightly thought".

But many Europeans felt threatened by this call to learn from China. The great German philosopher Christian Wolff (1679–1754) lost his position at the University of Halle after a 1721 lecture in which he praised Confucius' moral precepts and China's system of moral governance. He was given 48 h to leave Prussia or be hanged.

## The Generational Curse in Governance

Europeans especially admired Confucius' call for universal education (*The Analects*, 15.39) so that even commoners who proved themselves competent and virtuous could hold office. Confucius opposed hereditary offices because he had observed that hereditary aristocracies suffered the same "generational curse" as family businesses.

Chinese have long said that wealth does not extend beyond three generations because the first generation gains wealth through ability (merit), the second generation learns from the first but has an easier life and is less driven, and the third generation takes wealth for granted, has a sense of entitlement, and often squanders all that has been passed down to them. "I pity a rich man's son," said Conwell (1843–1925). "The statistics of Massachusetts show us that not one out of seventeen rich men's sons ever die rich. They are raised in luxury, they die in poverty."<sup>2</sup>

But hereditary governments, Confucius knew, suffered the same generational curse. Powerful people seized the throne to create new dynasties but their descendants, competent or not, had a sense of entitlement, taxed the people to fund their lavish lifestyles and paid less attention to wise and just rule. Social unrest then led to overthrow of the unjust government and the cycle began anew.

The solution, according to Confucius, was an education-based meritocracy, although he made it clear his ideas were not new but simply a clarion call to return to the high ideals and morals of China's "Ancient Ways" (*The Analects*, 7:1).

The "Ancient Ways" began with the Three Sovereigns, ancient God-kings whose rule was benevolent, pragmatic, and people-centered. They improved people's lives by giving them basic skills and knowledge. Their benevolence, uprightness and competence, reflected in their pragmatic inventiveness to meet people's needs, led

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<sup>2</sup>Russell H. Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds*. John Y. Huber Company, Philadelphia, 1890.

Confucius to write that rulers should be “generous in caring for ordinary people and just in exacting service from the people” (*The Analects*, 5:16). Chinese socialism today shares this same pragmatism.

The Three Sovereigns were followed by Five Emperors (2852–2070 BC), who were kings that enjoyed long, prosperous reigns because of their uprightness and morality. Their example suggested that moral governance was a prerequisite for peace and prosperity, and that immorality or incompetence was followed by the “generational failure” that destroyed the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BC).

The Shang Dynasty, ruled by 31 kings over 17 generations, initially enjoyed popular support because the people led peaceful, prosperous lives, but fortunes declined as rulers became complacent, corrupt and immoral.

Historian Sima Qian (145–? BC) said that the last Shang Dynasty king, King Di Xin (1075–1046 BC), had abilities far above average. Legends claimed he was so smart that he won all arguments and so strong that he hunted wild beasts with his bare hands. But later in life, Di Xin abandoned proper governance of the country and spent his time in drunken orgies and composed crude erotic songs with poor rhythm (a shocking affront to a nation which even 2,200 years ago had a governmental department of music and poetry). Di Xin’s heavy taxes to pay for his debauchery led to such social unrest that King Wu was able to overthrow him in 1046 BC.

To justify Di Xin’s overthrow, the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC) introduced the notion of the Mandate of Heaven, which held that immoral or inept rulers lose the support of Heaven and are replaced by a new ruler who did not need to be of noble birth, only moral and competent.

Like the Shang Dynasty in its prime, the Zhou Dynasty initially prospered. Zhou had a powerful military, excelled in shipbuilding and celestial navigation, and was known for its literature and philosophy. With many government leaders chosen for their intellectual ability, it is not surprising that the dynasty produced great thinkers like Lao Zi, Mo Zi, Yang Zhu, Confucius and Mencius, and many of China’s great classics such as the Five Classics (*Book of Changes*, *Book of Songs*, *Book of History*, *Book of Rites*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*) as well as the perennially popular *The Art of War*, which to this day is studied by everyone from the U.S. Army<sup>3</sup> to basketball coaches.

But by Confucius’ day, the Zhou Dynasty had obviously lost Heaven’s favor. The kings waged endless wars and lived in fear of assassination, the peasants paid heavy taxes to fund the wars, and ruthless bandits roamed the land. It was in this context that Confucius became prime minister of Lu.

Under Confucius’ guidance, the prince of Lu became so powerful that a neighboring prince, frightened by Lu’s success, sent him a gift of 80 beautiful girls trained in music and dance and some fine horses. This gift was the prince’s undoing. He took such pleasure in the girls that he ignored his responsibilities and Confucius’ counsel. Confucius eventually resigned and departed—though he left slowly, hoping in vain that the prince would call him back. Confucius wandered from state to state

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<sup>3</sup>U.S. Army, *Military History and Professional Development*, 1985 U. S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Combat Studies Institute.



for 12 years hoping to find a ruler willing to learn sound governance, but none would listen. He finally returned to live quietly at Lu, where he refused government positions and spent his time teaching his followers, studying the classics and committing ancient traditions to writing. Just before his death at 73, he told a pupil, “No wise ruler arises, and no one in the empire wants me to be his teacher.”

Confucius' failure at politics, however, proved to be a blessing for posterity because it gave him the time to pen the classics that would guide China even into the twenty-first century.

## Confucius on Government

Confucius taught that a good government had three priorities—sufficient food, sufficient army and the will of the people. If any had to be given up, first to go should be the army, with food second, but confidence was last because no government is sustainable without the people's confidence. Confucius also warned that no government could demand confidence, but must earn it by insuring the peoples' needs are met. Thus the first priority is to prosper people and the second is to educate them—the fundamental priorities that China holds to this day.

Although Confucian society pivoted on right relationships and social harmony—each person knew their place and kept it—commoners who cultivated their virtue and knowledge through education could attain offices. “In teaching,” Confucius wrote, “there should be no distinction of classes” (*The Analects*, 15.39).

This notion of universal education eventually led to the meritocracy in which people competed through exams and were promoted based on merit—a system that lasted into the early twentieth century. Giles wrote in 1902 that China's real rulers were the district magistrates, a position open to anyone passing the exams:

The district magistrates, so far as officials are concerned, are the real rulers of China ... the first step on the ladder is open to all who can win their way by successful competition at certain literary examinations.... Want of means may be said to offer no obstacle in China to ambition and desire for advancement. The slightest aptitude in a boy for learning would be carefully noted, and if found to be the genuine article, would be still ... more carefully fostered. Not only are there plenty of free schools in China, but there are plenty of persons ready to help in so good a cause. Many a high official has risen from the furrowed fields, his educational expenses as a student, and his travelling expenses as a candidate, being paid by subscription in his native place.

Even my own province of Fujian has many stories of rural youth rising from obscurity to high position—people like Li Guangdi (1642–1718), who was born in the remote village of Hutou but studied diligently as a child and became a highly honored prime minister under Emperor Kangxi.

## Confucian Leadership by Example

Confucius stressed that officials not only be moral and competent but that they lead through ethics rather than coercion, through example rather than law. For Confucius, force was always the last resort. In *The Analects* 2:3, he said, “If you try to guide the common people with coercive regulations and keep them in line with punishments, the common people will become evasive and will have no sense of shame. If, however, you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and will rectify themselves.”

Ethics and integrity was so important to Confucian scholars that some abandoned careers rather than betray principles. The brilliant polymath, Zhang Heng (78–139), gave up promotions rather than compromise his positions on history and calendar issues. In 1938, Lewis wrote of courageous twentieth century Chinese sages:

There is a bravery characteristic of the sage ... boldly to carry into practice his views of the doctrines of the ancient kings; in a high situation not to follow the current of a bad people; to consider that there is no poverty where there is virtue, and no wealth or honor where virtue is not; when appreciated by the world, to desire to share in all men's joys and sorrows; when unknown by the world, to stand up grandly alone between heaven and earth and have no fears – this is the bravery of the highest order.

## Taoist Government

Taoism influences Confucian Chinese culture and government to this day. Legend has it that Confucius consulted Lao Zi, founder of Taoism. Lao Zi was also disillusioned with the leadership and gave concrete suggestions on ethical governance, with a strong emphasis on small and minimally intrusive government. Like Confucius, Lao Zi urged minimal control so people would be virtuous, and controlled from within rather than from without. “The earliest leaders,” Lao Zi said, “didn't talk, they acted, and when they'd done their work, the people said, ‘Amazing: we did it, all by ourselves!’”.

We see echoes of Taoism's minimal control today in Chinese leader's emphasis on empowerment and self-reliance, and Xi Jinping's call to lift people from “poverty of spirit”.

Even former U.S. President Ronald Reagan quoted Lao Zi in his Jan. 25, 1988 State of the Union Address: “And as an ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Zi, said, ‘Govern a great nation as you would cook a small fish; do not overdo it.’”.

The element of Taoism in today's government that most impresses me stems from Lao Zi's, “When work is done and one's name is being known, to withdraw into obscurity is the Way of Heaven.” American politicians upon leaving office usually sign lucrative book contracts and go on speaking tours to tout their successes and criticize their successors. But we rarely hear from Li Peng, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao and many other Chinese leaders who, upon leaving power, also left the spotlight. I've been honored to attend many meetings with many officials, from

municipal to national level, and have never ceased to marvel at their humility and absence of self-aggrandizement—both of which are deeply rooted in both Taoism and Confucianism.

As Lao Zi said, “The skillful traveler leaves no traces of his footsteps.”

## The Confucian School

Today, it is hard to imagine a world without the wisdom of Confucius and Lao Zi, but they almost vanished from history when Emperor Qin Shi Huang, who first unified China and completed the Great Wall, burned philosophers' books. But thanks to the foresight of the 7th Han Emperor, Wudi (156–87 BC), Confucianism became the cornerstone of Chinese culture and governance for ages.

Wudi adopted Confucian ethics and philosophy and ensured that his vision was perpetuated by creating a Confucian school for administrators. He also promoted poetry and music by creating the Imperial Music Bureau. But Wudi's greatest contribution to posterity was the imperial exam, which arose from his relentless battle against corruption and the nobility's stranglehold upon the nation.

Wudi removed all non-government tolls, sent sycophantic noblemen back to their rural fiefdoms, punished criminal noblemen (who heretofore had been above the law), and infuriated the nobility when he ended their monopoly on power by recruiting talented commoners who had passed the imperial exam for government positions. His exam would also infuriate British noblemen some 2,000 years later.

The exam system was so patently logical and effective that the British government adopted it in 1832 for use in India, and in 1846 created a civil service exam in Britain. The British nobility were furious because it ended their monopoly on lucrative government jobs. On July 17, 1863, a nobleman complained during the Parliamentary Debates, “The English people did not know that it was necessary for them to take lessons from the Celestial Empire.”

The world has far more to learn from the “Celestial Empire” today than it did in 1863. New China has continued to evolve and modernize, and now leads the world in many areas. But thankfully, this ancient but irrepressibly youthful nation continues to cherish the ancient immutable ideals and ethics that enabled it to survive the ages. As Dr. Nevius wrote in 1892:

From time immemorial China has been the recognized teacher of all the nations around her and the pupil of none. She may well be excused for claiming a respect which for centuries all her neighbors have accorded to her. In this respect she stands in striking contrast to Japan. Japan is accustomed to take the place of learner, having largely derived her literary culture and even her language from China... It is not strange that China clings tenaciously to institutions which have stood the test of millenniums and given to her such a marvelous degree of national prosperity.

