

The Story of Vanishing Asia

I began photographing this book in 1972. I finished shooting it in the fall of 2019, which is almost a 50-year span. It's been a long love affair.

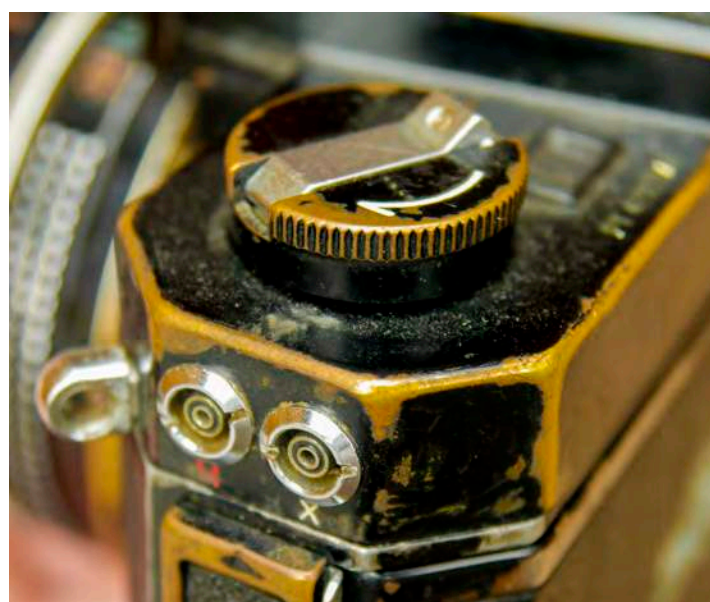
I first went to Asia two years after graduating from high school. Instead of going to college, I went to Taiwan and Japan to photograph. I barely saved enough money to pay for the plane ticket from my home in New Jersey, USA, so when I arrived I hitchhiked around the two countries. As a typical parochial American who had never left New England before, I was astounded by what I encountered. Although I had very little money, in Asia I was relatively rich so I kept going to the next border. Asia became my college, and after a decade roaming the continent in my 20s, I awarded myself an honorary degree in Asian Studies. I then married an Asian, and kept going back, and kept photographing. Much later in life I wrote some books that were translated and published in Asia, which brought me to Asia for business. I kept photographing. I accumulated 200,000 images of an Asia that was disappearing.

It is an understatement to say that during this period – from 1970 to 2020 – Asia transformed mightily. As many of the images in this book set reveal, not long ago – within my lifetime – many places in Asia were medieval oases unchanged by centuries. I often thought of traveling there as a ride in a time machine. I could walk in a large city with a population of half a million, without any cars, or even bicycles, with little electricity, or running water, and encounter half a million other citizens on foot, shopping, selling, playing outside in scenes that could have been painted by Bruegel in the 1500s. Today some of those same places are scenes from the future. Whimsical architecture scrapes the sky, immaculate subways haul millions to work, cash is gone, and LED lights flash over every flat surface. The traditional Asia, the vanishing Asia captured in this book, is gone.

I have no nostalgia for the Asia that has disappeared, because I have lived there and know it well. While these traditions are picturesque, the reality is not so romantic. Wooden homes built without nails



First trip. My dad took this picture of me when he dropped me off at Newark airport (outside New York City) on the dawn of my first trip headed to Asia in 1972. Bringing a tripod was a total mistake because I never used it even once and I had to drag it around the whole time. (I still have it.) Also, I quickly dropped the vest because it was too hot. Getting to Asia was the most expensive part of the trip. At that time the travel hack for crossing the Pacific cheaply was to fly via a charter flight booked by Asian-Americans returning home. But even with that hack, adjusting for inflation, it was way more expensive then, compared to an economy flight today.



Used cameras. When I started photographing 50 years ago, photography meant physical films. Cameras were made of heavy metal and heavy glass. You need both to make light-proof containers to flash photons onto chemicals. This is a snapshot of the brass shell of one of the two Nikomat cameras I carried with me at all times. It weighed 10 times what your iPhone camera does today. And the quality of its pictures was nowhere as good. For many years I shot Kodak slides. One camera had Kodachrome, and the other had faster-speed Ektachrome. On a very good day I might shoot two rolls of film, or 70 pictures. That was considered an insane amount of pictures to shoot in one day, when most people – if they had a camera – would shoot 24 pictures in a year. Later on, I shot Kodacolor print film, and had it developed at my local Costco. Around 2003, I switched to digital. Digital is superior to film in every way. No question. I will never go back to film.



