



A Life in Portraits



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Author's Preface

My son Tong Feila was born at 16:50 on April 29, 2003, when the SARS epidemic and the Iraq War were both at fever pitch. I rolled him in a little wheeled cart from the labor room back to the ward where, using my Nikon FM2 I took the first picture of his life. He had left his mother's body just 20 minutes earlier.

The little one watched me and the lens, curiosity written all over his tiny face – a face, not yet cleaned, that was covered with thread-like blood. Camera in hand, and full of reverence, I was starting to record my cute son whilst also compensating for the lack of images of my own life's journey. That year I was already a collector of photographs, but had found the oldest photographic record of myself was a group picture taken at my graduation from junior high.

That moment I resolved to take a photo of Naonao (his baby name) every day. I did that for a week. I still remember my excitement as I developed the first picture. In the days that followed I mechanically kept taking one photo a day and started to wonder about the meaning of my recording. Then I took one photo a week. Once he was a month old, I decided to make it once a month. After his first birthday I stopped following any particular schedule.

My lively son has never really been interested in taking photos. He was almost uncooperative, screaming his resistance from time to time. I always swayed between "taking" and "not taking." Is it really something necessary for the growth of a child or just my own ambition to create a history? Should he enjoy the freedom of life instead of having a pile of images? The digital photo display on my desk, replaying one piece after another of the painstakingly compiled memory of my little son, deepened my confusion and reflection.

Several years went by. In the fall of 2007, I made the acquaintance of Mr. Ye Jinglü, a native of Fuzhou, who wanted his portrait shot and kept up the practice for 62 years running.

What touched me first was Ye's tenacity and persistence. He was an uncomfortable reminder of my own wavering in the past years when taking photos of my son. I felt a twinge of regret for not keeping that up. We live in a screen age. Anyone with a mobile phone can take pictures at virtually any time, any place. The computer merging of still and video photography allows people to leave an image of their every moment. The digital age makes quantity a competitive advantage: if one person takes a photo every day, someone else will do so every hour – every minute even. But this is just a stale artistic approach or a parody by some Internet celebrity. No one these days is willing to put in the time!

Looking back on Ye's annual photo portraits starting over a century ago, the technology, the equipment, the subject's attitude and the significance of the event were all totally different. On a special day picked after much consideration, he would dress up in new clothing, put on his new shoes and hat and walk slowly down a long, long lane, reverentially entering the sanctum of the photo studio. He would have the photographer busily running around to implement ideas he had been mulling over for ages: selecting a backdrop, preparing props, adjusting the lighting and organizing the pose; then would come the click that froze a whole year into a single frame.

After several days of anticipation, he would take the finished portrait back home. Half sitting, half lying in his rattan chair he would closely examine the austere monochrome print, losing himself in peaceful reflection, conducting a silent dialogue with himself. This was a life ritual, an annual retrospection, summarization and conception. At this moment, Ye made the whole universe his private sitting room. The annual alternation between sitting and standing poses gave him the power to conquer hardship with

ease and to live through danger in peace. He seemed to put the rhythm of life under his control. Everything went with both tension and ease, in a methodical manner and at leisure. Such was his way of life.

His eyes are always full of peace and composure on those more than 60 photos. Of the ups and downs of time, of successes or reverses in business, of the separating and reuniting of his family... his expressions tell us nothing. But actually Ye's life was always connected to society and everything around him. Even in his eighties he would go out everyday to feel the fresh, invigorating changes going on. Indoors he would read books and newspaper and listen to the radio, an essential channel to learn about the world's goings-on. Ye lived overseas in his early manhood, was an industrious man of business in his middle years, and his old age was spent in retirement and leisure, but his mind always kept pace with the times. He held neither great riches nor important position. He lived his life without big peaks and troughs. However, he had intelligent insights about the powers and tides of change in this world. It was a strong and solid heart, a resolute and independent personality that made this invariably tranquil visage.

Ye's life was common and real, real like something tangible. He was a kind father in his children's eyes, a gentle husband in his wife's eyes, a reliable friend in the eyes of his family and friends, an honest partner in the eyes of business people, and a charitable gentleman in the eyes of his neighbors. There was nothing miraculous or fantastic about his life. He shared sunlight and warmth with the people around him every moment.

Forty years after Ye went to his final rest, I encountered him in his photographs. And I, in my forties, found a new understanding of myself and life.

Tong Bingxue

It All Started with the Web

Opportunity

One night in September 2007 – a clear night with beautiful moonlight and a few stars – I was on the web, when my mobile rang by my side. The caller had a strongly accented voice. He told me he was a book seller in Fuzhou City in the province of Fujian. He had just bought an album of old photos and wanted to ask me about its value. In 2005, I created an online “Chinese Photography Museum” and a website “Chinese Old Photos.” The websites explicitly offered free authentication and evaluation of old photos, so this kind of call asking for information was a routine, practically daily, event. I did not pay too much attention to it initially.

The caller, owner of an antiquarian bookstore, told me it was an album of portrait photos he had acquired recently. The album was said to come from Three Lanes and Seven Alleys, a well-known old city area in Fuzhou. The owner of this album had for many years had a studio photograph taken of himself. The album bore an inscription by Chen Zifen, a famous painter. The dealer felt that the photos were precious, asked me to evaluate them and whether I was interested in buying them. He had already put them on a collectors’ website.

I logged on to the site and started to examine the album carefully. The dealer had not retaken the photos well, each image on the website only showed a semi-original-looking photo. I had to examine and figure out the original look of the album from my own imagination. But after just a few minutes, I was astounded!