Dr. John L. Nevius, *Chinese Recorder*, Vol. 23, Nov. 1892

## Confucian Societies Abroad?

China's socialism has succeeded so well precisely because it fits hand in glove with the ancient Chinese ideal of a people-centered, benevolent, peace-seeking government by leaders selected solely for their morals and merit. No wonder Voltaire called for China's governmental model to be adopted in Europe—but perhaps it's not too late. As Prof. Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho of Yale-NUS college wrote, "Perhaps the twenty-first century will see the victory of Confucian societies, in which economic growth is guided for the public good by a meritocracy."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho, "The Confucian Roots of Xi Jinping's Policies", *The Straits Times*, Nov. 15, 2017.

## Chapter 22

# The Ancient Ethics Behind New China's Success



I had felt the impact of this immense vitality the moment I first set foot in Amoy. I came upon it by no rational process, no social studies. I met the tide of lusty and abundant life full in the face, with all its primitive urges undiluted. It was a life, at times, frightening in its force.

Averil Mackenzie-Grieve, English resident of Gulangyu, Xiamen, 1920s

Xiamen people's "immense vitality" was as overwhelming when we arrived in 1988 as it had been for Averil 60 years earlier. In spite of overwhelming challenges, Xiamen people were optimistic about the future because conditions were already better than anyone alive had ever seen. I too had confidence, because Chinese of all people have proven they can handle hardship. But I suspected we were "planting trees for future generations to enjoy the shade"; I never imagined our own generation would witness such a rapid transformation.

We weren't thrilled with Xiamen's living conditions but I was captivated by the cheerfulness of people like the bicycle repairman, who with his wife slept in a tiny loft above their 3 m wide shack. Every time I'd ask, "How much?" he'd reply, "Nothing. Wait until you've a big repair." And then he'd offer me tea in a cheap, thimble-sized clay cup but served with such grace and poise you'd have thought we lounged beneath a banyan in a scholar's courtyard rather than perched on rickety bamboo stools between rusty bike parts and rubber tires. Mr. Li had not finished primary school but he was a Confucian gentleman to the core in values, priorities and behavior.

### Optimism Rooted in "Superior Civilization"

I saw the same optimism and decorum in everyone from university leaders to the street sweeper and garden laborer who helped keep China's most beautiful campus in pristine condition. But such optimism, quiet self-confidence and dedication to the task at hand is nothing new and helps explain Chinese' successes both at home but abroad. Maclay wrote of Southeast Asia's Chinese in 1861:

By their intelligence, industry and capacity for business they almost monopolize all the important and highly remunerative departments of labor; commerce passes into their hands, and they become the chief factors, the leading spirits in the native communities in which they live....

Chinese monopolized business across Asia even in the face of colonial powers conducting trade at gunpoint because their “superior civilization” was rooted in what Confucius himself considered “Ancient Ways”.

## Ancient Ways of the Yellow River

Some 2,500 years ago, Confucius said, “I transmit rather than innovate. I trust in and love the Ancient Ways” (*The Analects*, 7:1). These Ancient Ways, Confucius explained, promised peace and prosperity to nations whose people were moral, just and peaceful, but devastation to those who strayed from the primordial and immutable Way of Heaven. Lin Zexu appealed to this Way of Heaven in a futile attempt to dissuade the British from smuggling opium:

The Way of Heaven is fairness to all; it does not suffer us to harm others in order to benefit ourselves. Men are alike in this all the world over: that they cherish life and hate what endangers life. Your country lies 20,000 leagues away; but for all that the Way of Heaven holds good for you as for us, and your instincts are not different from ours; for nowhere are there men so blind as not to distinguish what brings profit and what does harm....

## Deities of Self-Sufficiency

These Ancient Ways were promulgated by Chinese Civilization’s legendary founders—great god-kings like the Three Sovereigns, and heroes such as Shennong. Chinese revered these god-kings not for their supernatural traits or intervention in daily affairs but because they taught people pragmatic skills to solve their own problems. Skills such as making fire, building houses, planting and processing the “five grains” and domesticating animals allowed Chinese to migrate from their caves to the 752,000 sq. km Yellow River Basin in which they formed the agrarian villages that evolved into Chinese civilization. But the Mother River of China and source of Chinese civilization has been both a blessing and a bane.

The Yellow River winds from Qinghai in the far west near Tibet up to Inner Mongolia and east to Shandong where it empties what is left after irrigating the dry central plains of China. The Yellow River is an ancient giver of life—but it also brings death. The river has changed course dramatically about every 100 years, and flooded 1,593 times between 602 BC and 1946, with the 1931 flood, the worst natural disaster in history, killing 1 to 4 million.

Yet perhaps this very adversity helps account for ancient Chinese’ innovativeness. Necessity, after all, is the mother of invention. After the father of Yu the Great (2123–2025 BC) failed to tame the river with dykes, Yu spent 13 years on his new “not dam

but divert” strategy. Today, Yu is revered for creating the irrigation system that tamed the floods and brought prosperity to China’s heartland. But Chinese also admire Yu because he ate and slept with the workers and even shared their physical labor—a spirit admired to this day in leaders such as Xi Jinping, who as a young Party secretary in Fujian not only inspected farmers’ living conditions but even helped them hoe their fields.

## Reality Outshines Myth

Chinese have endless legends to account for their unique inventiveness and industriousness but archaeology has revealed that Chinese prospered long before the god-kings showed up.

The Yellow River basin agrarian settlements at Hebei’s Nanzhuangtou Neolithic Site (8,700–7,500 BC) cultivated millet and processed grains with stone slabs and rollers up to 6,000 years before the Yellow Emperor’s day. The villages of the Peiligang Neolithic Site (7,000–5,000 BC) in Henan grew millet and raised pigs, poultry and cattle, and fished with nets of hemp. Relics include stone sickles and rollers for harvesting and grinding millet and pottery for cooking and storing grains. The Jiahu villages to the south planted rice.

The ancient Yellow River basin’s architecture was so innovative that other nations are adopting it to this day. With its “bamboo bones” in walls of earth and glutinous rice, rammed earth dwellings are earthquake-proof and self-healing, with some buildings standing for 700 years. These homes are comfortable year round thanks to superb acoustic and thermal insulation, and are so eco-friendly that the techniques have been adapted for everything from hospitals, churches and schools to a meditation center at Stanford University and Napa Valley’s newest luxury hotel, the Bardessono eco-resort.

Ancient Yellow River agricultural practices were so ingenious that they were centuries and even millennia ahead of those in the West. In the 1600s, Dutch sailors borrowed Chinese agricultural techniques and tools, which led to the Agricultural Revolution that in turn made possible the Industrial Revolution.

Even into the twentieth century, foreign experts were amazed at Chinese farmers’ ingenuity in squeezing crops from the smallest plots of land for centuries with no deterioration in soil quality. Johnston described in 1898 how “indomitable” Chinese coaxed crops on vertical slopes as “inaccessible as the nest of the eagle”:

At first the hills rise abruptly from the water’s edge on either side, those to the south rising to a height of two thousand feet rugged and bare, except where the indomitable energy and industry of the Chinese have planted their little crop of rice on terraced slopes, or in nooks and crannies which seemed from our point of view as inaccessible as the nest of the eagle.

“There are no more clever farmers in the world,” concluded Philip Wilson Pitcher in 1893—but Chinese cleverness went far beyond farming.

## Master of All Trades

In English we talk of a “jack of all trades and master of none”, but Chinese seemed to have mastered all trades they put their hand to—and thousands of years before the West. Shore was astonished at the size and productivity of Xiamen Chinese oyster-beds and wrote in 1881, “While we in Europe are still writing essays and pamphlets on the theory of the subject, this practical people have been obtaining good results for the last 1,800 years.”

Westerners also marveled at how Chinese craftsman effortlessly conjured up quality products with the simplest tools, techniques, and material—be it fine wood or a strip of common bamboo. George Coffin<sup>1</sup> wrote of Chinese carpenters in 1908:

The carpenter’s tools at first sight seem rude and clumsy to a Yankee, but to see them handle them one must confess that they do not work so hard and can accomplish more than our carpenters.... They paint better than we do....

Chinese’ attention to detail delighted foreigners, with Elizabeth<sup>2</sup> Lewis exclaiming in 1938 how this integrity in workmanship reflected Chinese ideals of beauty and the “individual industrialism” at the heart of Chinese’ entrepreneurial success at home and abroad:

If any one Chinese virtue occurs more widely and to more marked degree than others, it is probably integrity in workmanship.... Whether a potter struggling to perfect a glaze; an ivory carver laboring for years on a screen worth a king’s ransom; or a humble housewife stitching shoe soles for her family, the same patient and painstaking attention is given to detail, the same effort poured into producing what will not only serve the immediate pursuit, but will have beauty and durability as well. Satisfaction in work well done seems to be its own reward in China; certainly no other is apparent in this land where labor, even when it becomes creative art – and only the thinnest line exists between Chinese artist and artisans – is the cheapest of all commodities.

This racial characteristic of thoroughness may be due to the Middle Kingdom’s having been throughout the centuries a civilization composed of individual industrialists. The largest establishments rarely consisted of more than the proprietor and six or seven helpers; great factories and mills appeared only with the introduction of foreign methods. Any man trained in a craft could set up business for himself in his own home; doing all the work in person or being assisted by the members of his household until that day when he could afford to feed and shelter an apprentice.

## Cultivating a Philosophical Character

What is truly remarkable is the excellence pursued by all Chinese, Confucian scholar or illiterate farmer alike. John MacGowan wrote in 1907 that a Chinese is a blend of Spartan and Buddha with virtually unlimited persistence:

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<sup>1</sup>George Coffin, *A Pioneer Voyage to California and Round the World, 1849 to 1852*, Gorham B. Coffin, Illinois, June, 1908.

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Foreman Lewis, *Portraits from a Chinese Scroll*, the John C. Winston Company, Chicago, 1938.



.... It is this same absence of nerves that enables the Chinese to bear suffering of any kind with a patience and fortitude that is perfectly Spartan. He will live from one year's end to another on food that seems utterly inadequate for human use; he will slave at the severest toil, with no Sunday to break its wearisome monotony, and no change to give the mind rest; and he will go on with the duties of life with a sturdy tread and with a meditative mystic look on his face, that reminds one of those images of Buddha that one sees so frequently in the Chinese monasteries or temples.... The staying power of the Chinese seems unlimited. The strong, square frames with which nature has endowed them are models of strength.

MacGowan 1907

Rose Talman, one of MacGowan's contemporaries in Xiamen, wrote of the "great difference in the psychology of Eastern and Western Society":

To their conditions they have developed responses – frugality (nothing wasted in China), patience, industriousness, sense of humour – a philosophical approach to the realities of life. These are the qualities that make the Chinese tough and persevering and give them the will to love and fight against poverty. The Chinese enjoy few luxuries in material things. They are not an acquisitive society. The people yearn more for peace and stability – a climate for work rather than affluence or wealth for the sake of pleasure. There is a great difference in the psychology of Eastern and Western society.

Rose Talman, Amoy Missionary, 1916–1930, unpublished memoirs

Chinese at all levels of society, whether scholar, farmer or fisherman, were Confucian in philosophy and practice because the Confucian values of humaneness, justice, norms, knowledge and integrity, and their concomitant behaviors, were taught not just in classes but in everyday life by leaders' consistent examples.

