

# BRUSH TALKS

*A Journal of China*

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# Brush Talks: A Journal of China

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*Brush Talks* publishes compelling nonfiction, along with photographs and occasional poetry, about China. We publish two issues per year and accept unsolicited submissions on a rolling basis. For more information, please visit [www.brushtalks.com](http://www.brushtalks.com).

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*Because I had only my writing brush and ink slab  
to converse with, I call it Brush Talks.*

SHEN KUO 沈括

(1031–1095)

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## Editor's Note

Welcome to volume three, issue two of *Brush Talks*. This issue, one might conclude from the collected pieces, has a kind of spiritual nature to it. Jacob Rawson's fascinating series continues about his travels to the most sacred mountains of China. This time we follow him vicariously to Anhui, where he visits Mount Jiuhua. Our interview is with Ian Johnson, whose insightful writing has appeared in top publications and earned him a Pulitzer Prize in 2001. His latest book is about the return of religion in China over the past forty years. We were delighted to be able to discuss that with him, as well as current events in China and aspects of writing long-form nonfiction. And our two poems by Melissa Huff and Gale Acuff touch on the ethereal as well. The portfolio by Michel Alain Louÿs and Wang Han (王茜) might be the one exception to that theme: their stark images of the demolition of a Beijing neighborhood last year bring us right back into the material world, depicting both the rubble of erstwhile homes and specific objects left behind by the hastily evicted residents and workers. As always, we thank our contributors for sharing their fine work.

One bit of news is that *Brush Talks* is now on Twitter (@BrushTalks), so you can follow us for information about new issues, special calls for submissions, and more. It's also a good way for more people to learn about us, so please share and recommend liberally!

Brian Kuhl

## Contributors

**Gale Acuff** has taught at several universities in China, as well as in the U.S., and currently teaches university English in the Palestinian West Bank.

**Melissa Huff** traveled to Taiwan in the spring of 2016, drawing inspiration for her poetry from Chinese landscape paintings and from the multitude of Chinese cultural treasures in the National Palace Museum. Recent publishing credits include *Halfway Down the Stairs*, the *Ekphrastic Review*, and *Red Eft Review*. She serves as secretary of the Illinois State Poetry Society and splits her time between Chicago and Champaign, Illinois. Her website is [www.melissahuff.com](http://www.melissahuff.com).

**Ian Johnson** is a writer based in Beijing. As a correspondent with the *Wall Street Journal*, he won a Pulitzer Prize in 2001 for his coverage of China. He has since authored three books and contributed to several others. His recent work has appeared in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*, among other publications. His website is [www.ian-johnson.com/](http://www.ian-johnson.com/).

**Michel-Alain Louÿs**, originally from France, has lived in several cities in China for more than 12 years. He now lives in Beijing and teaches at La Rochelle University in France and at the Beijing Language and Culture University. Through writing and photography, he tries to share his experiences in China. He has had exhibitions in China, France, Switzerland, and Korea. More of his photos can be seen at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/143548321@N05/>.

**Jacob Rawson** is coauthor of the book *Invisible China: A Journey Through Ethnic Borderlands*. After completing a master's degree in Chinese Linguistics at the University of Washington, he set out to climb the nine sacred peaks of China in 2010. His writings on South Korea have appeared in *Fulbright Korea Infusion*. He lives in Washington State with his wife and daughter.

**Wang Han** (王菡) is a photographer and graphic designer from Hebei Province. In 2013, she met and began following the artist Mo Yi to improve her photography skills. She now lives in Beijing and works in a gallery. She has had exhibitions in China, France, and Switzerland.

## The Dusk Plume

by Jacob Rawson

*How lofty are the crags of Jiuhua,  
Like lotus buds reaching toward the blue expanse.  
— Wang Yangming (15th – 16th centuries)*

The sleeper bus constitutes the greatest misnomer of Chinese land travel. The cold aluminum cots have no back for sitting, are too short for lying down, and are so low to the floor that the clamor of the gas engine and imperfections in the asphalt are amplified directly into the skulls of the pitiful passengers. Any attempt to sleep is thwarted by the Hong Kong detective flicks that stream from the driver's videodisc player throughout the night. The dialogue that blares from undersized tinny speakers between police shootouts is at the same time incomprehensible and unignorable. Competing with the digital racket are the snorts and shouts of off-duty drivers (a team of four is required for an overnight trip), whose raucous tea-fueled poker games run ceaselessly through the night.

I begrudgingly find myself on a sleeper bus when all trains from Hunan are booked full. The motorbus behemoth pulls out from truck stop fruit tents onto a flat stretch of blacktop, and I quickly slip under the spell of road hypnosis, a languid greyness where the conscious and subconscious meet. Through the course of the night my state of dissipated awareness catches strange names of strange towns — Yichun, Yongxiu, Fuliang — their vowels rattling down funnels in my mind. These are the trappings of the traveler, caught between the echoes of sleepless nights and wakeless dreams.

We pull up for breakfast at a highway kitchen stand where I am served noodles with no spice and find myself understanding ambient

conversations. I know that this must be the Mandarin-speaking province of Anhui.

