

# A FEW OF THE BILLION

*Portraits and Stories  
from China*



*A Brooks Jensen*

*A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication*



I was informed that he was the richest man in the village. I asked my translator how he knew such information. "It's easy to tell by the number of chickens he owns." Of course it is.





The entire length of this street was filled with small shops, almost all of them with one person, sitting in the door, making or repairing something. This fellow looked up at me and said in English, "Nice camera." Then he went back to work as though he was quite used to being photographed.







In this “volcano village” — so called because volcanic pumice stone is the construction material for all the homes and walls — every one of the elders suffers from crippling arthritis. There is something in the ground water that afflicts them all, but the government can’t convince them to stop drinking it.







First, he cooked us a delicious stir-fry in his giant wok. Later, I saw him down at the floating dock, washing the dishes in the river.







He was born and raised in this house. Now he is the patriarch. His only son lives in the city, but had come home for a vacation. Everyone was excited because for the first time there would be electricity in the house — as soon as his son finished installing the wiring in all three rooms. It was a big day and we were invited to stay and watch them turn it on, but alas our bus was waiting.





They were some sort of potato, or perhaps a yam. I was never sure, and try as I might to understand the Mandarin word he kept using, I could never quite hear it clearly enough to look it up. The most amazing part was the *bounty* he found in what I thought was just a patch of wasted land. It certainly didn't look cultivated.







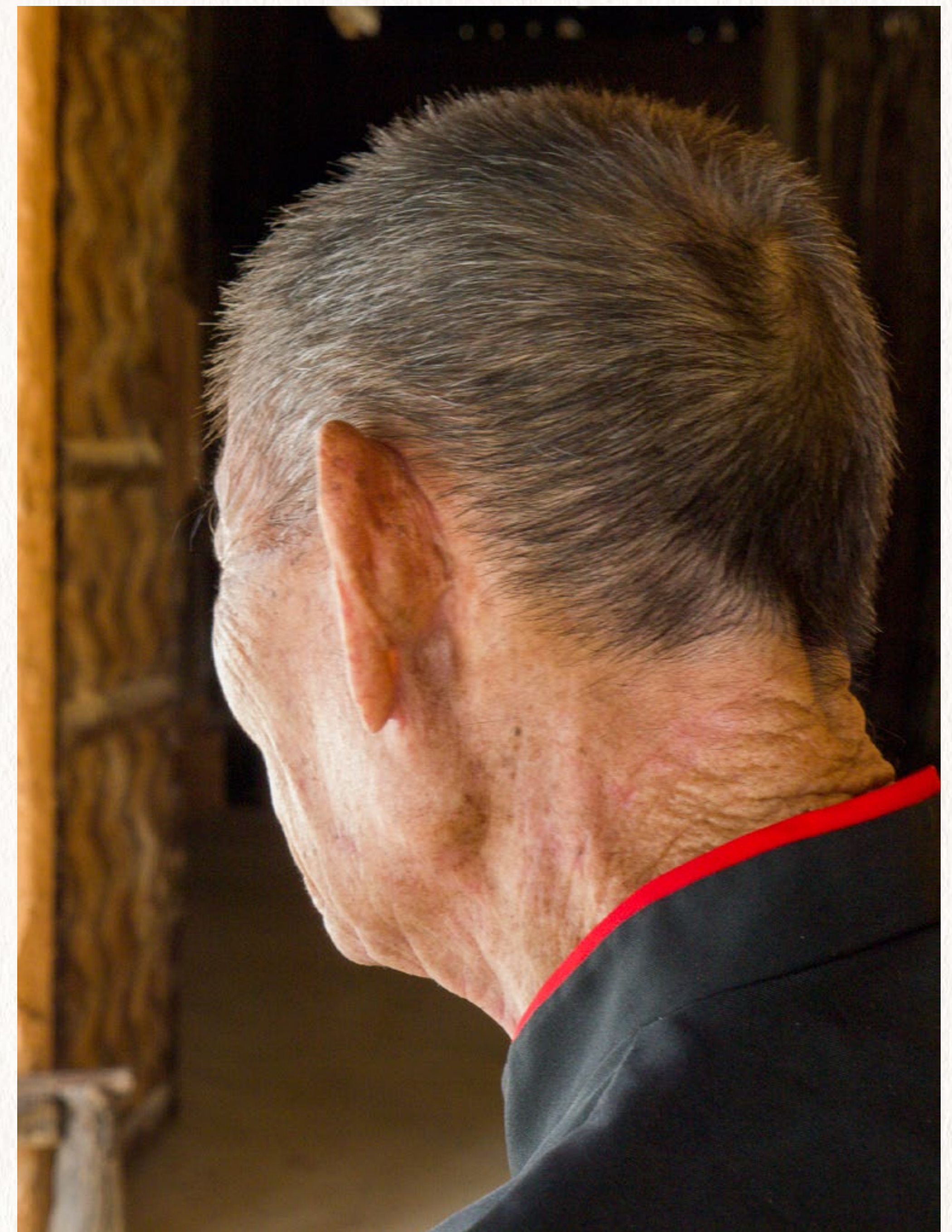
The incongruity of the scene was amazing — the leather jacket and hat, that tiny chair, and the oversized slippers. In spite of the oddity of the moment, I did notice that his basket work was intricate and simply beautiful.