This Confucian ethos was so pervasive and effective that even the northern nomadic invaders who overran China were forced to admit their newly conquered subjects' superiority and became more Chinese than the people themselves. Maclay wrote in 1861 of how China has remained virtually unchanged over the millennia:

The permanence of Chinese institutions is worthy of notice in this connection. It is a significant and singular fact that, from the earliest period of their authentic history to the present time, the Chinese have preserved intact and inviolate every important feature and principle of their government and civilization. The successive irruptions of northern barbarians have neither abrogated nor essentially modified Chinese institutions. The conquering races who have overrun those fertile plains have stood abashed ... and after subduing the empire, they have invariably adopted its government, laws, civilization, and language.

Maclay would not be surprised to learn that even in the twenty-first century, socialist China is also grounded upon the ancient ways because, as Confucius taught, they are the only sustainable path to peace, prosperity and stability.

## **Peace Rooted in Patriotism and Probity**

Of all Chinese traits, I most admire their love of peace, which is rooted in patriotism and probity. Chinese have never sought to colonize distant lands (see Chap. 25) in

part because it is immoral but also because they love their own homeland so deeply that they simply have no need to seize someone else's.

This Chinese patriotism is, admittedly, hard for foreigners to understand or believe. Western media paints Chinese as poor, oppressed and chafing for change, but in driving over 200,000 km around China during 32 years, I've been astonished at how consistently Han Chinese and minorities alike love their country and are grateful for its changes. That's not to say they don't have complaints. Every nation on earth has issues and the planet's most populous nation is no exception. But whether 100% satisfied or not, Chinese view China as their home—even when far from home! In 1881, Shore wrote that many Chinese sought their fortune abroad but their dream was to return home to China, preferably in life but, if not, at least in death:

.... Very many settle down in their adopted countries, but great numbers return home after amassing a competency; some, indeed, after death to be buried near their ancestors, for the Chinese have a deep regard for the mother country, and make a point of having their bodies embalmed, if, that is to say, they can afford it, and being sent back to their native place for burial.

Shore, 1881

I've seen the same pull of home during my three decades in China. Several of my brightest graduate students emigrated abroad but after a decade or two returned to a lower-paying job in China. One told me, "Life in America was comfortable and I had a bright career – but it wasn't home – and I wasn't doing anything as meaningful as I am here in China."

## Confucian Work Ethic vs. Protestant Work Ethic

Chinese also value peace simply because it is in accord with the Ancient Ways—the Way of Heaven that Lin Zexu tried to explain to Western opium smugglers. Sadly, Lin's appeal to morality fell flat, even though Western capitalism was, in theory, grounded in what Weber called the "Protestant Work Ethic".

I read *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in grad school, and then wrote "Beyond the Protestant Work Ethic" as my PhD dissertation because Christianity is not the historical explanation for capitalism's success. I see nothing of Christ's compassion, concern for the poor or demand for justice in the practices so vividly depicted by Dickens and Marx, and undertaken for centuries in Asia, Latin America and Africa. But to this day I do see the underlying influence of China's Ancient Ways—an ethos ancient even in Confucius' day that promised peace and prosperity if a nation followed the Way of Heaven's "fairness to all".

There are only two paths to profit. We can either steal it (colonialism, opium and slave trafficking, today's proxy wars to secure trade advantages), or we can earn it as Chinese have through the ages with industriousness, innovativeness and integrity.

I hope that other nations will learn from China's example, because only in the "Ancient Ways" of fairness to all, the foundation of China's 70-year battle against poverty, does our little planet have any hope of escaping the unjust practices of the past five centuries?

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## Chapter 23

# Confucian Capitalism and Innovation



Western media and academia have for decades perpetuated the fiction that Chinese are neither innovative nor good at business, but fortunately for the rest of the world, both claims are false. It was China's prosperous economy, grounded in Chinese' entrepreneurialism and solid support from a pragmatic government, that helped end the devastating Great Recession of the late 2000s.

I see vivid proof of Chinese entrepreneurialism at every turn. Three decades ago, my first phone in China cost USD 450 and I waited three years to get it installed. Today, even Chinese beggars have cell phones and display QR codes for donations. My phone is a Huawei, my computer is Lenovo. And China has rapidly gone from Cashpoor to cashless.

### Cashpoor to Cashless

In 1988, we had little cash but there was nothing to buy anyway, and many basic purchases required ration coupons. By 2017, China had the world's most mobile phones and spent USD 16.7 trillion on mobile payments, compared with only 49.3 billion in the U.S. And the rest of the world is not catching up but falling further behind. It is projected that in 2021, 79.3% of Chinese will use mobile payments compared with 23% in the U.S. and 15% in Germany. Even the remotest villages in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet have internet and villagers buy and sell online.

Chinese are obviously quite savvy at business, and as its influence expands through the BRI, it is comforting to know that, unlike other so-called Great Powers, China has always sought success solely through commercial means. Not once has China colonize far flung lands as the U.S. did when U.S. Senator Beveridge said before Congress on January 9th, 1900:

The Philippines are ours forever....and just beyond the Philippines are China's illimitable markets. We will not retreat from either... Our largest trade henceforth must be with Asia. The Pacific is our Ocean.

Trade opportunities with China are as illimitable today as in 1900, but foreign nations are discovering that on a level playing field, without navies and armies to enforce so-called "trade", Chinese are better at business than they'd ever imagined—and that is good news for other countries that seek peaceful coexistence and mutual prosperity.

## Are Asia's Chinese False Capitalists?

In 1988, Prof. Kunio Yoshinara wrote that most of Southeast Asia's Chinese entrepreneurs are not truly industrial capitalists but "ersatz" (fake, or poor imitation) capitalists—mere monopolists, rent seekers and speculators in collusion with ruling elites.<sup>1</sup> In May, 1992, *Business Week* (May 4, 1992, pp. 18–20) also noted:

In short, goes the argument, Southeast Asia's top entrepreneurs, most of whom are ethnic [Chinese], may be whizzes at making easy money as concessionaires. But they do little to build domestic industries that can compare globally.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, Asia's best businessmen for centuries have been Chinese—in part because they had no choice. As we see from Senator Beveridges' speech, even into the twentieth century, Western businesses relied largely on colonialism and military might but Chinese, without Beijing politics or a navy at their beck and call, were forced to rely entirely on business skills and strategy—and this turned out to be good for China because it forced Chinese to become adept at pure business, and they excelled.

## Harvard: China More Open and Market-Driven Than Europe

Three hundred years ago, China and India accounted for two thirds of the world's GDP, and in 2014, *Harvard Business Review* noted, "Until the early nineteenth century, China's economy was more open and market driven than the economies of Europe."

As noted earlier, almost 160 years ago, in 1861, Maclay explained that Chinese merchants used their soft power to dominate business and then to become the "leading" spirits of their adopted homes.

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<sup>1</sup>Kunio Yoshihara, *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in South-East Asia*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>*Business Week* (May 4, 1992, pp. 18–20).

## From Rice Seller to Henry Ford of Asia

Mr. Chen Jiageng, the Henry Ford of Asia who founded Xiamen University in 1921, epitomized overseas Chinese' use of soft power. Mr. Chen left Xiamen as a teen to help in his father's Singapore rice shop. Within 20 years, he had built a global empire with 30,000 employees in 150 offices and 48 countries, and as a true "leading spirit" he donated over USD10 million (over USD100 million today) to build dozens of schools throughout Asia.

Mr. Chen was both patriotic to China and a passionate global citizen. He designed XMU's architecture with Chinese roofs and Western walls and columns to reflect his ideal of modern, international education grounded in traditional Chinese values and culture. His vision so impressed Chinese and foreigners alike that in 1920, the year before XMU opened, Paul Hutchinson wrote:

This school [Xiamen University] is entirely a Chinese institution, with no foreign teachers and no foreign connections, and right out in a small Chinese village. The course of study is being made very practical.... When we think of the future days, it is one of the most encouraging things to be seen in the whole of China.

Paul Hutchinson, 1920

## 1930s "Typical Chinese Industrialist"

In 1936, Lockhart used Chen Jiageng as his model of a typical 1930s overseas Chinese industrialist:

But perhaps the greatest change in Malayan life is the emergence of the modern Chinese capitalist and industrialist... Externally, at least, he is Westernized from the soles of his brown shoes to his tie and collar ... there are still amazing examples of men who began life as an ordinary coolie and became dollar millionaires.

... he is a fully-equipped industrialist with the money-sense of a Jew, the gambling instincts of a South African Rand magnate, the modern methods of a Bat'<sup>3</sup> or a Ford, and the tireless, persevering energy of an old time Glasgow Scot. He runs banks and newspapers.

He has the stock exchange quotations of the world's bourses at his fingertips. He is an authority on commodity prices. He owns rubber estates and tin mines. His factories turn out boots, cheap clothing, food stuffs, including canned pineapples, building materials, medicines, soaps, toys and articles made from rubber, and by the latest methods of modern salesmanship he contrives to export his goods to nearly every country in the world....

Above all, he is a generous giver to local institutions, and like American millionaires is fond of endowing hospitals, colleges and other educational institutions....

R. H. Bruce Lockhart, 1936

When the West's colonial empires in Asia failed during the twentieth century, the firms that had relied upon politics and militaries rather than business principles also failed—and overseas Chinese bought them cheaply. Today, overseas Chinese

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas Bat's, 1876–1932, distinguished Czechoslovak manufacturer.

constitute less than 10% of the population of S.E. Asian countries yet control two thirds of the retail trade and 80% of the publicly listed companies.<sup>4</sup>

## Mainland Chinese as Formidable as Overseas Chinese

Yoshinara was wrong. S. E. Asia's Chinese are obviously quite good at business—but what about mainland Chinese?

History shows that Chinese at home were as adept at business as their counterparts overseas. China not only had a thriving trade but it also had extensive cultural exchanges, with the emperor offering an Alafa (allowance) even to foreigners to subsidize their philosophical or religious pursuits.

“There is no people in the world wealthier than the Chinese,” said the famous Arab traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–1358), who over 30 years traveled farther than any other explorer in history—some 117,000 km.

Marco Polo wrote of Quanzhou, the start of the Maritime Silk Road just 60 km north of my home in Xiamen:

At this city you must know is the Haven of Zayton, frequented by all the ships of India, which bring thither spicery and all other kinds of costly wares. It is the port also that is frequented by all the merchants of Manzi, for hither is imported the most astonishing quantity of goods and of precious stones and pearls, and from this they are distributed all over Manzi. And I assure you that for one shipload of pepper that goes to Alexandria or elsewhere, destined for Christendom, there come a hundred such, aye and more too, to this haven of Zayton; for it is one of the greatest havens in the world for commerce.

## Great Commercial and Cultural Crossroads

Ancient China not only excelled at trade and commerce but it was so open to other cultures and religions that the emperor offered an Alafa even to foreign missionaries like Andrew of Perugia, the Franciscan Bishop in ancient Quanzhou who wrote in 1326 that the sum of these Alafas exceeded the entire revenue of some Latin countries:

There, after the Archbishop was consecrated ... we obtained an Alafa from the emperor for our food and clothing. An Alafa is an allowance for expenses which the emperor grants to the envoys of princes, to orators, warriors, different kinds of artists, jongleurs, paupers, and all sorts of people of all sorts of conditions. And the sum total of these allowances surpasses the revenue and expenditure of several of the kings of the Latin countries. As to the wealth, splendor, and glory of this great emperor, the vastness of his dominion, the multitudes of people subject to him, the number and greatness of his cities, and the constitution of the empire, within which no man dares to draw a sword against his neighbor, I will say nothing, because it would be a long matter to write, and would seem incredible to those who heard it. Even I who am here in the country do hear things averred of it that I can scarcely believe....