“Does your phone have a signal here? Mine doesn’t . . . Oh wait, it does.”

“Why can’t I find a boyfriend who’s more than 170 centimeters tall?”

Understanding is overrated, I decide.

On a full belly I change to a small bus with real seats, from which I can take in the fine late-spring softness of the countryside and the old Anhui farmhouses with their distinctive terraced roof eaves, and think to myself that there is no road I would rather travel on this lucid morning.

\* \* \* \*

The tightly groomed hedgerows of southern Anhui tea cultivation skirt low rolling ridges, wrapping hills and hollows in neat concentric circles. This is the beginning of Mount Jiuhua, one of four peaks sacred to Chinese Buddhists. These mountains are often grouped with the circuit of five Daoist peaks to form the venerated list of nine sacred mountains.

I jump off the bus in a town that is tucked into a valley deep in the Jiuhua range and set about getting lost in the tea tree mazes. I chew on fresh tea buds and drink the mountain air and forget all about the sleepless sleeper bus from the night before.

As I traverse the rough terrain where the tea rows jut up an incline, a farmer offers a grunt as greeting and joins me. He wears a dirty yellow shirt, plastic yellow slippers, and a yellow baseball cap with “Mount Jiuhua” tattooed in black characters. The farmer speaks first in monosyllables — “Tea!”, “Yes.”, “Farm!” — then swings a suntanned arm in the other direction, which I take as an invitation to follow.

The jumble of tea tree mazes flows into deeper labyrinths, and I begin thinking that if I ever want to find the main road again I should do nothing to upset the man. He begins to speak more freely.

“How long is the flight from the United States?” And then, “Twelve hours in the sky? How do you eat?” He explains that his name is Shilin and that he lives in a small Buddhist monastery where he works as a cook for the two resident monks.

We tramp through the tea fields past a clay-lined irrigation pond where two men are fishing with bamboo rods. One looks up to gawk at me. Shilin traces a path up a dirt incline between squat farmer huts and into the courtyard and then the kitchen of his monastery. He boils water on a grimy propane stove and shakes dried tea leaves into a ceramic cup.

“It has to be a ceramic cup or it’s no good. Paper cups don’t hold the taste.” Shilin pours water from the kettle. “Taste it with your throat!” He tells me that he had picked and dried the leaves in my cup a few days ago. “I have to pick many pounds of fresh leaves to have any salable amount. When the leaves dry they lose two-thirds of their weight! But at least I can get a good price for my tea. These hills have the right combination of altitude and temperature to put out a high quality crop. The stuff grown down in the lowlands is garbage!” Shilin watches me drink out of the hot ceramic cup. “The bitterer the better. Taste the bitterness in the back of your throat, that’s how you know a good tea.”

When I have finished the pot of tea, Shilin leads me around the courtyard to an old room in the back and proudly announces that we are standing in the cremation chamber.

“All past monks of this monastery were cremated here. Their ashes are buried under these stone tablets.” The dates on the tablets indicate that some are more than five hundred years old. Shilin points out the

main cremation pot, a large clay chamber, and mimics the position the monks' body would be placed for a cremation: legs crossed and hands together in an *A-mi-tuo-fo* prayer position. "Do you have cremation in the United States?"

As I turn to leave, Shilin points a path through the tea rows and trees that will lead back to the road, then hands me a bag of his fresh tea leaves. I protest and push it away, but he artfully slides it into my front pants pocket. When I try to stuff some paper bills into his shirt pocket he covers it up, not accepting any payment.

As I head back down the hill to the meandering tea rows, Shilin calls out to me. "I don't believe you're an American. I see Americans on TV. Can't understand a word they say. You, I understand. Not an American!" With a grin on his face he disappears into the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

The afternoon sky turns sour and slumps down around the mountain, wrapping the pilgrim villages in a thick mist. I gulp down a plate of flavorless fried noodles in an innkeeper's basement while listening to an elderly group of weekend worshipers brag about their religious exploits to three unenthused local teens. "We offered incense at Baisui Palace, then we kowtowed at Huixiang Pavilion . . ."

Back outside, the mist has turned to slow drizzle. Vendors hawk baskets of nylon rain ponchos while lines of pilgrims in matching hats dart for cover like snakes escaping some impending doom.

I take brief cover under the awning of a trinket cart when a young woman in red-rimmed glasses and a blue warm-up suit timidly taps my shoulder. Her name is Rongrong and she is a freshman sales and marketing major in the nearby city of Chizhou, and could I possibly help her with a translation assignment? It is a formal paragraph, a news

clipping describing the Shanghai World Expo. I ask why a sales and marketing major has an English translation assignment, but she shrugs and flips open a creased notebook with the teacher's instructions.

We find a corner to duck out of the rain and work line by line to put the rigid and uninteresting (clean and proper) Chinese into equally uninteresting (equally proper) English until the translation sits as a framable example of prepositions leading into clauses leading into more prepositions in hypnotic banality. Rongrong buys a bag of cookies to thank me. Her classmates from Chizhou are lost somewhere halfway up the main mountain peak, and every few minutes she receives messages on her cell phone with delayed dinner plans and apologies.