All the cameras I used. Starting in the back row with the first camera I took in 1972, an imported Pentax from Japan with its logo scratched off to pass customs; a pair of Nikomats, Nikon's cheaper amateur version. Next row, a Canon with zoom lens, my last film camera. There after all my cameras were digital point and shoots, inexpensive models with less than professional sensors. In fact, I have never owned a professional camera; I've only ever used amateur grade cameras. I somehow got started on Panasonic's Lumix brand superzoom cameras (middle rows) because there were lightweight and silent. Silence is a gift for the candid street photographer. On my last couple of Lumix superzooms (front row) I put black tape over the brand logo to decrease distractions. Although all of these cameras still kind of work (however I will never go back to using film), the digital cameras only last a few years before getting flaky, so I kept upgrading.



My first selfie. Looking back through a road mirror in Taiwan in 1972. I rarely photographed myself.



Getting a haircut in Cambodia. I traveled as local as I could, in part to save money, and in part to be close to what was happening. Even when I had more money in later years, I still stayed at the cheapest hotels and ate street food when possible. I travelled light which meant I had less to lose and less to go wrong; more time to photograph.

are stunning – but horrible to live in. They are drafty, too cold or too hot, toiletless, filled with mosquitos and smoke. Wood fires in the kitchen make great food but increase lung cancer. Many of the most glorious displays of ornate dress and jewelry worn by tribal women severely restrict their movements and freedom. Their beauty comes at the cost of their liberty. Just as there is an unseen cost to our modern habits, there is also an unseen cost for the traditions featured in this book.

In the era of my visits, a billion Asians bought a one-way bus ticket from their picturesque village and moved to a grimy city. In hundreds of millions they left their homes built by their own hands from nearby natural materials, clothed in fabrics they made themselves, fed by organic food they raised themselves, and then moved into crowded, teaming, overwhelming urban metropolises. They made this traumatic move for the same reason I would if I were them. Despite the pollution, the neglect, the chaos, a city offers a million times more opportunities than their village or town did. They could now become more than a farmer or a mother, the only two options they had traditionally. They traded limited options in a natural place for unlimited options in a paved place. They traded minimal organic food and no toilets for air conditioning, running water, and wifi. In great courage billions left the certainty, the security, the deep identity of traditional ways in hopes of discovering who else they could be. I applaud their bravery.

The result of this massive, continent-wide migration is that the traditional ways of Asia are either morphing into something else, or quickly disappearing. In the packed cities, ancient unchanged ways are 98% gone. Out in the countryside almost everywhere in Asia, the villages, on average, are emptying out. The young have left, leaving only grandparents temporarily raising a few grandchildren. There is almost no one to carry the traditions forward. Here and there, a rare pocket of tradition will survive. For 50 years I have been seeking out these rare pockets. Reading closely, consulting experts, hiring guides; I have searched Asia for areas where the old ways continue. My obsession is to document these before they vanish. While I am under no illusion about the cost of the old ways, I appreciate their grace and beauty.



Stacks of printed pages. *Vanishing Asia* is a sequel of sorts to my first photobook, *Asia Grace*, published by Taschen in 2002. Here are piles of printed pages from *Asia Grace* before they are bound into books. That book features my best images from the first half of my Asian travels. These new books you are holding contain many images taken from those same earlier trips that I had never published, plus some of the 100 best images from *Asia Grace*. The majority of the 9,000 photos here are all new, and never published before. While these images will work fine online, especially viewed one by one, I have put them into this oversized book format because I think a book can do many things a website or Instagram cannot. I conceive of each image as a musical note; what *Vanishing Asia* is doing on paper is to act as a symphony of notes. These very large, visually wide pages gather dozens of notes into a chord, and then multiple chords into a melody, and then multiple melodies into a symphony of images. The big orchestra of these pictures is something you won't get on the tiny screen of your phone.



Behind the lens in Kyrgyzstan. I generally carried two cameras, with different speeds and/or different focal lengths lenses. They also served as backups. In later years, when digital cameras became extremely lightweight, I carried a third backup camera in my luggage.



Local transport. I've traveled on every type of vehicle made, from scooter to tractor to 18 wheeler. I've also traveled on every type of animal, from donkey to elephant. Here in Laos, I help wash an elephant in the river at the end of the journey.