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<sup>4</sup>Frank-Jurgen Richter, *Redesigning Asian Business: In the Aftermath of Crisis* (2002), Quorum Books, p. 83.

In this place I continue to dwell, living upon the imperial dole before-mentioned.... Of this allowance I have spent the greatest part in the construction of the church; and I know none among all the convents of our province to be compared to it in elegance and all other amenities.... 'Tis a fact that in this vast empire there are people of every nation under heaven, and every sect, and all and sundry are allowed to live freely according to their creed.... Farewell in the Lord, father, now and ever. Dated at Zayton, A.D. 1326, in the month of January.

Even into the twentieth century, Westerners marveled at Chinese business savvy, as well as their integrity. In 1912, Reverend Pitcher wrote of Chinese businessmen in *In and About Amoy*:

... what shall we say of them? They are a part of a wonderful people ... in business circles, the commercial world, they have the reputation of being the most straightforward and conscientious merchants in the whole Eastern hemisphere.... You may always depend upon the man with whom you may be dealing to deliver the goods. No matter how much they may lose in the transaction the Chinese have the reputation of fulfilling their contracts every time to the letter.

## Confucian Innovation in Business

Chinese are obviously adept at business, but what about the contention that they lack innovation and only copy others? In July, 2011, diplomat.com asked, “How does China kill innovation?” A March, 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article that acknowledged China’s historic openness to trade was entitled, “Why Chinese Can’t Innovate”.

In May, 2015, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said in a speech to the USAF Academy, “I challenge you, name me one innovative project, one innovative change, one innovative product that has come out of China.” That same year, Carly Fiorina, former Hewlett Packard CEO, wrote in her book, *Rising to the Challenge: My Leadership Journey*:

Although the Chinese are a gifted people, innovation and entrepreneurship are not their strong suits. Their society, as well as their educational system, is too homogenized and controlled to encourage imagination and risk taking.

Many experts opine that China’s rigid education curriculum stifles creativity, but if that were true, how did ancient Chinese with their rigid Confucian education invent everything under the sun? In reality, Chinese have long been innovative in governance, science and business precisely because their rigorous education gave them a foundation for critical thinking and problem solving.

Confucius himself was quite creative, and he taught by asking questions that forced students to think on their own rather than parrot what he’d told them. He said, “If I show one corner and the student cannot deduce the other three, I do not repeat the lesson.”



One decade ago, the Western media trumpeted Chinese' lack of creativity. Today, they are changing their tune. In April, 2019, Daniel Coughlin wrote for *MSN Money* titled "28 Incredible 'Made in China' Innovations That Are Changing the World"<sup>5</sup>:

Scientific and technological breakthroughs that will blow your mind. A beacon of eye-opening innovation, including this month's historic moon landing, China is becoming the global leader in everything from artificial intelligence and robotics to green energy ... we put the spotlight on 28 recent advances that reveal why the planet's most populous country is rapidly getting ahead.

## **Confucian Education: Key to Innovation, Business and Government**

Legends say the ancient Three Sovereigns improved people's lives by teaching them fire, farming and building houses, but Chinese have had no problem innovating on their own ever since. As the saying goes, "indigo is bluer than the plant itself," meaning the follower has surpassed the master.

Confucian education provided not only the intellectual foundation but also the moral imperative for innovation and commerce to feed, clothe and care for China's teeming population, which even 2000 years ago numbered 60 million.

To feed its millions, China adopted row crops in 500 BC, some 2300 years before Europeans, and started an agricultural research bureau in 200 BC. Chinese invented the iron plow in 300 BC; Dutch sailors saw it in Fujian in the 1600s, took it back to Europe, and in 1730 England patented this "Dutch plow". In 200 BC, Chinese sowed seeds one at a time, in rows, using multiple-tube seed drills that weren't widely used in Europe until the nineteenth century. Row crop farming was used in China in 500 BC, 2200 years before the Europeans. The Dutch introduction of Chinese agricultural ingenuity to Europe—row crops, hoeing weeds, iron plow with mouldboard to turn the soil and multiple seed drills—brought about the Agricultural Revolution that heralded the Industrial Revolution.

But history's greatest agricultural triumph was Governor Li Bing's Dujiangyan Irrigation Project built about 256 BC. To this day, Dujiangyan not only irrigates 5300 sq. km of land but also prevents floods in ways that surpass even "modern" practices. In the U.S., 1578 dams were demolished between 1912 and 2018 because they impeded fish migration or caused other environmental issues, but Li Bing's project even today allows fish and ships to travel unimpeded because he used the 4000-year-old Chinese river management philosophy of diverting and channeling rivers rather than damming them. This project has for over 2000 years bolstered the economy of "the breadbasket of West China".

Scholars helped farmers with seasonal sowing by studying the heavens and meteorology with 4500 years of records so accurate that NASA used them to study how much the earth's rotation had slowed 47/1000 of a second over the past 3400 years.

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/28-incredible-made-in-china-innovations-that-are-changing-the-world/ss-BBRWnlD>.

UK astronomers received the 1974 Nobel Prize for discovering a Crab Nebula pulsar, but in 1054 Chinese astronomers recorded the explosion that created it.

Shen Kuo (1031–1095) wrote of climate change over time and how to prevent deforestation, the use of biological pesticides, pinhole cameras, music and math harmonics, raised-relief maps and morality, among other subjects. In 1856 in the UK, Bessemer patented a modern steel making process but Shen Kuo had described it 800 years earlier.

China's Confucian scholars also excelled at medicine. Chinese used ephedrine in 2000 BC, and in 300 BC emphasized prevention of disease through proper nutrition, exercise and stress relief—the “healthy lifestyle” approach popular in the West only in recent decades. In 980, Chinese steamed clothes to reduce the spread of infections and in 1000 gave smallpox inoculations.

In 2015, Dr. Tu Youyou received the Nobel Prize in medicine for a malaria cure she based on a 1600-year-old Chinese work (scientists abroad had tried over 240,000 compounds without success).

To better govern their vast empire, Chinese created “projection maps” 1400 years before Mercator “invented them”, and created gridded maps in the second century BC. In the eighth century, Chinese conducted a 2500 km geodesic survey from Indo-China to Mongolia and traveled to within 20 degrees of the south pole to study southern constellations.

To facilitate trade, some 1400 years ago China started the 1100 mile Grand Canal to link Hangzhou and Beijing to the Silk Road and West China. The invention of pound locks for the Grand Canal made possible the European canals, including France's Canal du Midi, which was considered an engineering miracle in the West even though it was only 150 miles long and built 1000 years after the Grand Canal.

And Chinese of course invented not just paper but paper money, paper playing cards, greeting cards, toilet paper—and, of course, paper books.

China is said to have more books than any other country... In Peking there are several blocks of streets in the Chinese city which are devoted to books. The Hanlin Library contained many thousand volumes. Among them there was one work comprising 23,633 volumes....

Denby, 1900

China's Confucian scholars also excelled at math, inventing both the decimal system and the binomial math upon which computers depend. In 1535, Niccolo Tartaglia (1500–1557) excited Europeans with  $x^3 + ax = b$ , but 300 years earlier, in 1248, Chinese mathematician Li Ye (1192–1279) had calculated,  $ax^6 + bx^5 + cx^4 + dx^3 + ex^2 + fx + e = 0$  (and also claimed that the earth was a sphere), and Chinese mathematician Yang Hui (1238–1298) drew “Pascal's Triangle” almost 400 years before Pascal's birth in 1623. A fifth-century father-son team was 1000 years ahead of Europe when they calculated pi as 3.1415929203.

Zhang Heng (78–139), a civil servant, invented the odometer, and a seismograph so sensitive that it detected an earthquake 1000 km away. He was also an astronomer, mathematician, engineer, geographer, map maker, artist, poet, statesman and literary scholar—quite versatile for a person of a rigid Confucian education.

History proves that, far from stifling creativity, China's Confucian education system has long served to foster the intellectual discipline and critical thinking needed to solve the great problems of a great nation. That innovation was seen in Chinese entrepreneurs holding their own against colonial empires, or government officials building the Dujiangyan Irrigation Project 2200 years ago, the Grand Canal 1500 years ago, or the greatest maritime port in the world 1000 years ago. And it's seen in modern China's business and government as well.

## **Innovative Confucian Government Today**

Although New China is socialist, its leaders' values and goals are, in many ways, remarkably pragmatic and similar to those of 500 or 2000 years ago. Those who pass the entrance examination (the new imperial exam) and excel in college are placed at various posts around the country, moving up only if they prove themselves. And not surprisingly, today's meritocracy is chockfull of engineers with the skills to meet the rapidly evolving needs of China's one fifth of the planet's population.

Hong Kong-Apec Trade Policy Group executive David Dodwell wrote in 2017:

The main difference between the U.S. and China is not that one is capitalist and the other communist. Rather, it's that one is run by lawyers, and the other by engineers.<sup>6</sup>

## **Confucian Engineer Leaders**

Jiang Zemin is an electrical engineer, and Li Peng, a hydroelectric engineer, helped design the Three Gorges Dam. Zhu Rongji is an electrical engineer. Xi Jinping studied chemical engineering. A Swiss ambassador said that Wen Jiabao, who has a postgraduate degree from the Beijing Institute of Geology, has a "mind like a computer". I attended five meetings in Beijing with Wen Jiabao and each time he replied with statistics to every question put to him on diverse topics—and not a teleprompter in sight.

Given the caliber of New China's leadership, it is no surprise the nation has undertaken engineering feats that would have shocked even the ancients—such projects as the South to North Water Transfer, West to East Electric Power Project, the "Five Vertical, Seven Horizontal" Highways Project and the Three Gorges Dam and the world's most extensive hi-speed railway networks.

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<sup>6</sup><https://stansberrypacific.com/china/china-technology-is-ten-times-better-than-you-might-think/>.

But all of these pale beside the projects even now in place to complete the Belt and Road Initiative.

## **BRI: Taking Precision Poverty Alleviation to the World**

In 2017 the World Economic Forum reported that from 1990 to 2005, China had accounted for three fourths of global poverty alleviation. The goal of China's entrepreneurial leadership now is to use the BRI to tackle poverty in other nations as it has at home—by building fundamental infrastructure that will empower people to lift themselves from poverty.

A century ago, the world thought that China was on its last legs, but foreigners intimate with the ancient nation's history and spirit were confident the country would not just survive but thrive. Gamewell wrote in 1919:

China is not like ancient Egypt, whose greatness has departed though she still lives on. China is a vital force whose largest possibilities of development lie before and not behind her. A new fresh life is beginning to course through the nation's veins.

Today, that new fresh life is coursing not only through China's veins but through other nations as well—yet this inflames yet another Western fear—that China is out to conquer the world.

I understand Western nations' fears because after five centuries of colonialism, they fully believe that a powerful China will behave as they did, perhaps crying as the U.S. did in 1900, "The Pacific Ocean is ours!"

Fortunately, Chinese have never sought conquest. If ancient Chinese had harbored even the faintest imperialistic tendencies, today the entire world would be speaking Chinese.

As Maclay pointed out in 1861, Chinese won in business through pure business principles, and as the "leading spirits", gave back. Today, China is helping other nations to build their infrastructures.