We decide to pass the weather inside the surrounding temples, and walk up the first granite staircase into Upper Zen Hall. A bored monk in a grey robe picks his fingernails behind a table in the doorway with a standing sign that reads DONATE ONE THOUSAND YUAN TO HAVE YOUR NAME ENGRAVED ON A STONE TABLET.

"Welcome to China," Rongrong sneers sarcastically. "It's all about money now, even religion." In front of the red-painted altar, a small metal plaque displays four characters — WISHES WILL BE GRANTED. Pilgrims donning new yellow ponchos, the plastic crease marks still showing, line up to stuff paper bills into a box slot, then move aside to perform full-bodied kowtows to each of the wooden bodhisattvas.

While Rongrong lines up to kowtow, I focus on the photocopied documents tacked to the inside walls of the temple. The Mount Jiuhua Buddhist Society has posted a memorandum entitled "Outline of Citizen Ethics." The first item on the short list: "Be patriotic and follow the rule of law." Next to this, in another photocopy, the Buddhist Society enumerates the "Five 'Do-Wells' of Religious Activity": "Love your country and love your religion well, administer your people well, promote harmoniousness well, serve society well, and bring about safety

and stability well.” In the third notice from the Buddhist Society, the fifteen articles of the “National Regulations on the Shared Residences of Buddhist Temples” are enumerated with proper legal indentations. The first regulation calls on monks to abide by the national constitution and laws of the land, and to love their country. The subsequent regulations seem to fade in importance: stealing is prohibited, as is disobeying nightly curfews, cursing and slandering, and harvesting courtyard trees for lumber.

When Rongrong finishes burning incense, I ask if she wants to see another temple. “No, they’re all the same.”

I ask whether she wants to leave her hometown after graduation. “The local government is developing the area around the Yangtze River in Anhui Province, part of a new infrastructure policy. There will be many opportunities here. I want to stay.”

In the doorway of the temple, a young monk flips through a thick stack of hundred yuan notes. He writes down names in a small memo pad as he counts out the donations. I ask about which bodhisattva is depicted in a wooden statue, but he is uninterested. He turns away and focuses back on the wad of bills.

Rongrong confides in me that even though she has just begun her studies, she is worried about what to do after college. I tell her about my college year spent studying in Beijing, and the ins and outs of life overseas.

“We Chinese cannot simply go off traveling during college like you can. There’s too much pressure, too much competition.” I ask what type of job she hopes to find. “I don’t want a job,” she smiles, “I want many jobs. I want to go many places and meet many people.” She looks through the deep mist toward the shrouded peaks. “The world is large and my time is short.”

Rongrong hops off to find her classmates and I sit cross-legged under the slanted eaves of a food shop. With two cans of Mount Jiuhua Beer to keep me company (tasteless enough to make one wonder if the Buddhists have conspired to brew a liquor so bland as to turn every boozier off the sin), I watch the dribble seep through tile roofing and monks' robes and wonder if there really is a mountain behind the impenetrable curtain of mist.

\* \* \* \*

Baisui Palace is a four-hundred-year-old temple complex that straddles a low ridge under Mount Jiuhua's main peak. This mountain's temples are dedicated to Ksitigarbha, the bodhisattva protector of all beings in the realms of the Buddhist purgatory, and on a clear morning tour groups and lines of incense-toting pilgrims stream into the complex to kowtow and pay respects.

At the temple gates an enthusiastic young monk warns me about the most famous residents of the mountain. "The monkeys will bite. They're ferocious." Two red-faced macaques perch on the stone pillars of the temple walls. They nibble on discarded sweet potatoes and sneer at the pilgrims who shriek and quickstep past.

South Korean tourists take pictures of the embalmed body of a former resident monk next to a multilingual sign that prohibits spitting, photography, and unlicensed vending. The monk attendant on duty sighs as if the scene is all too familiar.

The tour group's Korean-Chinese guide explains that the "circle around the sun" is called Buddha's Halo, and the middle-aged women in grand perms and even grander sun visors ooh and aah and point their camera lenses directly at the blaring solar corona.

I move from the temple complex through a lush valley at the base of the main pilgrim trail. The forest evenly distributes pine and bamboo, and every few hundred paces the trail winds through a tiny village of neat huts with white-washed concrete walls and earthy ceramic roof tiles. The valley is adorned with tiny red azaleas that peer out between the bamboo, and the ascending pilgrims stop to remark about the abundance of blossoms this year. As the gentle trail turns to gradual steps and then to steeply inclined stairs, I pass a village that is tucked under pine canopy and duck into the first concrete hut that has smoke billowing from the pipe of its cooking stove.

In the cozy diner I order a lunch of scrambled eggs with tomatoes, and stir fried bamboo shoots. Along the trail I had seen young bamboo seedlings severed at the base throughout the thin forest, and the proprietor confirms that this is what I am now delicately lifting to my mouth with a bent pair of faux ivory chopsticks.

At the table next to me the only other patrons comprise a small group of elderly Shanghainese hikers, their Gore-Tex boots leaving damp waffle patterns on the concrete floor. The group's young local guide wears a buzz cut and knockoff Nike windbreaker and introduces himself as Xu Wei.