My studio. Around 2001 I began to have my best slides and print negatives scanned and digitized. This transformed the job of editing into the task of moving slides with a mouse. Just as important, design software made it easy to move images onto pages in a book, making a book, like the one you are reading, possible. Overall, I took about 200,000 photos in Asia. Out of those, I selected nearly 9,000 images for this book. To track, catalog, and edit all those images, I used Adobe's Lightroom software. I also used Lightroom's built-in image functions to barely tweak the contrast and color of each photograph. I used the heavier duty Photoshop on about a dozen images. I simply did not have time to do serious processing on my images. The final step in this modern book-making process was to move the images onto pages in Adobe's InDesign software, and once my design completed, the pages were exported as PDFs and sent to the printer. In case it is not evident, I took all the photographs, I processed all the images, I designed all the pages, and I wrote all the captions. I also had plenty of help along the way from my assistant Claudia who helped with travel arrangements, page templates, proofing, and design corrections.

Lightbox editing. To sort through tens of thousands of slides, I built more than one light box. My latest light box kept the slides vertical for easier viewing. A magnifier is used to closely inspect each slide for focus, exposure and composition. Slides have to be kept dust free, labeled, and sorted into piles. It's awkward and inefficient. Working with color negatives is worse; sorting them almost impossible. In this image I am sorting slides to prepare them for a multimedia show in late 1970s. The slides are synchronized to automatically advance one by one according to a sound track on a cassette tape. This took weeks to generate

I am spellbound by their integrity. These ways were usually created for a practical reason (that may no longer exist), but their form and function can be art. They carry a story, some history. They are often clever, sometimes brilliant. The ancient traditions of Asia may have a lesson for today. Their spectacular “otherness” can prod us to think differently, and thinking differently is the engine of innovation. In some cases these traditions have even become alien to the billions of young Asians living in the megacities. It is this beautiful otherness that I most cherish about the vanishing parts of Asia. From otherness, comes the betterment of tomorrow.

The rich worlds captured by this book are vanishing in a modernization process that cannot be reversed, nor should it be, but they are definitely worth remembering. We need this richness. It seems clear to me that this unfolding century, the 21st century, is the Century of Asia. Asia will be creating our future, no matter where we live. But the future never leaves the past behind; it carries the old forward. To steer this future, we need to recall and employ the richness of its past. I keep returning to Asia to be confronted with old things, alternative ideas, alien notions, strange solutions, compacted elegance, and maximum otherness. To create a new graphic design, I would pay attention to the hand-painted street graphics in India (pp. 351-360). To design futuristic uniforms for a science fiction world, I would look to the classical fashions of Japanese monks (p. 1067). To invent a new one-person electric vehicle, I'd study the mini-carts on the streets of Indonesia (pp. 473-474). To fabricate a modern eco-friendly home interior, I'd investigate the wooden architecture of the Dong houses in China (pp. 815-816). To conjure up the coolest live performance spectacle, I'd watch the elephant processions of Kerala, India (pp. 371-380). The abundance of textures, materials, designs, styles, rituals, colors, habits, motifs, and patterns is stunning, and available to all. I made this book to help transmit this ancient richness into the future, acknowledging the inadequacy of a single book, no matter how gigantic. These pages are one motherload, open to all, of the new New, thinly disguised as the old.

This mission has been my obsession. But not my vocation. I've never been a professional photographer, yet I have spent as much, if not more, time photographing exotic culture than most professional travel photographers. My career has been in advanced technology and futurism – perhaps the furthest thing possible from the ancient worlds lit only by fire that I have been documenting. I had a rule of thumb to measure how far removed from the modern world I was as I drifted deeper into the boonocks: I'd look around and count how much metal was being used. In the most extreme time-shifted places I visited, the only metal present would be in cutting tools – a knife, scythe – and some pans. Everything else would be natural materials such as clay, wool, animal parts, plant fiber, grass, wood, or rock. Instead of metal stove, an earthen stove. Instead of plastic buckets, wooden buckets. This world would have been very familiar to any of our ancestors 4 or 5 generations before us.

Over many decades of visiting these ancient times I noticed an interesting pattern in how this traditional world shifted into modernity. Things would vanish in a sequence. The first tradition to go was costume. Ancient clothes are shaped by the limits of how they were made by hand. Narrow weaving looms meant garments that were constrained in width, like the aprons of the Tibetans. Making cloth by hand is among the most tedious tasks there is, and when cheap machine-made cotton t-shirts came along, hand-spun cloth instantly disappeared. Right behind it, traditional styles and traditional costumes vanished. But if costumes remained, the other traditional arts and crafts were also likely to remain.

