## THE CHINESE WAY





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A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication



## Travel photography may not be "high art," but it is certainly fun!

The invitation to exhibit my work in China was unexpected. Of course, I'd be delighted! But when I learned that the invitation included an all-expenses-paid, two-week visit to attend the opening, I was reduced to drooling and wondering what stars had aligned in my astrological skies. "Can I bring my camera?" They insisted that I do so, and promised plenty of opportunities and time to photograph.



I arrived a couple days early to acclimate to the time shift and ease my way into the adventure. The next day I ventured out for a walk around the neighborhood, camera in hand, ready and alert for any photographic opportunities. The remote city rarely receives foreign visitors and I had been forewarned to expect to be greeted with curious caution. With each person I passed, I was met with an intense stare that felt like hostility — not an "Aren't you an unexpected curiosity!" stare, but rather a "What planet are you from and why have you come here? We have weapons, too!" sort of stare. I was nonplussed. I was intimidated. I was instinctively guarded and careful — not quite afraid, but definitely wary.





That night at dinner, I relayed my experience to my host. She laughed and graciously explained, "It's just the Chinese way. To the Chinese, staring is not considered impolite as it is in Western culture. Just smile and be friendly and they'll smile right back. But, they wouldn't dream of smiling at you first!" I decided to test her theory the next morning.



Wandering out from my hotel, I quickly found my first test subject. I walked directly up, opened a big smile, held out my hand, and did my best to pronounce the universal Mandarin greeting for hello, "Ni hao!" The old man responded with a smile even larger than mine, held out his hand and we shook over numerous ni hao for what seemed like several minutes. Overnight, the Chinese people became some of the most hospitable and gracious hosts I've ever experienced. I may not speak the language, but a smile is universally understood.







This couple graciously invited me into their kitchen to photograph. While I was photographing, they offered me some steamed sweet potatoes they were cooking — and a tasty treat it was!

We found this woman sunning herself by the side of the road. When I walked up with a smile and a "Ni hao," she insisted on standing for our greeting. In old Mandarin she said, "If he's come all the way from America, at least I can stand to meet him." My translator helped her out of her chair so we could shake hands. The exchange of compassion between these two strangers, visible in their faces, warmed my heart.





Nearby, a neighborhood Chinese opera group was scheduled to perform in an outdoor community theater. We were invited to attend — and photograph! Equipped with my new-found knowledge, I brought my big smile and a bag full of *ni-hao* greetings to ease the encounters. I was invited — no, *encouraged* — to photograph at will, including backstage, during the performance, wherever I wanted to go.















The neighbors had come to view the performances, and I was reticent to intrude myself into their entertainment. I tried to be as inconspicuous as I could be—a serious challenge for a large Swede with a camera in a crowd of smaller Chinese. The performance took place on a small, raised platform about 5-feet above the floor. To make photographs of the musicians and dancers, I'd set the 10-second timer on my camera, raise it to performance level at the end of my monopod, and aim as carefully as I could without the benefit of knowing exactly what was in the field of view. Everyone was patient with my intrusion, and I hoped (with luck) that I might get some good photographs without disturbing their enjoyment with my presence. I smiled a lot and quickly ducked out of the way until the next opportunity arose.