It's also showing the world how to tackle pandemics with science, not politics—an important lesson, because on this small planet we can attack borderless problems only with borderless cooperation.

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## Chapter 24

# China's Precision Pandemic Alleviation



For several months I've witnessed firsthand, in both China and the U.S., how the two countries have tackled the deadly Covid-19, and the difference was astonishing. While the U.S. effort has been led by politicians who downplayed the peril for and then blamed China for their inaction, China has battled the pandemic just as it has fought poverty and other problems—with experts who rapidly executed comprehensive, national strategies with scientific precision.

Foreign media of course criticized China for its initial delay in announcing the virus, but even as you don't shout "fire" in a crowded room, you don't panic 1.4 billion people or the rest of the world, before you're certain there is a problem. But once the threat was verified, China rapidly isolated the virus' genome and shared it with the world.

Today, my wife and I can walk about our Chinese city without fear of the virus, but friends and family in the U.S. are huddled in their homes, and experts say there is no longer any hope of curtailing the threat until a cure is perfected 12 to 18 months from now.

China is relatively safe today because the country did not hesitate to sacrifice its economy to save lives. On January 23, China shut down Wuhan, a city of 11 million people (compared with 8 million in New York) even though the nation had only 500 cases and 17 deaths at that point.

Other nations immediately attacked China's forced quarantines as violating the inalienable right of liberty, but those nations have now imposed their own quarantines, though too late to be effective.

### Priority Is People, Not Economy

Foreign media also reported how Chinese suffered under draconian quarantine measures, but what they failed to mention was the Chinese' astonishing sense of solidarity, commitment and confidence because, contrary to foreign reports, the Chinese

trusted leaders who have proven over 40 years of reform and opening up that their ultimate priority is not the economy but people.

“We’re careful, but not afraid,” a college student said to me. “We Chinese have faced adversity before, and we can overcome this too.”

A single girl in her 30s said, “I get bored alone in quarantine, but it is for the best. At least I have lots of time to read and study, and I can use my phone to have food and necessities delivered to my doorstep.”

This stoic acceptance contrasts sharply with what I saw in the U.S. as shoppers literally fought each other to buy the last roll of toilet paper or hand cleanser—but I well understand their fear. Chinese are trusting in experts and scientists like Major General Chen Wei, a veteran of SARS and Ebola, to fight the virus; Americans’ hope, however, is in the hands of mayors, governors and a president who fight each other harder than they fight the virus.

## Safest Place on the Planet?

It is no wonder that Dr. Bruce Aylward, who led the WHO-China Joint Mission on Covid-19 in February, said after his return from China, “You know, if I had Covid-19, I’d want to be treated in China... Folks, this is a rapidly escalating epidemic in different places that we’ve got to tackle superfast to prevent a pandemic.”<sup>1</sup>

Aylward concluded in February that the rest of the world is “simply not ready”. The world was still not ready on April 1st when the *USA Today* headline read, “This is what China did to beat corona virus. Experts say America couldn’t handle it.”<sup>2</sup>

## Early Warnings Ignored

But Americans, especially New York City, should have prepared long ago. In 2006, New York City’s 266-page Pandemic Plan warned that the city was “uniquely vulnerable to infectious disease threats”, and could be short of 9454 ventilators during a pandemic. The city responded by purchasing a small supply of face masks and 500 ventilators, and then sold the ventilators because of maintenance costs.<sup>3</sup>

In March, 2015, Bill Gates’ short TEDtalk warned that the world was unprepared for the next pandemic. He said we’d been lucky with Ebola because it did not spread through the air but:

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.businessinsider.com/what-works-to-fight-covid-19-lessons-from-china-who-2020-2>.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/04/01/coronavirus-covid-19-china-radical-measures-lockdowns-mass-quarantines/2938374001/>.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.propublica.org/article/how-new-york-city-emergency-ventilator-stockpile-ended-up-on-the-auction-block>.

Next time, we might not be so lucky. You can have a virus where people feel well enough while they're infectious that they get on a plane or they go to a market.... In fact, let's look at a model of a virus spread through the air, like the Spanish Flu back in 1918. So here's what would happen: It would spread throughout the world very, very quickly. And you can see over 30 million people died from that epidemic. So this is a serious problem. We should be concerned.

The world ignored Gates—and Covid-19 turned out to be the pandemic that did spread through the air. And U.S. officials warned each other privately but told the public there was nothing to worry about.

On January 29, Trump adviser Navarro warned in a memo that the virus could infect 100 million Americans and kill 1–2 million people. In a February 23 memo, he warned the crisis could cost trillions and take millions of lives. Yet that very same day, he told the media there was “nothing to worry about for the American people” under Trump’s leadership.<sup>4</sup> Also on that same day, he told Fox News, “The American economy is extremely strong and not particularly vulnerable to what happens in China.”

## **Don't Wear Masks!**

Leaders and experts not only downplayed the danger but even discouraged people, including healthcare workers, from taking such basic precautions as masks because, sadly, the country had no masks.

On January 30, the CDC said it did not recommend the general public wear masks because “the virus is not spreading in the general community.”

On February 29, the Surgeon General tweeted, “Seriously people: STOP BUYING MASKS! They are NOT effective.”

On April 2, New York City Mayor Blasio finally suggested that New Yorkers cover their nose and mouth in public to protect other people. New York Governor Cuomo responded by saying that masks just gave people a “false sense of security”, but less than two weeks later, on April 15, Cuomo himself ordered New Yorkers to wear face coverings in public. He said, “[It's] your right to go out for a walk in the park... You don't have a right to infect me.”

It took Cuomo three and a half months, 200,000 confirmed cases and over 11,000 deaths to finally require face coverings, yet even then Cuomo admitted he could not enforce his order but was relying upon New Yorkers to enforce it themselves by asking people without masks, “‘Where's your mask, buddy?’ in a nice, New York kind of way.”

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/10/politics/peter-navarro-coronavirus/index.html>.



## Doctors Fired for Wearing Masks

New Yorkers were also reminded to make their own masks so that real masks could be saved for healthcare workers—although doctors and nurses in both the U.S. and UK had been fired for wearing masks because they “frighten patients”.

On April 6, the *Guardian* reported that doctors in Britain are pressured to treat Covid-19 patients without protective gear and told to “hold their breath to avoid getting infected.”<sup>5</sup>

On April 17, headlines read that ten nurses had lost their jobs for refusing to treat Covid-19 patients without masks at Los Angeles's Providence Saint John's Health Center.

Dr. David L. Heymann, a WHO panel expert, was quoted by the *New York Times* on March 22 as saying, “The virus can be stopped, but only with harsh steps.... You need to identify and stop discrete outbreaks, and then do rigorous contact tracing.... But doing so takes intelligent, rapidly adaptive work by health officials, and near-total cooperation from the populace. Containment becomes realistic only when Americans realize that working together is the only way to protect themselves and their loved ones.”<sup>6</sup>

## A Politicized Pandemic

But Americans have not worked together because their leaders have not worked together. Governors fight mayors, and all of them fight the president who has claimed his authority is absolute, prompting Governor Cuomo to remind him, “You are a President, not a King.”

These leaders are even now, with the virus at its peak, weighing the cost in lives from resuming business because they've already lost the virus war and don't want to lose the economy as well.

Sadly, the greatest price for this political incompetence will be paid not by Americans but by the impoverished peoples in India, Latin America, Africa and Asia who have no way to practice social distance, who can barely afford clothes, much less masks, and who can't wash their hands because they have no clean water. And these poor will suffer through the next pandemic if the world does not learn from China's experience with Covid-19.

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/06/nhs-doctors-lacking-ppe-bullied-into-treating-covid-19-patients>.

<sup>6</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/health/coronavirus-restrictions-us.html>.

## China's Secret: Pandemics Are War

A *USA Today* article, “China’s Nationwide Response vs. America’s Patchwork”, quoted Huiyao Wang, a Chinese government senior adviser, as saying that “China’s response to the outbreak was truly a nationwide response: systematic, comprehensive and coordinated.... Lockdowns, bans on gatherings, basic quarantines, testing, hand-washing, this is not enough. You need to isolate people on an enormous scale, in stadiums, big exhibition halls, wherever you can. It seems extreme. It works. ‘No one left behind’ was the slogan in Wuhan. No one.”<sup>7</sup>

Bill Gates said in 2015 that epidemics are war, and China has fought this Covid-19 War with experts like Major General Chen Wei, a 54-year-old virologist and China’s No. 1 expert in biological and chemical weapons defense. She said, “The epidemic is like a military situation. The epicenter equals to the battlefield.”<sup>8</sup>

General Chen spoke from experience. In 2003, General Chen led the team to isolate the SARS, and in 2004, her team in Africa created the first Ebola vaccine that entered clinical trial.<sup>9</sup> Chen knows too well what is at stake, and told the *China Science Daily*, “Prevention and control of an epidemic can never wait until the disease has happened.”

China was able to implement many of its Covid-19 strategies precisely because it had learned from SARS, Swine Flu and other epidemics.

## China's Steps

*Business Insider*'s<sup>10</sup> succinct overview of China’s steps in tackling the virus could very well form the basis of a simple manual for the next pandemic.

1. Free and easy testing. From the outset, China gave everyone from farmers to foreigners free virus tests, and to this day, our temperature is taken several times a day in stores, restaurants, buses or when we pass a street corner health station. Compare that to the experience of Ms. Danni Askini, an American who was billed USD 34,927.43 for testing and treatment. She said, “I was pretty sticker-shocked. I personally don’t know anybody who has that kind of money.”<sup>11</sup>
2. Postponement of non-urgent medical care and elective surgeries. Western media criticized China for this, yet Italy and Spain faced the same choices when

<sup>7</sup><https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/04/01/coronavirus-covid-19-china-radical-measures-lockdowns-mass-quarantines/2938374001/>.

<sup>8</sup><https://arynews.tv/en/china-clinical-trials-coronavirus-vaccine/>.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1183887.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup><https://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-coronavirus-quarantines-other-countries-arent-ready-2020-3#the-country-implemented-large-scale-contact-tracing-in-the-early-2000s-8>.

<sup>11</sup><https://time.com/5806312/coronavirus-treatment-cost/>.

overwhelmed, and on March 24, the American College of Surgeons warned that:

We continue to recommend that surgeons **curtail the performance of “elective” surgical procedures** (boldface theirs). The ACS is receiving reports that most surgeons are in the process of or have already stopped performing elective operations.

3. Trains quit stopping in Wuhan. This is not likely in America, where governors argue with mayors over who has the right to enforce quarantines, and everyone argues with the president, who by law can restrict foreign travel but cannot easily intervene in states.
4. China walled off entire hospital wards. China also built two hospitals built almost overnight, thanks to lessons learned in 2003 with SARS. In only 10 days, a crew of 7000 built a 645,000 sq. foot, 2-storey, 1000 patient hospital with several isolation wards and 30 ICUs. Another 323,000 sq. foot, 1300 bed hospital was finished two days later. The blueprints were modeled after Beijing's Xiaotangshan hospital, which was built in one week during the 2003 SARS epidemic.

The hospitals' construction so enthralled the nation that they were live-streamed and the millions who would have normally been on Chinese New Year vacation but were now home on “staycations” called themselves “supervisors”, gave cranes nicknames such as “Little Red”, and cheered “Go!” and “Dig Faster!” Their sense of humor and resilience in this trying time was truly heartwarming.

