

Taking to the Road to Rewrite Your Life Story

■ Wang Yiwan

People never stop longing to travel. In his collection of essays entitled *The Art of Travel*, British author and philosopher Alain de Botton described journeys as “the midwives of thought.” Alternatively, Lonely Planet Founder Tony Wheeler regarded travel as a way to meet people.

In a saturated market where over 35,000 travel agencies compete, 54traveler.com is unique and easy to recognise. The company serves only young people and is fully dedicated to developing less-travelled routes in order to provide vivid travel experiences. Co-founder Zuo ‘Xiao Zuo’ Huimin admits her ambition is to influence more people by providing travelling services.



From left to right: Zuo ‘Xiao Zuo’ Huimin, Lonely Planet Founder Tony Wheeler and Fu ‘Xiao Fu’ Wenxian

It’s a different game at 54traveler

Xiao Zuo rewrote her life story by travelling. In 2003, when backpacking was still a strange notion to most Chinese people, while a student studying at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Xiao Zuo spent a whole summer travelling around in Xinjiang and Tibet together with a male friend without telling her family. As a local Shanghainese girl who had barely been out of the city, she was shocked, struck by not only the view but also by the people she came across. She recalls a speculator who travelled all the way to the desert in the South Xinjiang and talked about his dream of riches by reselling crude drugs, as well as a Swiss explorer who had hiked around in Himalayas for more than half a year and who gave her a vivid introduction to the wild animals he had photographed.

“It opened my eyes to a world resembling a kaleidoscope with different life stories,” she says. “And during that journey, I came to realise the narrowness of my mind.”

Following her trip to Xinjiang, her travel companion Fu ‘Xiao Fu’ Wenxian became her life and business partner.

“I decided to continue with my exploration of the world, but this time with people around me, hoping what had changed me would influence more people,” she says.

However, at that time, Xiao Zuo lacked the know-how to launch a travel agency. Traditional travel agencies profit from price wars and kick-backs, she explains – something she disliked.

“The principles we were pursuing were different from existing market players,” she adds. “The reason we are doing this,

our philosophy and what we won't do – all of these have been discussed thoroughly.”

The company's target clients are individual travellers rather than group tourists. They are young and less experienced. Still building personal values, they are easily affected and moved by the world around them. Nevertheless, the company has also adjusted its target audience from time to time. Given that university students typically can only afford a relatively lower price, the company has also redirected some of its focus to young white-collar workers aged between 20 and 45.

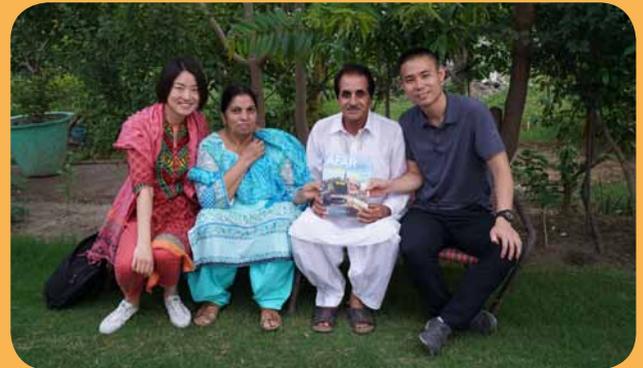
How can one describe a typical 54traveler trip? 54traveler is, first of all, not an outdoor club.

“We may prefer visiting villagers at the foot of Mount Everest to climbing the mountain itself,” Xiao Zuo explains. “But, you are not here to enjoy a resort hotel or travel in a safe bubble with all your habits unchallenged.”

Keen on encouraging people to experience the world, Xiao Zuo summarises the company philosophy in four words: exploration, experience, exchange and sharing. In India, for example, 54traveler takes groups to stay at luxury hotels and for a ride in a tuk-tuk. The groups also enjoy fancy restaurants and

get to savour street snacks. Communication with locals is also part of the experience in order to establish a deeper connection with the local culture. 54traveler aims to let people experience real local life using all of their senses and the design of the travel routes present the diversity of the destinations.

In addition to destinations, travel companions are also essential to the travel experience. That is where 54traveler's focus on young people has an edge. People of similar ages break the ice with self-introductions hosted by the tour guide and later strike up friendships.