It was, in fact, a series of photos of a Chinese man, taken over 62 consecutive

years, from 1907 to 1968, aged from 27 to 88 years old. There was one photo for every year (not one year omitted), making a collection of 62 photos. There was also separate one taken in 1901, a marriage photo in 1906, and 40th and 60th wedding anniversary photographs of himself and his wife. Above or below each photo were noted in own hand the date of the portrait, his age that year and important family and national events. Most of the pictures in the album are 6-inch argentic salt photos taken in professional studios.

I saw the course of his aging from vigorous young man to hale and hearty old gentleman, his attire changing with the times – from the first picture, taken under the Qing Dynasty, in which he still wore a long braided pigtail, to the long gown and mandarin jacket of the Republic of China (1912-1949), and to the Lenin suit of the People's Republic of China. These photos truthfully recorded the progression from the prime of life to its end. I was immediately hooked by Mr. Ye's tenacity and the calm expression of his eyes.

As well as uploading the photos onto this collection website the dealer was also putting the album up for auction on Taobao.com, the Chinese equivalent to e-bay. But his opening price was generally thought sky-high, so basically nobody really looked into this album. Several friends who also collected old photos told me later that they had seen it, but confessed ruefully that they had not looked carefully because they felt the price exorbitant.

But my principle of treasure hunting on Chinese websites is to start browsing from the most expensive. The majority of collectables sold on the web are useless. Many websites don't take a charge on items sold, which results in real collectors items being way outnumbered by rubbish in these sites' specialist channels. If a vendor has something really valuable, he will quote a sky-high price for fear that he might end up selling it for way less than its value.

Online foraging is an important channel for me to collect old photos. Via

the Internet I can directly contact any person in the world within seconds, which expands the geographic scope of my collection from a limited area to infinity. Collection, auction and art gallery websites in China and abroad are important sources of information. My philosophy in online foraging is: I do not worry about how expensive an item is, but that it might be not so good, because I do not have the time to look at useless things. Because of this habit, I was attracted at once to this album I had never really seen, even though the information came from the Internet.

After bargaining with the owner over the phone, I finally decided to buy this album at a "handsome price." Because the vendor refused to accept online payment, I asked a former classmate who worked in Fuzhou to pay the money and pick up the album on my behalf. He sent it to Beijing by special delivery and two days later, it arrived safely and officially became part of my collection.

I have always trusted destiny and fate in the collecting process. It is destiny that brings together the item and the collector. It is something determined by the universe, that we cannot control; it is also fate, something that we can strive to create. This fate is built on the reverence and passion deep in a collector's heart, on relentless pursuit and opening up of new channels. On weekends, I often linger in the curiosity markets. Perhaps there is nothing to buy. But I can feel the popularity of the market, people's preferences and price fluctuations. I can also chat with the stand owners, exchange information with them and learn about the latest market situation. My full use of modern collection channels, the Internet in particular, plays another vital part in establishing destiny and fate between me and the items. Not only do I infinitely expand the search area for my collection through web search, but I infinitely expand my passive search area too, I increase my chances of being found by building my own website so that more people learn about me and give me information on collection items.

In 2005, I built a website specialized in the collection and study of old



Homepage image on the author's website:
an advertisement for a photo studio in early
China

25X20cm, albumen paper based, printed in
1868, by anonymous photographer, in the
collection of the author

photographs, which in fact was my personal collection website. My purpose at the time was to have more people learn about it and to communicate the idea of image collection. It also changed the traditional concept that many collectors only take and store items but never show their acquisitions to others.

In a sense, creating my website resulted in many people coming to know the value of other items similar to those in my collection and this meant more competition or raised the prices I had to pay. However, I got more information this way. Through my website I got to know the world's major collectors, researchers and dealers in Chinese old photographs. I got much firsthand information too. Almost daily I received emails or phone calls asking about or selling photos. Without the web, it would have been virtually impossible to forge a direct information link with a bookstore owner in Fuzhou. And he had found my website courtesy of a search engine.

Of course, had I been fixated on finding a "lucky treasure" or unwilling to pay a really good price, I wouldn't have paid the album any attention. It had been on sale online for about a month. If someone had bought it before me,

or if I hadn't had a former classmate working in Fuzhou, or if he had gone to the dealer one day later, the album might have found its destiny with someone else, because the day after I bought it, someone else came to the vendor and offered a high price. Had I only wanted to resell it at a profit, it would not be in my hands today and the publishing, exhibition and web posting of this album would never have happened, since soon after I bought it, some collector friends were offering really good money, which I declined.

The premise I work on when buying is that I must like the item. If I do and if I can afford to buy it I don't care whether the price is high or a bargain. Appreciating an item in my collection can bring me delight and pleasure every day; to study it and make new discoveries every day can bring me surprise and joy. For such feelings there is no substitute.

Appreciation

Someone asked me about the pleasure of collecting, especially in the Internet age and I summed it up as follows: When you have a clear direction and keep searching and chasing both online and off your hunger and longing for what the future might bring – this is the pleasure of anticipation. When you succeed in finding something you like via real-world channels or in the vast ocean of web information, this is the pleasure of discovery. When you appreciate and feel your favorite item and exhibit to the whole world via the web, this is the pleasure of enjoyment and sharing. When you keep on studying and get new understanding about your collection items or find more background information about them on the Internet, this is the pleasure of exploration. When you see that more and more netizens know about your collection and the items are endorsed by more and more readers and viewers, that is the pleasure of success!

After two days of my impatient waiting the package from Fuzhou arrived. I opened it carefully and cast my eyes over that light-green album of old