

Photographer's Afterword

In five years of visiting aboriginal festivals, I have tested in practice a huge number of ideas and tricks.

The main idea for this book was to capture moments of the greatest spontaneous and natural joy. I was inspired by reading books by Paul Ekman, co-discoverer of micro-expressions. It turns out that the human face is a tool for infecting others with emotional states and moods. We perceive and are affected by the emotional messages in a subliminal way. More, they can appear and disappear in fractions of a seconds. Ekman uses his expertise to train the Police, prosecutors and anti-terrorist negotiators. I used the knowledge to create an ultimate drug-free remedy for depressions. This is what's the basic nature of the photos I make. Try not to smile when browsing through them and you would fail miserably.

The right moment

Ideal occasions for such photos are annual festivals. They are both county level festivals and those of individual villages and tribes. For the participants themselves, they are a break from daily burdens. An opportunity to meet old KA-CHIK! friends. This 'ka-chik' is my camera's shutter sound. I often



sneak up behind groups arriving to the site with my camera prepared in advance. The exchanges of welcoming banter are a jackpot for me.

A seemingly simple photo usually is the result of a confluence of ideas and techniques. For a festival or a ceremony, especially in a small tribe, it's best to arrive a day early. I show myself to people around and to introduce myself to local elementary school staff or to village leaders. I show my earlier photos and let the word spread out. Only after such an introduction does the „foreigner effect,” as I call it, work. The photographed persons lose their shyness, stop being tense, forget about my presence, do not stress themselves about shortcomings of their looks. The photo of the blushing kid above is the result of seven hours spent in a faraway tribe in the south of the island in 2019. I managed to approach to a mother surrounded by a garland of people admiring her little child. I asked the already overjoyed ladies to additionally poke the kid and make happy faces in front of it. The resulted photo is simply phenomenal, see p. 78.

I learned to sneak backwards. This is a trick I read about in some books on anthropology, biological instincts combined with knowledge of martial arts psychology. Should someone approach you „frontally” , that is face toward you, triggers, often unknowingly, the instinct to react to an approaching predator. The resulted sense of danger is



either visible in the photo or causes the person to suddenly lose the joyful looks on their face.

Sometimes the very sight of the photographer causes individuals to raise their hand with the victory gesture „V” in front of their face. This is a problem. Their joy becomes visibly artificial. The hand sometimes stupefies the auto-focus, and the photo is blurred. The bad thing is that the natural smile was replaced by a posed one, much less contagious. „To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up,” as Oscar Wilde was to say.

One of the most interesting discoveries I’ve made is that a person’s outburst of joy can be predicted. Someone who has a serious and preoccupied face a few seconds later blossoms into a beautiful laughter of joy like a flower bud let loose at an accelerated pace. The reasons for the sudden change might be multiple. It is someone who says a joke. Sometimes it is a good friend who appears in the field of vision. The two frames above are taken six seconds apart. Someone on the side reported to the girl that I was just taking pictures of her. As an exception to the above, the second frame is simply perfect.

Kids

Kids are a separate story. They look playful and happy when they are running back and forth. Unfortunately, the auto-focus just can’t keep up with objects approaching fast and a sharp shot is almost always a stroke of luck.

Children are usually brought in a bunch by a teacher, under whose supervision they act out a performance or sing a tribal song. Pre-performance photos don’t look good. The kids are too tense and rarely smile. Later, im-

mediately after the performance they change their costumes from Aboriginal to „civilian”. Then their joy and the disappearance of stress makes them the perfect subject for beautiful shots. Thus, from a photographer’s point of view, this leaves either a very narrow window after the performance, or quite a bit before it.

I solved the problem in a insidious way, but one that works for the good of both parties, in front of and behind the lens. If circumstances permit, I run a wireless bluetooth speaker coupled to a smartphone strapped to my forearm. I have various strange, not always entirely serious sounds prepared in advance: either the bleating of a sheep or the grunting of a pig. I came up with this obvious idea quite late in my project. The sounds make the kids burst with laughter. When I do the trick before they enter the stage, they are more relaxed.

Equipment

Most of the above tricks and hacks work from a very specific distance. It’s about four to seven meters. If I approach too close, people suddenly became aware of my presence. They often get pesky, even unconsciously, or start posing. If I was too far away, the face ceased to be the main subject of the shot. With a tripod and telephoto lens, on the other hand, it is impossible to chase joyful persons or mingle with crowds. The ideal lens turned out to be one with a range of 70-300 mm. For most of the photos, the zoom is set at about 80 to 90% of the farthest range.

In my vision, the ideal photo is one in which the expression of joy is most easily contagious toward the one seeing it. As the optimal expressions take milliseconds

only, taking single frames is an insufficient technique. It is necessary to take series. Their optimal frequency is 8-15 frames per second. The process of shooting such a series usually looks like this: I point the lens at a person who is about to laugh beautifully and press the trigger. A two-second series yields about twenty shots. Of these, the perfect frame is the one that catches the joy or just any other dynamic feeling only started to take shape. The rest are usually noticeably less good-looking.

The moments

A large part of the photos that have “the magic” in them I managed to take by pure luck and outside the festivals or ceremonies site. Everyone immediately is enchanted by the little kid carried in a fruit box (p. 65). I arrived at his tribe the day before. I was roaming everywhere with my camera... And when walking along the main street I just hit upon the magical moment.



The same happened with the photo of the girl on the scooter (p. 172). For half a day I accompanied a group of tribal youths who visit the homes of chiefs of nearby tribes to perform a ritual dance in the eve of the ceremony. Of the entire day, this was the one shot that qualified for

the book... Everyone had already boarded their scooters after the last “stop” and headed home for a well-deserved rest. Before this photo was taken, and it was in August of 2022, experience has already taught me that the best photos I manage to shoot are those precisely in such “unexpected” moments of everybody being off-duty.

It was exactly such a moment which made to the cover of this book, the one with an Amis girl making glasses



out of her fingers on it. The frame is the result of a chance meeting on the street. Three big sisters and two little ones got out of the car right next to me. At the moment I was waiting for my chicken breast meal (香雞排, a specialty of Taiwanese street food) at a roadside stall. Nothing more spontaneous might be arranged.

But the most beautiful shot I saw will never be part of this book. It was at the wedding of a couple of Amis people (p. 94). I was standing by the wall, lurking for good portraits of guests in the dancing procession. I was in the perfect spot and on maximum alert. What could go wrong? Then a father holding perhaps a two-months-old baby started handing it over to his mother. The baby began to pull away from the dad’s chest, then saw the mother. It reached out to her. The mother took it over from her husband’s arms. The kid snuggled into her breast just as

he had just been snuggled into his father's breast just two seconds before.

All this lasted maybe a two seconds and a half. I didn't even try to aim the camera. The perfect moment itself, the one in which the kid held a pose similar to the one in Michelangelo's painting "The Creation of Adam," extending his hand toward his mother, lasted less than a quarter of a second. In the moment the bay recognized its mother and it showed with its body movements and face expression. To act out the scene, all three of them positioned themselves at perfect angles, facing me. There would not be a photo in this book that conveys more magic than this scene.

To this day, I can't begrudge I missed it.

Taitung, April 2023