The second class of tradition to disappear after costume is architecture. Traditional building styles arose out of the need to use native materials, but while beautiful to look at, these homes were not so desirable and not so cheap once labor became valuable. Some places which had lost their traditional clothing still had their classic dwellings.

The third to vanish is traditional music, the next is food, and the last is language. The first two are usually replaced by pop and rock music and processed foods. Once native language has gone, usually all traces of the culture have gone as well. Some places retain an ancient language, some



Making friends. Tribal decorations, tattoos, and ornate jewelry are fast disappearing as everyday wear. This mother from a village in south Rajasthan, India, continues to flaunt a heavy gold nose ring everyday. She also continues a long tradition of serving and sipping opium tea whenever she can. Today with TVs and smartphones, tribal folk are more aware of how different they are, and their children generally have given up these habits.



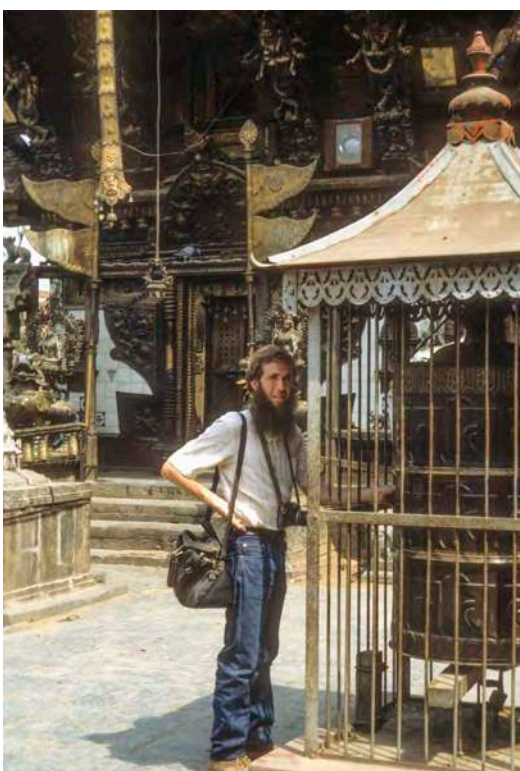
Police station in Burma. I've had my cameras stolen 3 times during my travels, and each time I miraculously retrieved it. There's a tale to be told for each heist, but in this case, the police in Bagan, Burma (now called Myanmar) were able to help me get my cameras back. The gear were stolen by a horse-cart driver who taxied me to the train station one morning. While unloading my belongings, he drove away with my camera bag as I chased him. But I got a glimpse of his cart number, and with the help of the local police, they tracked him down, and probably roughed him up. They were all smiles when they were able to return my camera bag.



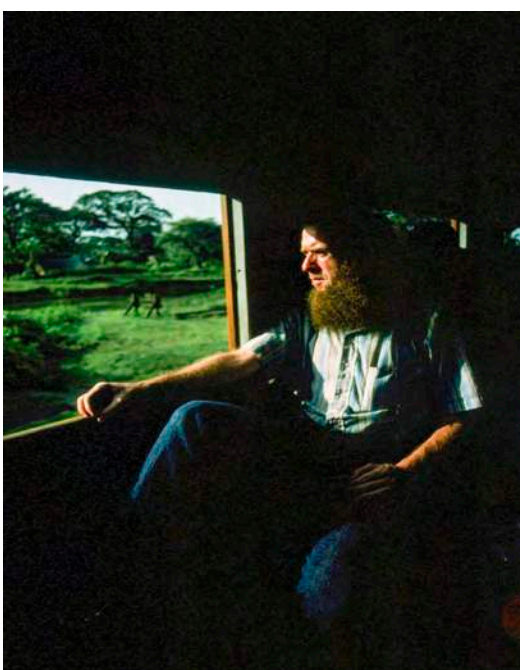
Netting. One of the few things I carry in my backpack, still to this day, is my own mosquito netting. I am very allergic to mosquito bites, not to mention the potential dire health consequences, so I always travel with a lightweight net, which I string up in my room at the slightest indication of mosquitos. In this picture, the nets are provided by the dorm. That is me inside front. Dorms were common lodging for travellers in Asia in the 1970s and 80s because at that time there were few hotels outside of large cities.