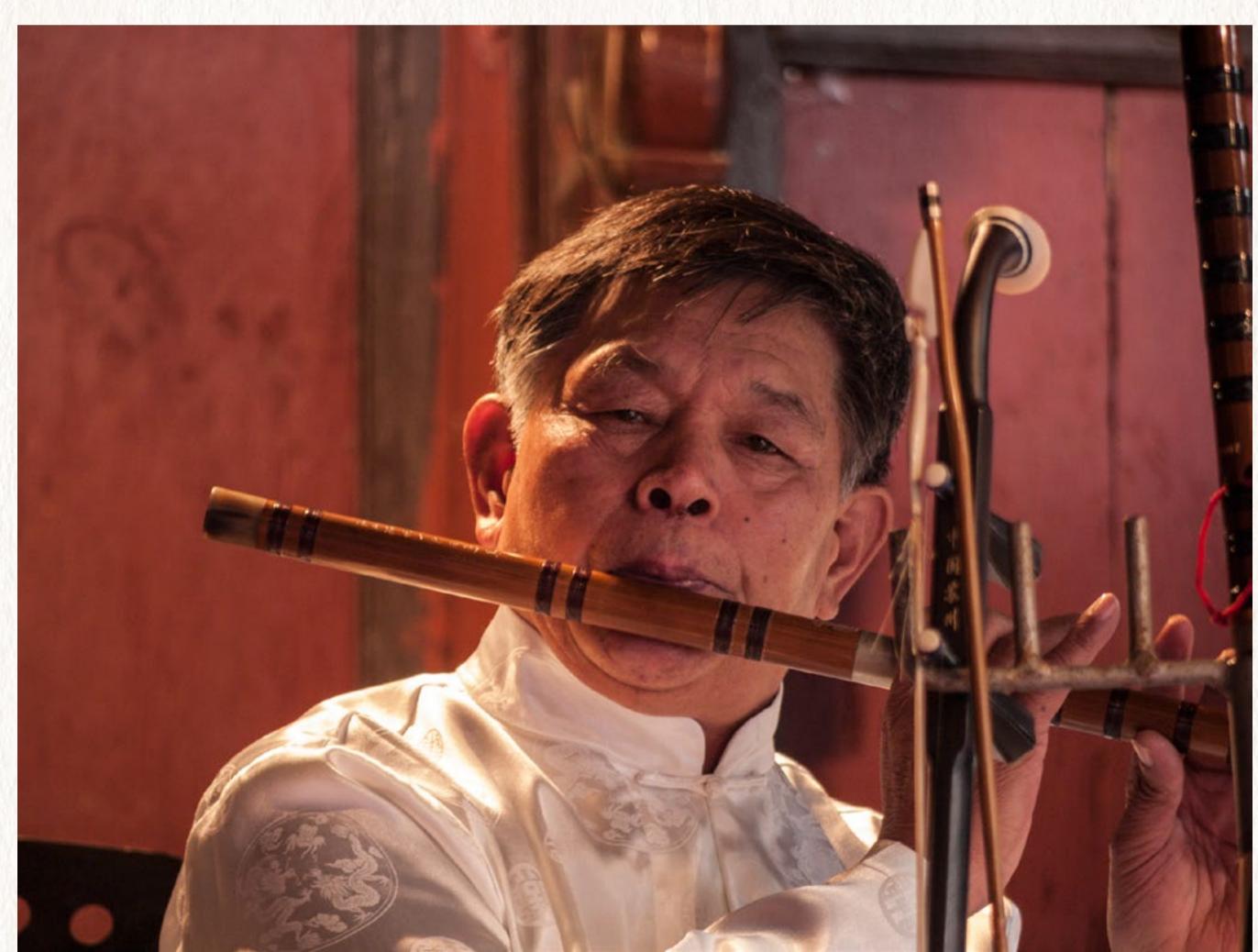










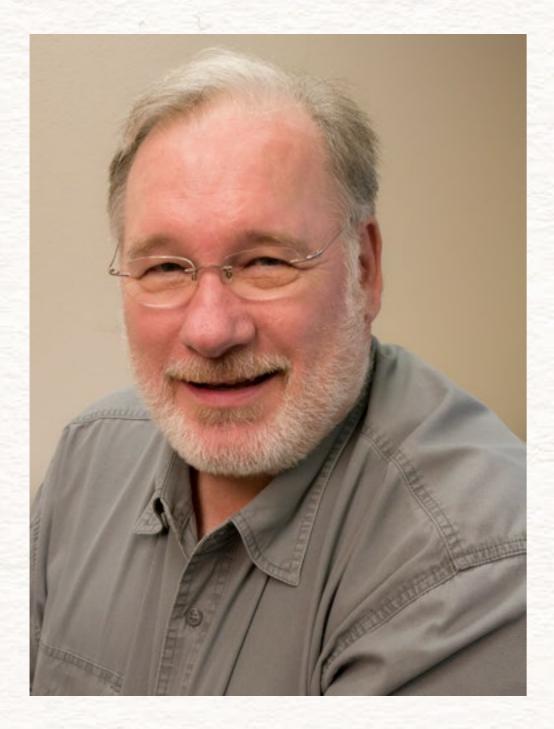








Unknowingly, I had become a fascination for the performers who kept seeing my disembodied camera pop up center stage at the end of my monopod. Moments after the last applause had died down at the end of the performance, a number of the dancers rushed down the steps and surrounded me for a group photograph. Lots of *ni-hao* and big smiles. It's just the Chinese way.



**Brooks Jensen** is a fine-art photographer, publisher, workshop teacher, and writer. In his personal work he specializes in small prints, handmade 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 <u>LensWork Online</u>, the LensWork membership website. LensWork Publishing is also at the leading edge in multimedia and digital media publishing with <u>LensWork Extended</u> — 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*, is available for download.

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