5. China used technology to trace every case. The West has criticized China, Singapore, Israel and others for violating the right of privacy with this “Digital Authoritarianism”, but consider Typhoid Mary (1869–1938), who was tracked down and locked up twice, the second time for 23 years. She was denied her right to liberty because of her threat to public health. Covid-19, even treated, is 10 times deadlier than typhoid.

Pandemics are possible precisely because of the technology that makes our world so interconnected, and we need to use technology to combat such threats, even as the U.S. White House and CDC helped create and distribute a Modular Wireless Patient Monitoring System to track Ebola patients in Africa. The WHO's executive director, Dr. Michael Ryan, said that tracing cases is effective, inexpensive, and a “very basic public health intervention”.

6. Relatively easy for shut-ins to get food and supplies. While Americans are fighting over toilet paper, hand sanitizer and bottled water, Chinese in quarantine, virtually anywhere in China, can use their phones to have anything delivered to their door, including freshly prepared meals and hot tea or coffee.
7. Quickly shifted jobs to help. China sent 40,000 medical workers, many of them volunteers, to help Wuhan. People across the entire country enthusiastically accepted transfers to work in completely different fields to do their part in what is very much a “war effort”.
8. People worked together. Even the WHO's Dr. Aylward was astounded by the Chinese sense of national solidarity. As the old Chinese saying goes, “When the nest crashes, no egg survives.” But for three decades I've witnessed this

same solidarity and trust in the leadership because Chinese are confident in a government that has completely transformed the nation in only four decades of reform and opening up. In those nations led by self-serving politicians, however, there is no solidarity, only “every man for himself”.

As Dr. Aylward noted, “Hundreds of thousands of people in China did not get Covid-19 because of this aggressive response,” which he said continually evolved as the Chinese learned more about the enemy. Aylward also noted that China’s approach was simply the use of “old-fashioned public-health tools” applied “with a rigor and innovation of approach on a scale that we’ve never seen in history.”

“In 30 years of doing this business,” Aylward said, “I’ve not seen this before, nor was I sure it would work.”

It did work, but only because the government acted immediately, with courage and decisiveness, and the people had ample reason to trust their government. No wonder Chinese are optimistic—but does the rest of the world have hope?

## **Pan-Global Pandemic Response**

In 1990, Kenichi Ohmae wrote in *The Borderless World* that trade was open and free for all nations, even though his own home of Japan had some of the most rigid cultural, political and economic barriers in the world. Trade is not borderless to this day, and probably never will be—but Covid-19 truly knows no borders. Rich and poor alike fall before it, though the elderly, the weak and the poor are hardest hit.

In our inescapably interconnected world, with 60% of the global GDP from trade, a borderless virus requires a truly borderless response, because even one nation’s failure endangers all others.

I was heartened, therefore, when several EU countries sent China medical equipment when it was most needed, and how China in turn helped the EU, the U.S. and many other countries. Those bright moments in otherwise dark months offered hope that we may yet learn to face a common enemy together.

For our children’s sake, I hope that the nations will cease bickering and blaming and learn from one another so we can respond to the next pandemic scientifically, not politically, and as a global community, not as isolated nations. Our enemy, after all, should be the virus, not each other, and the only way to defeat a borderless pandemic is with a borderless response.

And if the world can learn from China’s response to Covid-19, I hope it can also learn from China how to defeat that other ancient enemy, poverty, which throughout history has taken far more lives than any pandemic.

Fortunately, China’s BRI is already helping other nations lift themselves from poverty in the same way as China did—by building sound infrastructure that fosters innovation and self-sufficiency.

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## Chapter 25

# BRI: Global Precision Poverty Alleviation



The Seres [Chinese] are a race eminent for integrity and well known for the trade. ...

Pomponius Mela, Roman geographer, AD 43

When my youngest son and his wife volunteered for medical work in Africa, his biggest concern was not safety (riots, robbers, kidnappings, political uprisings, lions) or health (malaria, typhoid, dengue fever), or even living in an insufferably hot climate with no air conditioning. My sons grew up in China, and after living with a dad who dragged them 100,000 km exploring their adopted home, they're tough. But Matt did have one worry—that he'd not be able to cook Chinese food, but his first week he wrote, "Even our remote village has a tiny Chinese grocery store!"

I understand Matt's concern. The French playwright and poet, Moliere (1622–1673), said, "One should eat to live, not live to eat," but I say, "Moliere never ate Chinese food!"

Matt could handle Africa once he found that a Chinese family had set aside one room of their house to sell staples like spices, tofu and bamboo shoots to the Chinese building a nearby dam. And as Matt discovered, every corner of Africa had Chinese working to help the vast continent in the same way China had lifted itself from poverty—building infrastructure.

## Four Thousand Years of Foreign Trade

By 2019, the Belt and Road Initiative's 69 participants accounted for over 62% of the global population, 31% of global GDP and 33% of global trade volume. Western pundits have written about China's "new openness" but, in reality, China was trading with Europe, Africa and Asia almost 4000 years ago—long before most modern nations existed.

Researchers found 3800-year-old Caucasian mummies along the Silk Road in N. W. China, some of them wearing "Austrian" twill. A 3000-year-old mummy in Egypt was found to have remnants of silk fabric, which was only made in China. The Han

Dynasty (221 BC–AD 206) sent 10 or more embassies yearly to Central Asia to trade for their spirited stallions. Ethiopians sent an envoy to China in AD 100. In AD 43, the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela wrote that the Seres [Chinese] were “a race eminent for integrity and well known for the trade....”

Over 1100 years ago, Canton had 120,000 foreigners from all over the known world, and the start of the Maritime Silk Road, Xi Jinping’s inspiration for the BRI, was Fujian’s Quanzhou Harbor, which Marco Polo said had 100 ships for every one ship in the West. Trade was so good that the Southern Song Emperor Gao Zong (1107–1187) said, “Maritime trade profits are very great—perhaps millions, if managed well... Isn’t this better than taxing the people?”

I was not surprised when *Harvard Business Review* claimed in March, 2014, “Until the early nineteenth century, China’s economy was more open and market driven than the economies of Europe.” In 1842, China was an open, economic powerhouse with 32% of the global GDP. But that was also the year that China lost the First Opium War, and by 1942, after 100 years of foreign occupation and military-backed opium trade, China’s share of GDP had plummeted from 32% to less than 5%.

## Africa: Wealthiest and Poorest Continent

Africa, like China and India, was also destroyed. Africa is so large it could hold Europe, China and the USA and still have room left over. But even though Africa is by far the richest continent in resources, it is also by far the poorest continent economically because, for centuries, Europeans had carved the continent into colonies and exported everything of worth—including the people themselves as slaves.

With everything of value shipped out of Africa, there was no need for infrastructure between the countries themselves, which resulted in Africa’s infamous “growth without development”.

In 1980, vast Africa had only 0.4% of global manufacturing, and that dwindled to 0.3% by 2003. But by 2014 it had increased 500% to 1.5%—not much, but even that little progress was only because China had begun attacking poverty in Africa the same way it had at home. As Chinese had said for decades, “To prosper, first build roads,” and with Xi Jinping’s inauguration of the BRI in 2013, this philosophy was extended to other countries as well.

Hillary Clinton, former U.S. secretary of state, warned Africa to deal only with “responsible nations” and not those nations [China] who only wanted to exploit their resources. Africans laughed at Clinton. As South African President Zuma said, “Africa’s past economic experience with Europe dictates a need to be cautious when entering into partnerships with other economies. We certainly are convinced that China’s intention is different to that of Europe, which to date continues to attempt to influence African countries for their sole benefit.”

## China's New Hope for Africa

China's intentions toward Africa were evident very early on. The famous consulting firm, McKinsey and Company, observed:

Even in 1978, when China was just emerging from the devastating effects of its Cultural Revolution and was itself one of the world's poorest countries, it provided foreign aid to 74 countries – and to more in Africa than the United States did.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s, China built the Tanzania-Zambia (TANZARA) Railway. Westerners were quick to point out that the railroad failed after Africans took over, but China learned from that experience that in addition to building infrastructure, it needed to train Africans to maintain and manage the new projects. Today, for example, China is funding and building a railway academy in Ethiopia.

China is also training Africa's future engineers, economists and leaders with scholarships to study in China. I've met many of these future leaders at my own Xiamen University, which is China's No. 1 in accounting, and they are thankful that China is giving Africa hope for the first time in centuries.

In Andrew Mwenda's TEDGlobal 2007 talk, "Aid for Africa? No thanks," he noted that Africa received 600 million in aid between 1960 to 2003. "Where has all the aid gone?" he asked. Most of it went for health, food and education but little for actual development. Mwenda asked his audience, "Can any one of you tell me a neighbor, a friend, a relative that you know, who became rich by receiving charity? By holding the begging bowl and receiving alms?"

China, however, has learned from its own experience that the only sustainable approach to poverty is not "donating blood", which can create dependency, but "producing blood" to engender self-sufficiency and, as Xi Jinping has said for years, "heal the poverty of spirit."

## Why Africa Respects China

McKinsey and Company (June 2010) summed up why Africans respect China's approach:

Yet China's recent development trajectory – lifting hundreds of millions of its people from poverty in the past 30 years – offers Africans lessons and hope. Other factors adding to China's credibility are its pragmatic, business-like approach to development and focus on much-needed infrastructure projects. Also, Chinese workers are generally well-respected because they are prepared to work in Africa's fields or factories, often at the locals' salaries,

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<sup>1</sup>Steve Davis and Jonathan Woetzel, "Making the Most of Chinese Aid to Africa," McKinsey Consulting, June 2010.



in contrast to the wages, housing, and approaches of Western aid organizations or commercial enterprises. For this reason, China still explicitly rejects the label of donor.<sup>2</sup>

China empowers nations to lift themselves from poverty by building highways, railways, airports, bridges, dams, power plants, schools and hospitals. The World Bank has estimated that such BRI projects could reduce travel times by 12%, increase trade 2.7–9.7% and increase incomes by up to 3.4%, lifting millions from extreme poverty. And these huge projects have paved the way for smaller and more diverse investments by entrepreneurs the world over in everything from agriculture to banking, insurance, transport and logistics, housing and telecommunications.

McKinsey Associate Partner Irene Yuan Sun says:

Chinese manufacturing investment is the best hope that Africa has to industrialize in this generation. Chinese involvement in Africa is not just about state-driven efforts. A just as large, if not larger, component is these private enterprises, which are more job-intensive, which localize quicker and which have a much larger economic and social impact.<sup>3</sup>

Alibaba founder Jack Ma visited several African countries in August 2018, and set up the “Ma Yun African Venture Fund” to help over 100 African start-ups. On November 16, 2019, this fund hosted the finals for the African Entrepreneurs Competition in Accra, Ghana and awarded a USD 1 million prize to each of the top ten from more than 10,000 contestants.

But in a developing country, it doesn’t take USD 1 million to bring change; sometimes USD 50 can do the trick. My son Matt found that mothers in one village walked six hours a day just for water, so he surfed the internet for solutions, paid a local blacksmith fifty dollars to forge an iron drill bit, and helped villagers dig a well. Now that the village has its own water, the government sent a teacher and built a school, and the entire village now has hope and a future.

## How the West Benefits from BRI

Some nations still oppose BRI in spite of its benefits, but that does not stop them from capitalizing upon the efficient new infrastructure. In October, 2019, India shipped cargo from Navasiva, India to Tashkent Uzbekistan in the far west via rail from Xiamen on China’s east coast. In spite of the zigzagging east and west, shipping was nearly 20 days faster than alternative routes.