Shooting in Bali, Indonesia. To get close to a traditional religious ceremony in Bali (this one happening on a beach) it is required to don traditional garments. I am wearing a sarong around my waist and a Udegung hat. However most times when photographing I do not attempt to blend in by wearing local costumes because I find no one is fooled. With my sunburned white skin, blue eyes, big beard, I will always be an alien. So I primarily wear my tribe's traditional dress: jeans, t-shirt, sneakers. In all other respects, I always try to follow local customs.



In Katmandu, Nepal, about 1975. This is the skinniest point in my life after a month-long trek in a remote part of Nepal with inadequate food. Back in Kathmandu, I carried the same leather black bag I used for years, holding 2 camera bodies and 5 heavy glass lenses, to photograph in the streets. Outside of some hippy hangouts in the center of town, in those years I could wander almost anywhere in the country and be the only visitor around. Since film was so expensive, I may have been the only photographer to shoot in many places.



Train riding in India. I spent a large portion of my young adult life waiting for buses to leave. Buses were and are the most common transport in Asia. They go almost anywhere for cheap. By ancient tradition they do not leave until they are full. You are hurried on, and then you wait. And wait. Every seat must be filled. Trains, by comparison, are civilized because they leave on schedule. Their weakness, however, is that there are often not enough seats, so passengers are squeezed, standing upright, or nearly sitting on you, and in the case of Indian trains, sitting over you in the upper bins. This picture is one of the brighter moments of the many months that I spent riding trains in India. I had my own uncrowded seat, near an open breezy window, as the sunlit green countryside swept by.

CREDITS: Photographs, text, design, and layout by Kevin Kelly. Claudia Dawson produced the book. Text was proofed by Camille Harstell and Colleen Kenney. Jim Home, John Plunkett, Craig Mod, Chris Michel, and Paul Donald gave design advice. Travel companions include Brian Kelly, Eric Fuh, Craig Mod, Jamis MacNiven, Will Milne, Charles Lindsay, Hugh Howey, Mary deGozzaldi, and my family, Kalleen, Ting, Tywen and Giamin Kelly. Peter Martin printed the 972-page prototype, which was bound by Key Printing, Oakland, CA. Mike Lappin at National Geographic helped with color calibration. These books were printed by Mega Basim in Istanbul, Turkey. Trevor Shih facilitated the huge project of printing this first edition. Thanks to Kickstarter backers for believing in this project and making it real.



Solo travel. For most of my sojourns I traveled alone. But on several long trips I traveled with my brother Brian. He is one year younger than I, and we shared a bedroom growing up. Brian has traveled far more widely than I. He's been to most places I have, plus whole continents like South America that I have little experience with. We spent many weeks traveling in Nepal, India, and Afghanistan together. These snapshots show us just shy of Mount Everest in Nepal, at the literal height of our lives: 18,000 feet (5,500m). I also spent recovery time with Brian in the balmy beaches of south India and Sri Lanka after I had contracted Hepatitis A and was invalid for a month. The two of us also managed to sneak into Afghanistan after the Russian coup through the Pakistani outpost of Quetta. We had a local street photographer take our instant portrait (without using film, only photo paper!) at the marketplace in front of a backdrop of a mosque. Brian and I share many interests, including what to seek out. All of the photographs in this book were taken by me, with the exception of 9 photos that Brian took. They are p.454/4.5; p.462/4; p.569/1,8; p.601/1; p.726/1; p.760/2; p.897/1.



My house for many years. In this cheapo backpack that I brought in 1969, I packed one change of clothes, a toothbrush, and at the beginning of a trip, 500 rolls of film. I used the sleeping bag all the time because I often slept in dormitories, or on floors. I painted my “brand” on the back, mostly to make it less desirable for thieves. Today, I still paint all my luggage with my KK brand, now to find it among all the other luggage.



Off time. I treated my travels in Asia as a kind of job. I was out shooting pictures starting at dawn each day, spent the whole day on foot hunting for the right shot, and even tried to shoot at night as much as I could. Soaking in a natural hot spring in Japan was one of the few times I could relax because officially you can't bring a camera in. But sometimes I did anyway.



On a moto-taxi in Vietnam. Starting about the year 2000 Asia became overrun with cheap motorcycles. Often costing as little as \$300, these mighty machines replaced horses, camels, donkeys, cars, jeeps, and trucks. One could move unbelievable loads on the back of a motorcycle. A loaded motorcycle might include live pigs, goats, chickens, a human family of 5, lumber, stoves, refrigerators, and even another motorcycle. The genius of motorcycles is that they did not require the construction of roads. You could drive them up muddy footpaths into the mountains, jungles, and steppes, cheaply opening up the hinterlands to commerce, education, rapid health care, and home improvement. Along the way, guys with motorcycles would offer paid rides to those without cycles. These moto-taxis hang out at marketplaces and transport you (and your load) wherever you wanted to go. I used moto-taxis to get around the northern highlands in Vietnam. They were inexpensive, but the guys like to go too crazy fast for me.