He says he wants to talk with me and pulls a chair up to my table with his back to his clients. "You eat with your left hand. Must be intelligent!" He blurts out a question each time I attempt to lift my chopsticks.

"From Seattle? The Supersonics!" I explain that the NBA team has moved to a different city, and he begins quizzing me on the players. I struggle to guess at the names in phonetic Chinese transliteration. "*Pei-dun!*" (Payton) "*Kan-pu!*" (Kemp) "The U.S. has nice parks too. Yellowstone! The Grand Canyon!"

The Shanghainese tourists join in. “Americans have it good. Even during this so-called financial crisis, they live well.”

Xu Wei interrupts. “Our government tries to paint the U.S. as an enemy. But we really like Americans and American culture.” Then he pauses. “*Ke-bi Bu-lai-en-te!* You must know him.” I do know Kobe Bryant, and Xu Wei and I feign a slam dunk attempt and an above-the-rim block, and fall back into our seats laughing.

When I have swallowed the last bamboo shoot and guzzled the last drop of pungent green tea, I lace up my boots and return to the stone steps. The shopkeeper shouts up the trail behind me. “*Manzou!*” The common Chinese parting words, an admonition to take ‘er easy, have the direct meaning of “walk slowly.” I am fond of this phrase, and my aching feet are quite happy to take it in its literal sense as the stone steps wind around stubborn boulder formations and jagged cliffs.

Near the summit a three-year-old girl pulls down her pants and squats. Her mother looks up from a cell phone screen to scold her. “Not in front of the temple!”

On the dramatic final staircase that leads to the Temple of K itigarbha at the mountain summit, a middle-aged woman sings and waves her arms as she climbs the last steps. I ask what she is singing. “I don’t even know. I have already forgotten. It was something about being happy.”

\* \* \* \*

As the sun’s rays list, the pilgrims begin to head back down the mountain, and the concessionaires pack up their incense boxes, a timid young monk in a yellow frock finds me sitting alone scribbling into a notebook and invites me to join the congregation for the evening meal. As we dig wooden chopsticks into a simple meal of boiled radish and

eggplant, oily tofu, and steamed rice, my hosts ask about my journey. I tell them of the snowstorm on the northern Daoist peak, the midnight train parties, and the six sacred mountains that still lie ahead. An elderly monk mashes his bare gums and says, “The road before you will not be easy, but the Bodhisattva will guide and protect you. This I am sure of.”

At dusk in the main temple hall the elder monks sit around a cast iron incense cauldron donning yellow and red cloth crowns. They clang brass cymbals and chant sutras in tritone harmony. In the evening shadows the stone formations of Mount Jiuhua appear as stoic guardians in the still mountain air. A young monk approaches the cliff’s edge to throw an offering of rice and pickled vegetables into the expanse. He nods to me, and I ask how he decided to join this temple’s congregation.

“I did not decide to become a monk. This is my destiny. You and I meeting here is our destiny. All things are part of the Buddhist destiny.”

Elderly pilgrims from Guangzhou climb down the stone staircase and begin shoveling piles of paper offerings into a prayer oven, all the while joking and praying in Cantonese. I offer my only word of Cantonese in greeting and they respond with giant and joyful grins. The eldest of the group, showing a big smile that reveals her two remaining teeth, hobbles over, puts her hands together with mine, and offers a throaty “*A-mi-tuo-fo*.” The sky fills with ashes, which disperse down the ridgeline into a fire-red dusky plume. As the incense embers in the large stone cauldron fade, the orange-striped horizon dims to a soft pink, then to a stone grey.

Beyond the cliffs and foothills, specks of light from towns and villages appear in the sprawling Yangtze River basin. Between the specks appear the outlines of highways, the faint and motionless ribbons of headlights seeming a world apart from this elevated sanctuary. A shooting star breaks the upper void. The twinkle makes me think of an old acquaintance who grew up in a patched-up army tent in the Idaho

## The Dusk Plume

wilderness, and now wraps himself in suits and neckties and sells insurance in Palo Alto. Even the stars change color, I think to myself.

The monks' chanting continues deep into the night. I perch on the rocky ridgeline and bathe in the pleasant musk of smoky incense and pungent mountain pines. ☯



## Interview

Ian Johnson

*Ian Johnson is a Pulitzer-Prize winning writer focusing on society, religion, and history. He has spent nearly twenty years in the greater China region, first as a student in Beijing from 1984 to 1985, and then in Taipei from 1986 to 1988. He later worked as a newspaper correspondent in China, from 1994 to 1996 with Baltimore's The Sun, and from 1997 to 2001 with the Wall Street Journal, where he covered macroeconomics, China's WTO accession, and social issues.*

*In 2009, Johnson returned to China, where he writes features and essays for the New York Times, the New York Review of Books, as well as other publications. He teaches undergraduates at The Beijing Center for Chinese Studies, where he also runs a fellowship program. In addition, he has served as an advisor to academic journals and think tanks on China, such as the Journal of Asian Studies, the Berlin-based think tank Merics, and New York University's Center for Religion and Media.*

