

A Decade of Being the Man Behind the Mask

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Public notoriety has been an interesting experience for undercover reporter Li Yaosha - not his real name - since fame only exists when fans don't know who he is.

In August 2009, Li released chapters of a book on tianya.cn, one of China's largest forums, detailing a decade of experience as an undercover reporter working for various newspapers and covering experiences with beggars, prostitutes and other disadvantaged groups.

This year the popular articles were picked up by an interested publisher and bound together in a book called Undercover Reporting for 10 Years. By then, Li had already seen 10 million visitors check out his online articles.

At the book launch on May 25, Li showed up with a mask, a fake name and sealed lips when questioned about his identity. However, the stout man did share some truths in a heavy northwest accent with METRO.

Q: How did you become an undercover reporter?

A: I once applied for the position of a reporter at a newspaper, but the only job going was as an undercover agent. I took it because I really need a job.

Q: How do you get in close contact with your subjects?

A: I always do a lot of research before I set out. For example, if I tell a beggar I am a worker at a building site, I need to be able to mention specifics like which site it was, what is nearby, how long it has been under construction, how many workers it has and so on, just in case he asks.

When I started to study prostitutes, I moved to a "village within the city", where lots of them lived. I told them I was a computer engineer; they didn't know what a computer engineer was exactly so never asked questions. I was also helpful in the area, so the neighbors loved to chat with me.

I never carry my cell phone or ID cards when doing an undercover investigation.

Q: What attitude do you think the public should give to those at the bottom of society such as beggars?

A: I never knew most beggars are actually professionals until I went undercover - some make a lot of money. I know of two villages in the south where all the villagers are beggars: each Spring Festival they come back and compete for who has made more money.

They are delighted when a family gives birth to a disabled child because it can get more sympathy and money from the public.

During my investigations I met many people who pretended to be disabled. I saw them throw down their props and wander into a KFC or jump into a taxi.

I encourage people not to give money to beggars. If they are really poor, they can call 110 for help.

Q: You have exposed some darker parts of society. Are you afraid someone might want to take revenge on you?

A: I have been punched many times and was once exposed while investigating a secret industry. A man threatened to kill me if I reported the truth, so I never did.

That's the reason I never use my real name in my articles and am wearing a mask today.

Q: Is everything in your book real?

A: A few details are fictional to make the book more readable, but all the experiences are real. I would not have been so familiar with the details if I hadn't experienced them firsthand.

For example, there is a chapter in my book about cheaters in bars. The scam runs like this; a woman attracts you to a bar after chatting with you online. Once you are there, you have to buy unusually expensive drinks or face getting beaten up.

I found out that the person who initially chats with you online is not the woman you meet later. In this business, the chatter is called a "keyboarder" and is usually a man. How disgusting is that?

Q: What's your family's attitude toward your undercover reporting?

A: My parents believed I was a standard reporter until my book was published. Now they have united with my wife to force me to quit.

Q: Do you ever undergo counseling to deal with your sordid experiences?

A: Never. I try to forget all the horrible things right after I experience them. I cherish my family greatly after seeing so many dark things.

Q: Are you well-paid for this dangerous work?

A: My monthly income can purchase a half-square-meter apartment in my city.

Q: Why gear all your attention toward the disadvantaged and not high-profile crimes?

A: When I infiltrate a group, I have to slip in at the very bottom and move up the ladder slowly. It takes a long time to get that high.

I plan to write about my experiences with fake cigarettes, real estate deception, hospital decoys and other topics in my next book, which you could say are higher-level crimes.

Q: What's your plan for the future?

A: I would like to write for a few more years and then move to a small town and leave the reporting behind.

Q: If you could live your life again, would you have spent the last 10 years doing what you do now?

A: No. It was a horrible experience that haunts me a lot.