The U.S. government criticizes BRI but PVH, the U.S. owner of brands like Calvin Klein, Van Heusen, Tommy Hilfiger, Speedo and Izod, is the top job provider at Hawassa Industrial Park, an eco-friendly park built in only nine months by China’s state-owned China Civil Engineering Corporation.

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<sup>2</sup>Steve Davis and Jonathan Woetzel, “Making the Most of Chinese Aid to Africa”, McKinsey Consulting, June 2010.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.ozy.com/around-the-world/how-chinese-entrepreneurs-are-quietly-reshaping-africa/93519/>.

Royal HaskoningDHV (RHDHV), a global Dutch engineering firm with offices in South Africa, partnered with the Chinese state-owned construction firm the Aviation Industry Corporation of China, Ltd. in building airports.

Sonatrach, Algeria's state-owned oil company and Africa's largest company, signed a USD 445 million contract with China Harbor Engineering Company for port installations in eastern Algeria because it was the only option to increase production and expand international markets.

As Pippa Morgan wrote in *The Diplomat* (March 2018):

And, of course, PVH and other global investors could not run their businesses – and create thousands of coveted manufacturing jobs – without the railways, roads, and power stations that China is constructing all over Ethiopia... Investors desperately need roads, electricity, water, and the internet. With traditional Western partners either unwilling or unable to fund these at scale, and low tax revenues due to the country's poverty, how else can the Ethiopian government build the basic infrastructure that we take for granted in the developed world? Without Chinese help, Western money for training and other 'soft' sectors is sinking money into a black hole, and Ethiopia risks being 'too poor to develop' – condemned to survive on subsistence agriculture and international handouts.

China's economic investments also promote positive social change. In 2019, Forbes Global 2000 ranked Zijin Mining as No. 1 in the world in gold production and No. 1 in China in non-ferrous metals production. I've learned much about its far flung operations in places such as Tajikistan, Peru, Australia and Russia because some of its managers have been my MBA students. Zijin's economic benefits to the Democratic Republic of the Congo helped stabilize the nation and bring about its first smooth and democratic power transition with the election of President Felix Tshisekedi in early 2019. The World Bank hailed this as "an extraordinary opportunity" to improve the country's civil rights.

## The "Chinese Laborer in Africa" Myth

A common criticism of BRI is that China sends its own laborers instead of hiring locals, but a McKinsey survey of over 400 Chinese companies in over 40 African countries showed over 80% of workers were Africans. China's 10,000 plus firms in Africa have not only created jobs for several million Africans but have also provided technical training and transfer of technology. Zijin Mining trained Africans for 1500 skilled jobs, and Huawei founded the West Africa training school in Nigeria to hone African engineers' skills. I visited Huawei's Shenzhen headquarters and spoke with a manager who had worked in Africa, and was heartened by how the company treated African team members. And just as they'd done in remote Tibet, Huawei provided communications services to remote areas of Africa even when they had no way of ever making a profit.

In Ethiopia, 82 Chinese companies with a total output of USD 730 million have created over 10,000 jobs in the Ethiopia Eastern Industrial Zone, which was built in 2007 by a private Chinese company. China's newly created free trade zones in places

like Djibouti are becoming global trade and logistics hubs linking Africa, Asia and Europe.

China differs from the West not just in economic strategies but also in how the Chinese themselves work with the peoples of other countries. Ben Olander of [smallpower.org](http://smallpower.org) said:

You walk down the street of Kinshasa, you see Chinese people working side by side with Africans in a way that you just don't see Europeans and Americans do.

## The West's Skills Gap in Africa

Olander also pointed out the U.S.'s growing "skills gap":

Half a century ago, American engineers of all flavors could be found in Africa and elsewhere designing similar infrastructure projects as what the Chinese are doing today. The United States no longer generates enough engineering talents for its domestic market, much less to deploy to developing countries. Instead, the United States exports legions of consultants and so-called 'development experts' who seemingly do little more than write reports, attend meetings and work from the air conditioned comfort of their secure office compounds. The Chinese, in contrast, have a seemingly endless supply of highly trained engineers who are now deployed across Africa to build communication, road and electrical networks. Our skill sets no longer line up with the needs of the people that we are working with. The real reason why the Chinese have been effective is that the Chinese are sending people that will get their hands dirty, not just consultants to sit in chauffeured driven SUVs, air conditioning blasting, go from one office to another office, never actually working with the people they are supposed to be reaching.

Yet another criticism of BRI is the partner nations' debt risk, but China is working to reduce that risk with diversified financing such as equity financing and bonds, and it now has currency swap agreements with over 20 BRI countries. Some African countries like Zambia, Angola, Gabon and Sudan already have a trade surplus with China, and China is considering canceling RMB10.5 billion in debt for 31 African countries facing unexpected challenges.

China is also promoting BRI green initiatives to balance greening and growing as it has at home. Almost 20 financial institutions from 10 countries and regions signed the BRI Green Investment Principle created by The City of London and the China Society for Finance and Banking to promote green development along the Belt and Road.

## McKinsey: The Future Is Africa

"The rate of return on foreign investment is higher in Africa than in any other developing region," *McKinsey Quarterly* noted in June, 2010. "Global executives and investors must pay heed." Yet in spite of Africa's vast opportunities, many Western

companies have no Africa strategy because they think Africa is a scary place to do business and unpredictable.

The BRI does indeed entail great risks. Chinese in Africa face political and economic instability, corruption, violence, kidnapping of workers and executives, wars and challenging health conditions. Nevertheless, since the 1950s China has felt that Africa has suffered long enough, the risks are worth it—and it is the only moral thing to do.

For five centuries, many of today’s great powers enriched themselves not through true trade but through colonialism, opium and slave trafficking. But in all of recorded history, China has never occupied a distant land or engaged in anything but peaceful and mutually beneficial trade and exchange. And for decades, New China’s leaders have said that no society is prosperous if any live in poverty.

With BRI, China is now taking this value to a global level because, on such a small planet as ours, no nation can be prosperous while others remain impoverished—or at war.

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## Chapter 26

# Art of War, Way of Peace



I felt I'd come full circle when Sue and I returned to Taipei in 2016 to celebrate our 35th wedding anniversary where we'd been married and where Sue had been born. The world is much wealthier today—but apparently not that much wiser. Even in this day of astonishing technology, 10% of the world, some 734 million people, still live in absolute poverty.<sup>1</sup>

But no amount of wealth or sophistication of science will ever eradicate poverty if nations don't unite to address with precision the causes of poverty—the greatest factor being the endless rhetoric and fear mongering that pits nations and regions against each other in a geopolitical game that perpetuates poverty rather than solve it. I fear we're no closer now to ending this game than we were in 1976.

### CCK Air Base, Taiwan, 1976

I was certain I'd face battle when the Air Force sent me to Taiwan in 1976 but, fortunately, the two sides were wielding not weapons but words. But Chinese have long believed, and as much as possible acted upon, "The pen is mightier than the sword."

Over time I came to respect the mainland's restraint. After all, if it didn't retake Taiwan's militarily-occupied Jinmen Island, which at 3 miles from Xiamen is so close that with binoculars you can see its soldiers, then it wasn't likely they'd attack Taiwan 100 miles away. Besides, both sides were Chinese who knew from Sun Zi's *Art of War* that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting."

Today, 40 years later, the two sides have resolved some differences and exchanges are improving, but they've not yet resolved all their differences in part because of interference by the nation that in 1900 proclaimed to the world, "The Pacific is our Ocean."

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<sup>1</sup>"PovcalNet". <https://iresearch.worldbank.org>. Retrieved 10 March 2019.

When I was in the Air Force, we viewed China as the great threat but ourselves as “Peacemakers”, but the more I learned about our global “police actions”, the more I came to think there must be a better path to peace than constant war, including the CIA’s “Secret War” in Laos that ended in 1975, the year before I was sent to Taiwan. Only in 1997 did the U.S. admit that in eight years they’d dropped 2,756,941 tons of bombs—more than they’d used in all of WW II<sup>2</sup>—on a tiny nation with less people than we have in Xiamen (the U.S., by the way, had considered dropping a nuclear bomb on Xiamen in 1958).<sup>3</sup>

The more I learned, the more I wondered who was really the greatest threat to peace.

I’m not demonizing one nation and deifying another. I know far too well that every nation, including China, has serious issues. But the West has portrayed China as the “Yellow Peril” for well over a century when in fact it was the victim. China is now too powerful to be a victim but many other nations still suffer extreme poverty because of corruption and wars—many of them so-called proxy wars largely instigated over trade. If we’re to end poverty, we must end war—and recognize that the threat to peace is not China. History suggests, in fact, that China’s deeply rooted Confucian and Taoist values help make it the least likely country to wage war.

## Confucian Peace

In 1861, American missionary Robert Samuel MacClay (1824–1907) explained in his insightful “Life among the Chinese” exactly why Chinese since Confucius’ day prefer the pen over the sword:

The soldier occupies the lowest position in the Chinese classification of society, and this arrangement, we think, is in accordance with the true sentiment of the nation on this point. The Chinese do not regard it as at all derogatory to their character to be told that they are deficient in the elements of warlike strength. “We are not a military people,” say they, “we are a literary nation. With us reason, and not force, defines rights and privileges; argument, and not the sword, decides controversies.”

But China’s appeals to reason and morality failed with the West.

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<sup>2</sup>Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), p. 389 citing Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), pp. 234–236; and Fred Branfman, *Voices of the Plain of Jars: Life Under an Air War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 3 and 18–20.

<sup>3</sup>“Air Force Histories Released Through Archive Lawsuit Show Cautious Presidents Overruling Air Force Plans for Early Use of Nuclear Weapons”, Washington, DC: National Security Archive. 30 April 2008.

## Becoming Captain Elliott

I knew nothing about the West's century of opium trafficking at gunpoint until the mid-1990s, when I played Britain's Captain Elliott in a TV series about Lin Zexu, who tried to end the opium trade. I was certain the script had to be pure fiction so I researched it. I used Western sources because I didn't trust the Chinese to be objective. I was horrified to learn that the script in fact downplayed the depravity; real life was far worse. "The British were not truly 'evil,'" a director told me. People can convince themselves anything is moral if the price is high enough."

After Emperor Dao Guang's sons died of opium, he lambasted England as a "Christian nation devoid of four out of the five virtues". England responded by promising the emperor great wealth if he would only allow opium. The horrified emperor replied:

It is true that I cannot prevent the introduction of the poison; gain seeking corrupt men will, for profit and sensuality, defeat my wishes; but nothing will induce me to derive a revenue from the vice and misery of my people.

The number of Chinese opium addicts grew 50-fold between 1820 and 1835. In typically Confucian fashion, Lin Zexu tried to reason with Queen Victoria, writing a poignant letter to her in 1839:

I am told that in your own country opium smoking is forbidden under severe penalties. This means that you are aware of how harmful it is. So long as you do not take it yourselves, but continue to make it and tempt the people of China to buy it, such conduct is repugnant to human feeling and at variance with the Way of Heaven.

The Way of Heaven is fairness to all; it does not suffer us to harm others in order to benefit ourselves. Men are alike in this all the world over: that they cherish life and hate what endangers life. Your country lies 20,000 leagues away; but for all that the Way of Heaven holds good for you as for us, and your instincts are not different from ours; for nowhere are there men so blind as not to distinguish what brings profit and what does harm....