Xiao Zuo (left) during her travels





“Two most important standards in selecting partners are sharing common goals and having complementary expertise.”

Bittersweet: When hobbies become business

It is not always sweet to have your life partner as your business partner. Xiao Zuo frequently mentioned “bickering” when it comes to this point. Two most important standards in selecting partners are sharing common goals and having complementary expertise. With different abilities, husbands and wives tend to misunderstand each other and have conflicts, but since they are also family, they cannot be as blunt as many regular partners are.

“You have to compromise,” Xiao Zuo says. “If both of us want to have a final say in such a small company, who we should listen to? It can only limit the strength of two opposing directions and will do no good for anyone.”

These days, Xiao Zuo and Xiao Fu have a clear division of work and any friction has diminished. Xiao Fu is in charge of daily operations and Xiao Zuo is responsible for business de-

velopment and innovation.

Turning a hobby into a business, Xiao Zuo feels the road to running a business resembles Chinese scholar Xuanzang’s journey to the west – it is full of challenges. She has come to realise that no matter your love for something, the process to make it a business can never be one of pure joy.

“When an unexpected situation is beyond your control,” Xiao Zuo says. “One can only try to live through it.”

Hardship also led her to greater self-awareness.

“Your youth is the best time to try different things,” she says. “Don’t wait until it is too late to understand who you are and what your possibilities are.”

Travelling strengthens your mind

In 2014, 54traveler launched a cross-border business and its per customer transaction is now more than 10,000 RMB. Today, the company employs a team of about 80 people with an annual revenue of over 100 million RMB. Xiao Zuo is not in a rush for expansion.

“Our initial goal was to be amongst the top 500 businesses in our neighbourhood,” she jokes. “But now we are aiming for the top 500 in Hongkou District in Shanghai where our company headquarters are located.”

That said, due to the impact of COVID-19 on the travel industry, 54traveler has had to shift its focus back home to stay alive.

The company also emphasises values of doing business for good and a culture of giving. A tour guide, for example, is called a “giver” in the company. They are selected based on not only their ability and familiarity with the destination but also, more importantly, on their willingness to care for others.

“This kind of culture has prevailed across the whole company even from the beginning,” Xiao Zuo says. “We don’t over-emphasise ability and hope everyone can do something for others from the bottom of their hearts.”

Xiao Zuo remembers every place 54traveler has been to. In Qinghai, for example, she recalls an enchanting view of snow-covered mountains in a village near Qilian Mountain where no proper lodgings were available prior to ten years ago. In 2007, a 54traveler group came across a warm-hearted man in the village and stayed at his place for a few days. Over the past decade, the man has been in touch with 54traveler and has gradually learnt about the concept of guesthouses. He shared his experience with the villagers and now the whole village is flourishing with business.

Xiao Zuo looks forward to more and more stories like this. In 2018, she started the 54traveler Foundation to put funds towards supporting public causes along its travel routes. As of 2020, it had invested in 11 projects.

She has also started working on a development plan for the



Xiao Zuo graduated from CEIBS

company for the next decade – something which impelled her to join the CEIBS EMBA programme. For one, she was surprised by the school’s focus on CSR.

“I thought a business school would teach you how to manage a company and how to earn money right from the beginning,” she says. “It is apparently different from what I imagined.”

Her experience at CEIBS has also allowed her to meet and learn about many different people.

“Before, I used to keep away from others who didn’t share my values,” she says. “CEIBS has enhanced my tolerance and has helped me move beyond the borders I had set for myself.”

Xiao Zuo also regards travelling as an opportunity to rid herself of biases. Travel-lovers typically value world peace. They try to understand different cultures and feel connected to the places they visit.

“Everyone in China can recite the old saying, ‘Read 10,000 books and travel 10,000 miles,’” she says. “Few people, however, travel 10,000 miles.”

Looking ahead, Xiao Zuo says she would like to see travelling become part of compulsory education in China to allow everyone to stand in the actual places they learn about, to experience old architecture first-hand and to feel the history behind it.

“Travelling can strengthen one’s mind,” she says. “Unpleasant accidents and difficulties in life course are not something we can change, but at least we can have the courage we need to resist frustration.”