*He was twice nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and won in 2001 for his coverage of China. He also won two awards from the Overseas Press Club, and an award from the Society of Professional Journalists. In 2017, he won Stanford University's Shorenstein Journalism Award for his body of work covering Asia.*

*Johnson has published three books and contributed chapters to three others. His newest book, The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao, describes China's religious revival and its implications for politics and society.*

*His other books are on civil society and grassroots protest in China (Wild Grass, 2004) and Islamism and the Cold War in Europe (A Mosque in Munich, 2010). He has also contributed chapters to My First Trip to China (2011), Chinese Characters (2012), and the Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China (2016).*

**BT:** Your most recent book is *The Souls of China*, which came out last year. In that, you mention that Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, had a hand in issuing Document 19, the 1982 paper on religious policy. Do you think this played a role in Xi himself espousing an openness toward religion when he first came to power?

**IJ:** I think Xi junior realized which way the wind was now blowing in the 1980s and used the policy to his advantage. I don't think he ever really supported religion, per se, but it's clear he was comfortable with the so-called traditional Chinese religions (Daoism, Buddhism, and folk religion) and as head of a poor county realized that they could be used as a resource for development and stability, and by extension to further his career.

**BT:** At the same time, new religious regulations passed in 2016 would appear to have tightened the government's grip on religion. What were the main aspects of those regulations and how strictly are they being enforced?

**IJ:** The regulations strictly require all religious organizations to affiliate with the state — no more independent churches or temples, for example. They are being quite strictly enforced, as we see with the continued reports on underground churches being closed or bulldozed.

**BT:** I found it quite interesting that, as you write, a government spy regularly attended the Bible study at the Early Rain church. (Yet everyone knew he was a spy.) Do you have a sense of how common this is?

**IJ:** Very common. Just look at how the Stasi was organized in East Germany, using a vast army of what they called *informelle Mitarbeiter*, or “informal co-workers,” who narked on people across society. The Chinese Communist state isn’t in such a dire situation as East Germany — which had a much larger and successful neighbor, West Germany, whose very presence undermined and almost delegitimized the state. But China still has an incredibly dense network of informers and agents who monitor a huge variety of organizations, including foreign companies, NGOs, journalists, aid workers, academics, and so on. To think otherwise is naive and potentially foolish.

**BT:** In a couple of book talks you did for *Souls*, you mentioned that the negotiations between the Chinese government and the Vatican risked the support of Catholics in China if the Vatican appeared to compromise too much. This fall, it was announced that a preliminary agreement had been reached that seemed to do just that by the Vatican’s acceptance of the legitimacy of seven bishops the government had appointed. First, why do you think they agreed to that, after years of insisting upon retaining this right for themselves? Was it perhaps made clear to them that an agreement was a no-go without this? Do you think their relatively small footprint in China (compared to other Christian groups) played a role — that this untapped “market,” if you will, was too large to ignore any longer by taking too principled a stand? And second, have you gotten a sense of how Catholics — maybe congregants more than clergy — are reacting to this?

**IJ:** I think a lot of the commentary has been one-sided. For example, you mention the seven bishops that the Vatican has agreed to accept. This is accurate but China has about 130 bishops, so the seven amount to about five percent of the total. That's not a huge compromise. And in exchange the Vatican gets a say in how future bishops are appointed — for the first time since 1951, when diplomatic ties were severed. Of course this is the theory; how it plays out in practice we don't know. China's a big place so you'll be able to find Catholics who will feel betrayed but I spent a lot of time in one very Catholic county, with a dominant underground church, and many people were blasé. Their view was that if the Pope ordered it they'd do it. Now, if it's a scam and the church is being made a fool of, and the Vatican in fact doesn't have a say, then I think it'll look different. But that's not a foregone conclusion. The church has been dealing with recalcitrant states for two thousand years. It isn't its first time to this dance.

**BT:** In a couple of your talks, you also said that women outnumber men in Christian congregations. Any idea why?

**IJ:** Men are often seen as the breadwinners and need a day off, while women are sort of in charge of the spiritual life, at least on the family's behalf. It's also a space where women can interact on a more-or-less equal basis with men — although males outnumber female clergy.

**BT:** You devote one chapter in your book to the sect (some would say "cult") known as Eastern Lightning. What is your sense of its status today? Is it growing or shrinking? Is the government paying much attention to it? I believe it started in the northeast. Is it mostly confined to that region, or has it spread significantly to other parts of the country?

**IJ:** I think it's shrinking. It's one of these millenarian sects that rise and fall in China. Chinese governments through the centuries have always made a big deal about them because they're independent of government control, and so officials cook up mostly bogus stories about how dangerous they are. Sometimes they are dangerous, but mostly they're creative ways of combining various faiths and ideas. This form of syncretic belief is a hallmark of Chinese religion.

**BT:** At the Buddhist temple in the city where I taught in Zhejiang, there was a sign near the entrance listing the fees for all available prayers (the highest fee was for good luck on the *gaokao*). And people I spoke to often said the monasteries and monks were too focused on money and not as devout as in the past, the most famous case perhaps being the Shaolin Temple. Have they been targeted in the government's anti-corruption campaign?