He was fascinated with the bald spot on the top of my head. He asked if he could touch it. "Sure," I replied through my translator, "but only if I can photograph yours. I'm jealous." He laughed and then stroked my head. I had earned my photograph.







It was 10am and he was drunk as a skunk. He was desperate to sell me a chicken. I have no idea what he thought I was supposed to do with a live chicken, but that didn't deter him. Finally, I paid him for a piece of string which I wound into a circle and placed in my pocket. He was satisfied and all talk of the chicken sale ceased.





Drying, I learned, is a big deal in rural China. Fruit is dried; vegetables are dried; mushrooms, herbs, even salted meats and fish are dried. We saw these drying trays everywhere we went. I thought they were marvelous, but I couldn't figure a way to fit one into my luggage. Too bad.







It seemed that every time I turned a corner, I saw this busy monk hurrying to and fro, often in different robes. I must have photographed him several times in the few hours I was there. At one point, a different monk approached me to practice his English. He boldly struck up a conversation and asked if I'd like to see his dorm room and meet his room mate. Of course I would! Upon entering his room, there was my busy monk of the morning, donning yet a different set of robes! He graciously agreed to pose for a portrait in front of the altar in their room.





This factory makes swords for the tourist trade. I tried to imagine working here, all day, applying a thin paint to these sword handles, breathing those fumes all day long. I simply couldn't stretch my imagination that far. At the gift shop out front, there was a brisk trade as bus-load after bus-load of tourists filed through. I kept thinking of the workers I'd photographed, wondering about their lives.







Mr. Zhao was the patriarch of the family — and I was told the family was considered very well off for this region of rural China. They even owned a small plot of land. His son was away because he worked in the city. Mr. Zhao was alone for the day and invited us into the living room for tea. He was anxious to know if we liked American basketball. He was a big fan, especially of the famous Chinese player Yao Ming who played for the Houston Rockets. He pronounced it, “Oooston Ockets.”





An entirely one-person operation, he ran a neighborhood school for children. Teacher, administrator, cook, and janitor — if it needed to be done, he did it. He explained it was good Buddhist practice. I was surprised that a religious school was permitted in Communist China. “We are too far out in the country for the officials to care what we do,” he explained.







Rounding a corner in a rural village, and suddenly there are the old ways, the old tools, in a harvest story that is as old as humanity.







Based on the number of harvest baskets lining the alleyway, I could easily understand the need for a nap on a nice, sunny afternoon.







**Brooks Jensen** is a fine-art photographer, publisher, workshop teacher, and writer. In his personal work he specializes in small prints, hand-made artist's books, and digital media publications.

He and his wife (Maureen Gallagher) are the owners, co-founders, editors, and publishers of the award winning *LensWork*, one of today's most respected and important periodicals in fine art photography. With subscribers in 73 countries, Brooks' impact on fine art photography is truly world-wide. His long-running podcasts on art and photography are heard over the Internet by thousands every day. All 900+ podcasts are available at [LensWork Online](http://lensworkonline.com), the LensWork membership website. LensWork Publishing is also at the leading edge in multimedia and digital media publishing with *LensWork Extended* — a PDF based, media-rich expanded version of the magazine.

Brooks is the author of seven best-selling books about photography and creativity: *Letting Go of the Camera* (2004); *The Creative Life in Photography* (2013); *Single Exposures* (4 books in a series, random observations on art, photography and creativity); and *Looking at Images* (2014); as well as a photography monograph, *Made of Steel* (2012). His next book will be *Those Who Inspire Me (And Why)*. A free monthly compilation of of this image journal, [Kokoro](http://kokoro.com), is available for download.

### **The contents of this computer media are copyrighted materials.**

Please note that this computer file publication is a consumer product for private non-commercial use only. Its contents are copyrighted in its entirety and may not be duplicated by any means. All content is copyrighted by Brooks Jensen, his assigns or heirs, and may not be duplicated for any purpose or by any means without their consent. All rights reserved.

Please play fair.

© 2015 Brooks Jensen  
Anacortes, WA, U.S.A.

Email [brooks@brooksjensenarts.com](mailto:brooks@brooksjensenarts.com)

Additional work by Brooks can be found:  
[www.brooksjensenarts.com](http://www.brooksjensenarts.com) and [www.lenswork.com](http://www.lenswork.com)