On the job. A local newspaper photographer in Kerala, India shot me shooting a festival in a very out of the way village. It was a fabulously extravagant ceremony, with thousands of participants, dozens of elephants on procession, and weird shamans in a trance. As far as I tell, I was the only foreigner there, and this was in 2016. Proof that small pools of tradition do still erupt in the modern world.



Private cars. Once rare, cars are now ubiquitous in most of Asia. You can even rent cars in most places. Nowadays, I will often hire a private car with its driver (for liability purposes). This provides a freedom that I could have only dreamt about years ago. Here I am on the Tibetan grasslands near Litang, China, with a 4 x 4 rental. Even as a solo traveler the economics of hiring a private driver would make sense on most journeys outside of cities.

also continue their traditional food and language, and some have language, food and music. The kind of places I sought out for this book were those places which also retained their architecture and costumes, because they would have the other three attributes as well. The rarest and most rewarding places were those whose inhabitants retained their distinctive traditional clothes for everyday wear. There are very few of these. They are often remote, as in hard to get to, because of geography – mountains, or islands – or because of poverty. In some non-remote places, such as Saudi Arabia, the traditional garb is a voluntary badge of identity. In other places, like Bhutan, the badge of traditional garb is mandated by the government in order to craft a national identity. But wherever traditional costume continues, it is a bellwether for other traditions and culture.

I had a compulsion to find all the places in Asia with remnants of tradition. It was almost like an addiction because there is no economic reason for me to do this, nor is there a visible demand for it. No one is tweeting they need more traditional costume, or scenes of by-gone life. But I just needed to find the next one.

Without a doubt the best way to photograph people candidly in their native environment is to live with them. For the first days, or first weeks, you don't even bring out your camera. You befriend them. Once you earn their trust, you take out your cameras, and once out, they remain out, 24 hours a day. Very quickly, your new friends will not even see the cameras, and you can photograph everything with ease.

I did not do that. Asia was too big, and I had too little time to embed myself this way (though I wish I could have). Instead, I was a photo ninja. Working very fast, very lightly, always moving, I would usually photograph people before they realized it. My motto was: shoot first, smile, ask questions later. I always tried to be as discreet, polite, and unobtrusive as possible. I did not want to disturb even slightly the scene I was trying to capture, so it could remain true, authentic.

The maps reproduced on the front and back end pages of each book trace my surface journeys in Asia. The routes in red are my paths on land and water, and do not show air travel. If I were to chart my air travel, the maps would reveal that I made hundreds of trips to Asia. This is not the ideal way to do this. Ideally, I would have made a couple of years-long journeys, crawling across Asia in a sensible unbroken line, going from one place to the next adjacent place. I did not do that. Most of my trips to Asia were one, two, or three week trips (plus a few multi-month adventures), flying into a capital city, and then heading to remote parts before flying out again. The one advantage of this uneconomic method is that I was always fresh. I did not have time to become jaded. I was able to maintain my wonder and appreciation for the everyday ordinary of a place.

Disclosure: it seems weird to have to say this, but I have no sponsors. I paid my own money for all my photography trips over the past 50 years. None of my gear (cameras, luggage, clothing, etc.) was given to me; I bought everything myself, did all my own research. I paid for all my hotels, rides, and guides myself. Yet, relative to many other hobbies and obsessions in the world, I did not really spend that much money. Asia has been and remains relatively cheap. The most expensive part of making this book was time. I spent my time, which is my scarcest resource. For every one of the 9,000 plus images in this book, I was standing directly behind the camera. I had to get there. It's not just a long way from the US to Asia, it was usually a long way from the airport in the local town in the countryside. And then it took time to reach the right village. And then it took time to find the ceremony. And then I would have to wait. Then wait some more. More than money, or photons, this book is made from time.

I dedicate this book to the many thousands of people in it, whose names I don't know. I regret I didn't get to spend more time in your life, and to understand your ways even better. I hope I was able to capture some of the richness of your traditions to share with others. I am grateful beyond words that I had the privilege to witness this world before it vanishes.

– Kevin Kelly