**IJ:** People often make a big deal about this because they forget that most religions charge money for services provided—they have to survive in this world, too, and need money to function. True, you don't have to pay to go a church service in the West, but in many churches, synagogues or other Western places of worship weddings, funerals, etc., all come with an explicit or implicit price tag. So sometimes we have this idealized view of what "true" or "proper" religion ought to be—it ought to be someone on a mountain top in rags meditating, or very pious people meeting in a pure, non-commercial setting. But if you read *Canterbury Tales* you see it's rarely been like that.

Having spewed out all that relativistic mumbo jumbo, I also have to say that Chinese temples are very commercial and that this is a big issue for believers—and for the government. Put simply, Buddhism and Daoism are at a disadvantage relative to Christianity because churches

don't charge for admission. So the central government is pushing temples to cut fees. That's harder to do than it looks, however, because local governments often want high fees so they can siphon off a percentage, while temples don't have outside sources of income as they used to — land holdings, for example. It's a challenge we also see in the West, where the great old cathedrals of Europe are crumbling and often resort to commercial solutions, such as renting out space or setting up gift shops to hawk postcards and candles.

**BT:** In your book, you describe how the government's urbanization campaign has led to people feeling disconnected from the land and their traditional way of life. And in an interview you did with Christopher Lydon for *Radio Open Source*, you mentioned that the urbanization drive is tied to this search for religion. Can you speak to that a little here? Have there been studies that show this link or is it something you hear often from people? Are certain religious groups more likely to be impacted by this or does it impact all fairly equally?

**IJ:** We've seen this in other countries' history, such as the Great Awakening in the 19th century United States, when huge economic and social dislocation caused a religious revival. In China, too, people are disoriented by urbanization and looking for new communities, which they often can find in religious institutions.

**BT:** In 2013, you wrote a series called "Leaving the Land" for the *New York Times* on this push for urbanization. The main purpose seemed to be to create a consumer class to increase domestic demand and spending. And you wrote that state spending on this initiative "could cost upward of \$600 billion a year." I wonder how the current situation has affected this — in particular, the trade war with the United States and the relative slowing of the Chinese economy this year. I've read articles about

people cutting back on spending, for example. And can the government maintain the spending levels necessary to keep this going? Have you followed the results of this?

**IJ:** Urbanization continues apace. You still see signs of it all around the country. I was just in a remote part of Hubei province and the government investment in infrastructure and new villages for people living in the highlands is astounding — they just keep building new roads, new settlements, new electric towers and high-speed rail. It's like an infrastructure machine on autopilot.

**BT:** Our portfolio in this issue documents the evictions and demolition last fall in Xinjian Village, in a southern district of Beijing. If the government is actively pursuing country-wide urbanization, what was the motivation for this (other than poor safety standards, the official reason given)? The area was one with a large population of migrant workers, so does the government want more educated, high-earning residents in Beijing? Are they trying to reduce the population of major cities like Beijing while encouraging the growth of second-tier cities? And do you know what the state of that area is a year later?

**IJ:** This area had a huge fire, so it was slated for destruction as a sign that the government was doing something — action for action's sake. Clearly there are many substandard areas, and the government wants to get these under control. It wants urbanization but not out-of-control urbanization, where megacities have Brazilian-style favelas, poor services, and crime. The Chinese state has always craved order of some kind and the current one is no different. It also would prefer that people urbanize in second- and third-tier cities, not in the big dozen cities. To a degree this makes sense. Beijing is already bursting at the seams with

more than 20 million people. If you followed the advice of laissez-faire libertarians like editorial writers at the *Economist*, it would have double that and every single piece of farmland would be occupied by squatter settlements. It is true that the Chinese state is arbitrary, authoritarian, and aggressive, but it's also rational and wants what it sees as best for the country. It's not run by killjoy lunatics, which is what you'd assume by reading some recent coverage of Beijing's campaign against illegal structures.

**BT:** What influence has China had on your writing? In other words, what have you learned from reporting on and from China that you have not from other locations?

**IJ:** China requires patience. It's not a place where you can wake up in the morning and decide you want to do X and then go off and do it. It requires thinking about your goals and slowly realizing them. You have to network into situations — you can't just say, right, I want to spend months hanging out with Beijing pilgrims, or Daoists in a cave. You might be able to visit them on short notice but you won't get too much. This is probably true of many other places and cultures — probably of dealing with humanity in general — but time makes true relations. Time wins trust. That's why you can't do good narrative nonfiction if you have a hack's mentality of producing something every day.

**BT:** There's a scene that struck me in Chapter 9 of *The Souls of China*. There you relate the Qingming ritual of Xu Jue, the mother of a young man killed in Tiananmen Square in 1989. She's under surveillance around the clock, and every year the police require that she visit her son's grave about a week before Qingming so her visit does not attract attention. You describe how they accompanied her there and end with a

scene in which one of the officers helps her repaint her son's grave. I found that very powerful; the simple scene conveys so much complexity and nuance, but as a result of considerable development throughout the chapter. Not everyone who practices daily journalism makes an easy jump to long-form nonfiction, so my question is this: You do both extremely well, but since you began your career reporting for newspapers, was the move to long form something you had to consciously work on? Does one form come more naturally to you than the other?