Lin Zexu's appeal to morality was fruitless. On April 6, 1843, the *Times* summed up Prime Minister Robert Peel's position:

Morality and religion, and the happiness of mankind, and friendly relations with China, and new markets for British manufactures were all very fine things in their way; but that the opium trade was worth to the Indian government £1,200,000....

Lin Zexu finally abandoned appeals to reason and morality and confiscated 20,283 chests of the foreigners' opium, which took six weeks to destroy. As foreigners gazed at the black smoke rising over Canton, Lin Zexu noted, "I should judge from their attitudes that they have the decency to feel heartily ashamed."

They were red-faced not from shame but fury, and Britain waged two opium wars. When China refused to legalize opium even after the second Opium War, 4000 British and French troops spent three days destroying Beijing's 800 acre Summer Palace (but only after looting the priceless objects inside, which UNESCO says are now in 47 museums around the world). China surrendered and legalized opium.

## “International Complexities” of Drug Trafficking?

To this day, Lin Zexu is criticized by Western scholars for his “rigid approach which failed to account for the domestic and international complexities of the problem.”<sup>4</sup> But Lin Zexu’s failure was that he assumed he could reason with amoral adversaries.

When I played Captain Elliott in the Lin Zexu series, the other actors joked during breaks but I was, for one of the few times in my life, sobered and silent. Imagine if today’s Mexican drug cartels marched boldly across the border into the U.S. with literally tons of opium in semi-trucks, and the Mexican military at their back—and accused the U.S., if it objected to the drugs, of failing to take into account the “international complexities of the problem”.

If Mexican drug lords can become billionaires in a decade, imagine how much Western nations made from a century of entire shiploads of opium at gunpoint. America’s first multimillionaire, John Jacob Astor, built his first fortune on China opium trafficking and died with a fortune that would have been worth USD 140 billion in today’s dollars.

By 1900, one fourth of Chinese adults used opium. In 1896, China’s Viceroy, Zhang Zhidong, wrote in *China’s Only Hope*:

Cast out the poison! The foreign drug is debasing the homes and sweeping away the lives of our people. It is not foreign intercourse that is ruining China, but this dreadful poison. Oh, the grief and desolation it has wrought to our people!

## Where Is China?

In 1919, Ellen N. La Motte, the American nurse, journalist and author whose writings were thought to have influenced Hemingway, wrote in *Peking Dust*:

An American pointed at different colored places on a map of China and said his company would work here, or there, or somewhere else, but each time he was told, “No, that belongs to Britain. No, that is French. Can’t do – that is Russia’s. No, this is Germany’s.” He finally demanded of the Chinese and European officials, “Where the hell is China!”

Western nations carved China into so many spheres of influence that in 1899, Lord Charles Beresford published *The Break-Up of China*,<sup>5</sup> which was essentially a catalogue of China’s assets by region, and their benefits for her foreign occupiers.

In my home of Xiamen, our “international police” badges showed the flags of a dozen nations but not China’s flag because Chinese had no rights. Foreigners were immune to China’s laws but Chinese had to obey foreign law in their own country. Yet in spite of this century of occupation and drug trade, Western media portrayed China as the Yellow Peril—the threat to peace and the established order of “free trade”.

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<sup>4</sup>Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>Lord Charles Beresford, *The Break Up of China*, first American edition (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899).



John MacGowan (1835–1922), an Irish missionary to Xiamen and author of a dozen books on Chinese history, culture and language, scoffed at the West’s portrayal of China as the Yellow Peril. In 1907, he explained why Chinese love peace—and in so doing he described the Chinese Dream 100 years before it became a buzzword in China<sup>6</sup>:

Some writers have predicted that a day may come when, inspired by a spirit of war, they [the Chinese] will flash their swords in a wild conquest of the West. This is a dream that will never be realized. Both by instinct and by ages of training, the Chinese are essentially a peace-loving people. The glory of war is something that does not appeal to them. Trade, and commerce, and moneymaking, and peaceful lives are the ideals [the Chinese Dream!] of the race. No sooner is a clan fight begun, or a war with another nation, than the air at once resounds with the cry, “Mediate,” “Mediate.” Mediation is in the very blood of the nation, and the man who is a successful mediator is one that wins a golden reputation for himself.

MacGowan proved to be a prophet, however, with the next lines:

What the West has to fear is not the warlike spirit of the Chinese, which has never been a very important factor in their past history, but their numbers.... The Chinese are a strong race, and can live in comfort, and even luxury, on incomes that would mean starvation to American or Australian workmen. The battle of the future with the Yellow race will not be fought on any battlefield, but in the labour markets of the nations that they would invade.<sup>7</sup>

MacGowan had witnessed Chinese business prowess in Xiamen. In 1900, Gulangyu Islet was said to be the richest square mile on earth, and even today the tiny islet has over 1000 mansions. Yet even though Westerners controlled the military, police and customs, the wealth belonged not to foreigners but to the Chinese. The foreigners excelled at hard power and opium sales but little else. The Chinese, however, took advantage of the situation to do business—as their ancestors had done for centuries.

## China: Ancient Military Power for Peace

It was during this period [1573-1644] that the Dutch made their appearance by way of Formosa. They took possession of the Pescadores, and landed at Amoy, from whence they penetrated as far as Changchow and Haiting. The Dutch at the time were at war with both the Spanish and Portuguese; their trading-ships went heavily armed, and sailed as much for prizes as for trade.

Denby, 1900<sup>8</sup>

The world is fortunate that China did not follow the West’s example because for well over 1000 years China had the most powerful army and navy on the planet. The great muslim traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–1369), described Chinese ships in Fujian’s Quanzhou harbor:

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<sup>6</sup>Rev. John Macgowan, *Sidelights on Chinese Life*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Limited, 1907).

<sup>7</sup>Hastings Maclay, *Life Among the Chinese* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1861).

<sup>8</sup>The Hon. Charles Denby, LL.D., *China’s Open Door* (Boston: Lothrop Publishing).

The large ships have anything from three to twelve sails made of bamboo rods plaited like mats. A ship carries a thousand men, six hundred of whom are sailors and four hundred men-at-arms, including archers, men with shields and crossbowmen who throw naphtha [flaming petroleum].

Decades later, Admiral Zheng He (1371–1433), whose court name was Sanbao, probably inspired the Sinbad legend with his seven great voyages throughout Asia, East Africa and Arabia. On his first voyage, in 1405, he commanded 27,800 troops on 62 ships. The longest ship was 417 ft (Columbus' longest ship, the Santa Maria, was 161 ft). Zheng He so astonished the nations he visited that many have Sanbao Temples to this day. Some of his ships carried only water, others only rice, still others had silk, tea and porcelain for trade—but all were armed with weapons the like of which the world had never seen.

## A Sample of Chinese Military Inventions

- 4th century BC: chemical warfare: ox-hide bellows pumped burning balls of dried mustard and other toxic matter – 2300 years before World War I's mustard gas.
- 1st century AD: paddlewheel battleships to navigate very shallow rivers.
- 9th century AD: grenades and bombs of gunpowder mixed with toxic substances, like human excrement, wolfsbane, aconite, croton oil, arsenious oxide, arsenic sulfide, ashes, tung oil, and soap-bean pods that produced black smoke to cover movement or disorient the enemy.
- 10th century AD: flamethrowers, flares, fireworks, bombs, grenades, land mines and sea mines, rockets and multi-stage rockets.
- 11th century AD: watertight compartments on ships (not in the West until the mid-1800s).
- 13th century AD: guns, cannons, mortars, and repeating guns.

Fortunately, Chinese used their weaponry for defense, not conquest. Unfortunately, in 1540, Chinese weaponry and methods reached Europe—with devastating effect on the world for centuries.

## Art of War or Machiavelli?

China's greatest advantage, however, was not its innovative weapons but its strategies embodied in the classic *The Art of War*, which today is studied the world over not just by militaries but also by businessmen, sportsmen or anyone else needing to hone their strategy.

Despite its title, *The Art of War* warns that war and force are justifiable only when all other alternatives have been exhausted. This is rooted in both Confucian and Taoist morality, which calls to avoid death even for enemies. As Lao Zi wrote:

Violence, even well intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself. Weapons are tools of fear; a decent man will avoid them except in the direst necessity, and if compelled, will use them only with the utmost restraint. Peace is his highest value. If the peace has been shattered, how can he become content? His enemies are not demons but humans like himself. He doesn't wish them personal harm. Nor does he rejoice in victory. How could he rejoice in victory and delight in the slaughter of men?

If war becomes unavoidable, however, *The Art of War* declares that the most important factor in deciding victory is “Which of the two sovereigns is imbued with the moral law” (Laying of Plans 4). Only then do other factors like leaders’ abilities and size of army come into play. It is easy to see, then, why Lin Zexu tried to stop the opium trade by appealing to morality and the Way of Heaven, but Lin Zexu failed because Westerners follow not Confucius or Lao Zi but Machiavelli (1469–1527).

Machiavelli, the West’s “Father of Modern Political Science”, taught that morality is irrelevant and the end justifies the means. Murder, deceit and betrayal are acceptable as long as they achieve the goal.

Where Confucius and Lao Zi urged leaders to rule by moral example, Machiavelli wrote in Chapter 17 of *The Prince* that it was better to be feared than loved. As to military leadership, Machiavelli averred that a prince must use “inhuman cruelty” to ensure his troops’ respect. This is in stark contrast to Sun Zi’s admonition, “Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look upon them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death” (Terrain 4).

Machiavelli’s works have been reprinted endlessly and his tombstone is engraved with, “To so great a name, there is no praise great enough.” Today, his tactics are even taught in Western business schools. On July 18, 2018, Monash University Business School published the article, “How a Machiavellian Approach Could Boost Your Career.”<sup>9</sup>

## Hope for Change in East and West?

John MacGowan wrote in 1907 that Chinese have always sought peaceful prosperity and peaceful coexistence, but as *The Art of War* warns, Chinese will fight if they’ve exhausted all other alternatives. Heaven helps us if it comes to that. Let us hope the world will finally heed the words of Fujian’s governor who, on July 4, 1891, toasted Americans in Xiamen:

China, having followed its own principles of advancement during more than 5,000 years, is now compelled to change and move along European channels. It has begun to own steamships and railways. Its telegraph now covers every province. It has mills, forges and foundries like

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<sup>9</sup><https://www2.monash.edu/impact/articles/management/how-machiavelli-can-boost-your-career/>.

those of Essen, of Sheffield and of Pittsburgh. China is today learning that lesson in education which Europe has obliged her to learn, – the art of killing, the science of armies and navies. Woe, then, to the world if the scholar, profiting by her lesson, should apply it in turn. With its freedom from debt, its inexhaustible resources and its teeming millions, this empire might be the menace, if not the destroyer, of Christendom. No matter what happens, it needs no prophetic gift to know that the 20th century will see at the forefront of the nations of the world, – China in the East and America in the West. Well may we pray that, for the welfare of humanity, their purposes will be as peaceful and upright as today.

*Chinese Recorder*, Vol. 23, January 1892

The Fujian governor did not need to be a prophet in 1892 to know what lay ahead, and we too need no prophetic gift to see our own future. As Ecclesiastes 1:9 said, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.”

We will see something new under the sun—peace, and the end of poverty—if change begins in you and I.

We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.

Mahatma Gandhi<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>1964, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XII, April 1913 to December 1914, Chapter: General Knowledge About Health XXXII: Accidents Snake-Bite (From Gujarati, Indian Opinion, 9-8-1913), Start p. 156, Quote p. 158, the Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.