**IJ:** I had to work on it — to allow things to unfold. What you don't see in a book like this are the myriad efforts that failed! I also tried a year before that trip to go with her but was stymied because they took her there on a different day and had switched off her phone. So you just have to have time and put it on your calendar for next year. I think this is the biggest difference between writing nonfiction and journalism or journalistic nonfiction. Journalists have to, by necessity, be efficient and produce. If you can't interview X, you find Y or Z and make do. Many books are written like this too — basically a collection of notes or quick-hit impressions that are written out in long form into a book but which reflect the same instrumentalizing nature of journalism. Basically it's hard to find the time and money to do long form writing properly so a lot of compromises get made.

**BT:** Are there plans to publish *The Souls of China* in translation in China?

**IJ:** A Chinese-language edition is coming out in February in Taiwan by Gusa Publishing. It can't be published in China because too much of it is sensitive — the entire section on the underground church in Chengdu,

for example, or the section on government policy would have to go. That would be forty percent of the book right there. It's a pity because when I've given talks abroad, Chinese diplomats have come up to me and said that they liked it because I show there's a vibrant religious life in China, which is counterintuitive to how most people see China — many people still think it's run by a godless Communist Party and all religion is banned. (The first part is true but the second isn't!) So in some ways my book is favorable to how foreigners think of China, or at least challenges stereotypes. But it also frankly talks about the existence of house churches, repression, and government policy of favoring some religions over others, and that's just not possible to discuss inside China.

**BT:** Which contemporary Chinese writers would you recommend who have a good insight into Chinese society today?

**IJ:** Yu Hua's *China in Ten Words* is an evergreen that has some amazing scenes. I thought that Liao Yiwu's *The Corpse Walker* showed the bizarre and grotesque underside of China that we rarely see. His *God Is Red* is a wonderful look at Christianity in China's minority regions and his memoir *For a Song and a Hundred Songs* might be the best prison memoir I've read on China.

Unfortunately, a lot of younger voices in China have been stymied by the censorship, which has increased dramatically over the past five or so years. People who once seemed interesting, like the blogger Han Han, are now silent or irrelevant, while Ai Weiwei, Liao Yiwu, and others have gone into exile, where they continue to write and speak out but as classic exiles or dissidents.

Western presses have made a serious effort to find Chinese writers and get them into translation, but a lot of the material is fairly second-rate. You can definitely read Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* if

you're into science fiction, but otherwise it's a deadeningly dull novel with almost zero character development. If it hadn't fit comfortably into a particular kind of genre fiction that was already well-established in the West, it wouldn't have been much noticed. This is true of all genre fiction in all countries, especially crime, where mediocre writers are feted as lions. If you're into it, that's fine, but it's sort of like making the argument that Snickers is great chocolate. It should be treated as a guilty pleasure. But I digress . . .

I think the problem with writing in China is (a) there's not much of a *Bildungsbürgertum* that wants to pay for good fiction and (b) censorship has a stultifying effect so that you can't touch any social issue without it becoming verboten. So we end up with Chinese authors in exile, some of them writing genuinely but others out of opportunism, to explain China to Western audiences. That's OK but it's not the same as Chinese authors writing to a broad Chinese audience about China.

**BT:** What's next for you? Are there any new topics that interest you? Aside from your newspaper reporting, are you working on any larger projects that readers can expect to see in the future?

**IJ:** I'm working on a couple of new books but am reluctant to talk about them because they're still in the R&D phase. But definitely a couple more books, as well as a PhD that I'm working on at Leipzig University in Germany. You can click on this link<sup>†</sup> and scroll down to my name. If you click further on "*Alles lesen*" you can read the full description. It's basically a continuation of one of the storylines in *The Souls of China* but in a more focused, systematic, academic fashion than the narrative nonfiction technique I used in *Souls*. It's a chance to get down in writing some of the oral history I've been collecting and look

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<sup>†</sup> <http://sinologie.gko.uni-leipzig.de/forschung/promotionsvorhaben>

at a topic that's interested me for the past few decades: How do Chinese people organize themselves while living in a society with a massive and very active state?

**BT:** What advice would you give someone interested in writing about China who is just starting out?

**IJ:** First, learn the language. Second, learn to listen. Third, come for the long haul and not because it fits in well between internships at *Granta* and the *Paris Review*. ☺

[Note: Please read the following poem from the bottom of the page upward.]

sky  
to the  
lift you  
of secrets as they  
they will speak to you  
they will wrap you with their wings  
give your gaze to my mountains  
  
from breezes that drift through my trees  
you have only to follow the music distilled  
do you think you will lose your way?  
  
the courage to embrace them  
my clouds will carry your dreams until you gather  
upward regardless of the terrain  
I will teach you to always move forward  
of my paths?  
the steepness  
why do you see only  
  
into the breath of clear vision  
they will not veil your thoughts but transform them  
do you fear you cannot penetrate the mists that settle on my slopes?  
  
their surface will reflect whatever light you need  
my streams will sing you their stories  
across the waters of your worry  
my bridge will lay a platform of calm  
  
my rivers will rinse time from your pockets  
the hush of my forest will drown out your noise  
  
you can rest here  
enter if you will

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by Melissa Huff  
**Promises Made by a Chinese Landscape Painting**



## Portfolio

Michel-Alain Louÿs and Wang Han (王菡)

*Xinjian Village, Daxing District, southern suburbs of Beijing— On the night of November 18, 2017, a fire ravaged a boarding house of migrant workers from the interior of China, many of whom were employed in nearby textile workshops. Nineteen people were killed and another eight injured. The day after the tragedy, the authorities invoked security reasons to launch a large campaign across the city, lasting forty days, against this type of housing that they said did not meet safety standards. Tens of thousands of low-income families were forcibly evicted from their homes, and water, gas, and electricity supplies were quickly cut off. Outside, the temperature was below zero. Heavy machinery started to raze to the ground homes, shops, schools, and workshops. This series was taken in Xinjian Village a few days after the migrant workers were expelled from their homes.*



























## What We Did in Class Today

by Gale Acuff

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*Xuzhou, Jiangsu, PR China*

In class today I showed a video  
of chimpanzees and how they form nations  
of themselves, and the other ways they act  
like people — making tools, using teamwork,  
fighting battles, mourning their dead, building  
hierarchies, even using medicines.  
We're studying literary views of  
Nature; after the VCD, we move  
to *Paradise Lost*, a passage in our  
Beijing-sanctioned literary survey  
from Book 4 (wherein they note too that  
Satan is the hero of the thing and  
speaks for Milton's spirit of rebellion),  
in which we watch the first Western parents  
walking proudly naked in the Garden  
— *Hee for God only, shee for God in him*,  
and so on (speaking of a hierarchy),  
before God kicked them out (I sham booting  
an invisible soccer ball to make  
my point — the students laugh). There is no shame  
in Paradise, I say — as if I know  
the secrets of my culture's great neurosis;  
the two aren't modest — there is no modesty,  
there is nothing sensuous that's evil  
there — there is no evil discussed

until (*for those of you who've read ahead*)  
Satan comes to tempt the couple, give them  
the gifts of knowing then what we know now,  
how the world is fallen, etc.,  
what that means to Western people, how we  
have thought ourselves special in that way, all  
other creatures spared such good and evil  
as we, at least, would have it. Then along  
came chimpanzees, throwing a monkey wrench  
into what's conceived; they're almost human,  
share 97% of our genes,  
and why has God forsaken them — who is  
their Savior as we destroy their habitat?  
But I'm going beyond myself here.  
I point out something in Book 4 which I  
never really noticed before: Adam  
is described by implication as a  
trellis or tall firm pole upon which  
Eve can climb, her hair like *ringlets*, curling  
at the tips just like the tendrils of a  
vine (I suggest the Chinese *guo*, for melons,  
which similarly cling). What I'm trying  
to say to my students is that Milton  
accounts for the existence of evil  
— *evil* being what we know right now (a  
student yawns, several check their lexicons  
for definitions of my English words,  
one looks at her watch), *evil* being any  
impediment to pleasures unforbidden  
until God was double-crossed. *This*, I say,

*is why, for Westerners who are Christians*  
*— at least in Milton's time, and for some now*  
*— this is why we all must fail, suffer pain,*  
*even die.* As if I know what I am  
talking about, I continue: *This great*  
*story is Milton's attempt, based largely*  
*on the Bible, to justify the ways*  
*of God to people, a view religious,*  
*not scientific, a view alien,*  
*I suppose, to chimpanzees and other*  
*creatures with which — or whom? — we share Nature.*

It is all too incredible for some  
students, who interrogate me after  
class and want to know why Milton's story  
is any more reliable than the  
Han folk tale of the woman and her pet  
rabbit on the moon. I don't know, I say,  
but if you want to understand the minds  
of Westerners, here is where you can start, by  
wondering why our lives begin with stories,  
the only truth we had that could account  
— though it has not — for what we are. Science  
answers *how*, but never *why*, not the *Big*  
*Why*. Of course they look confused; so am I  
— I have always been, have always been  
eternal in this way, understanding  
nothing as it should not be understood,  
always pointing out a contradiction  
but not able to remove my own motes.  
I won't say I've had a loss of faith, but

when did the well-wrought explanation  
give way to atoms and the tales they spin?  
It happens in the history of one's mind  
first, before it is recorded as a  
circumstance, an event, or consequence.  
When a mind stopped believing, did the world?  
*Plainly, Genesis is a fairy tale*  
says Wang Hu Wu to me as we walk from  
class, under a rare full moon that we can  
see, pollution here nearly hopeless.  
(Next class we talk about how we make our  
-selves extinct, how like gods we can banish  
us from the Nature which will seem like Eden  
once it is all gone). I want to tell her  
*Science makes its own truths, is its own*  
*fiction*, but while that's fine for lecture halls,  
it's plainly stupid as the world goes sour  
like a bitten apple dropped and left to go  
to seed, not far from where it falls, but  
far enough to fear its independence,  
returning apples to its tree only  
by resurrecting its diminishment.