

BRUSH TALKS

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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 brushtalks.com.

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Transporting bamboo, Suzhou, Jiangsu, ca. 1900–1919

Brush Talks: A Journal of China

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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 the second issue of volume five of *Brush Talks*. This issue combines the old with the new — that is, work of people long since passed together with pieces by contemporary writers. Both are very much alive, notwithstanding the state of their creators. Art is eternal, transcending boundaries of time, space, and culture, which is why we can learn from a conversation between Genghis Khan and Charlie Chaplin. Poet Niels Hav brings them together in one of his poems that we highlight in this issue. (Turn to page 30 to see what they have to say to each other.) Poetry is usually a minor part of *Brush Talks*, but in this issue it gets a starring role with Hav's portfolio from a multi-city tour of China. Read our interview with Hav to hear more about the tour as well as his thoughts on writing poetry. The other contemporary work we feature is from our continuing series by Jacob Rawson on his travels to China's sacred mountains. This issue takes readers to the imposing Mount Hua in Shaanxi Province.

One of the artists from the past in these pages is Eileen Chang (张爱玲), to whom we pay tribute on the centenary of her birth. And it was my rummaging around the archives for a different project that brought to light our portfolio of photographs for this issue, along with the closing poem. Both are by members of the Logan family, whose first encounter with China came as medical missionaries in the waning days of the Qing dynasty. A daughter of the missionary couple continued this cross-cultural interaction as a teacher up through the mid-twentieth century. So much similar material remains buried in archives or personal collections, and we hope to bring more to these pages in the future to continue the dialogue between past and present. After all, as examples like the photograph on pages 50–51 documenting the fight against an epidemic and the description of Shanghai's nightscape in Elsa Logan's poem show us, what's past is indeed prologue.

Brian Kuhl

Contributors

Eileen Chang (张爱玲) was born in Shanghai, in 1920. She was the author of many novels, short stories, and essays. A film adaptation of her story “Lust, Caution” was made in 2007, directed by Ang Lee. She died in Los Angeles, in 1995.

Niels Hav is a Danish poet and short story writer whose work has been widely published and translated. He and his wife, a concert pianist, have performed in China a number of times. They live in Copenhagen.

Elsa Logan was born in 1898 in Changde, Hunan. Her parents, Dr. Oliver Tracy Logan (1870–1919) and Jennie Logan (1867–1961), were medical missionaries in China in the early twentieth century. Elsa earned a bachelor of science from Wesleyan College in Georgia, a bachelor of sacred theology from the Biblical Seminary in New York (now New York Theological Seminary), and a master’s degree in Oriental studies from Yale University. Her teaching career in China, Korea, and the United States spanned roughly fifty years. She died in 1988.

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.



Sunrise at the West Peak of Mount Hua by Wu Guanzhong (吳冠中, 1919–2010).

The Otherworldly Peach Spring

by Jacob Rawson

Up and down the Mount Hua ridges

Intense melancholy passions

—*Wang Wei (8th century)*

“ARE YOU ARAB? Why aren’t you at the mosque?”

I order a mutton-stuffed bun in Xi’an’s Muslim Quarter, and the Hui Muslim merchant points to my weeks of beard scruff. Here at the eastern terminus of the ancient Silk Road, I am sometimes taken for a descendant of one of the Central Asian traders who settled here in the Tang dynasty capital.

Further down the alleyway Hui vendors hawk their curios, and at a sprawling table display where little trinket versions of Terracotta Warriors are sold like action figures, a young woman straightens her pink cloth headwrap and points excitedly to a display of jade necklaces.

I walk along wide boulevards through the northern gate of the ornately preserved city wall, then onto a high-speed train that whisks me along the soft loamy plains of the Wei River basin. Outside the train window the wheat fields are at full height. The farmers who have already begun their harvest have covered the narrow roadways with their payload, and small passenger buses swerve to avoid the low piles. Other farmers toss their harvest into the wind to separate the chaff from the seed. They look up only briefly to glance at the slick new train.

Somewhere outside the town of Huayin, aptly named “in the shadow of Mount Hua,” I spend the afternoon under the railroad tracks that traverse a tight ravine and a squat waterfall. Three local boys are splashing around in a deep pool and trying to call the attention of their disinterested girlfriends, and as the sky dims I turn to watch train cars full of sleepy passengers rattle across the rusted

steel trestle. In the stillness of twilight I peer up into stolid shadows as darkness obscures the soft granite crests.

* * * *

Over the past couple of millennia, Mount Hua has developed a reputation across China as “the most perilous mountain under heaven.” It is a reputation earned not only from its unique frustum shape and the sheer cliffs that drop off all sides of its summit, but also from reports throughout recent centuries of the large numbers of visitors who have fallen to their doom. Mount Hua is the westernmost of the five peaks sacred to the Daoists, and rising six thousand feet above the surrounding plains to an apex at more than seven thousand feet above sea level, it presents the highest and most challenging climb of the Daoist circuit. In my bid to climb the nine sacred Chinese peaks, Mount Hua marks my final ascent of the Daoist five.

I start climbing the ancient pre-Tang dynasty route that leads up the mountain from the east. Near the trailhead a large stone sculpture depicts the “eight brave warriors” of the People’s Liberation Army who scaled this undeveloped route with climbing equipment in 1949 and ambushed more than one hundred Kuomintang soldiers stationed at the top, thus taking the mountain for the Communist side.

As I rise on stone steps the gorge narrows and closes around me, and when I look up the cracked granite cliffs have covered most of the sky, their little tufts of vegetational fuzz adding a bichromatic contrast to the beige canvas. The path bends around the side of a cliff with concrete platforms built out to allow a safe ascent. Here the ancient version of this trail section is still visible, with stone foothold cutouts rising seventy feet up the vertical cliff face. To deter climbers, park rangers have removed the bottom section of the iron hand chain and affixed a small sign that reads *ENTRY FORBIDDEN*.

Further along, the trail turns up a steep rock face that rises one hundred feet or so at a sixty-degree incline. As I hang from the safety chains to rest halfway up, two shirtless men climb past me carrying a red flag that reads “Model Workers”

affixed to a bamboo staff. More of their companions follow, and they tell me they are coal miners who spend six days per week digging five hundred feet underground. The men ask about the working conditions of coal miners in the United States as we pull ourselves hand by hand up the steep incline.

At a flat point in the trail a fatigued builder hauls a sheet of plywood into a new stone hut that will soon become a public restroom. His two colleagues kneel over a steel door frame with a welding torch. They grunt when I ask about their work. “The Communist Party pays us. On some days we make two hundred yuan, on others only thirty.” The men will live inside the small unfinished building until the restroom is complete and operational.

After a couple of hours the trail reaches the first notable promontory on North Peak, and I look south to see the imposing summit area still thousands of feet above. From North Peak I cross onto Black Dragon Ridge, a steep razor-thin rocky spine that at one point offers only a few feet of berth between cliffs that drop off both sides. A legend suggests that when the famed ninth-century poet Han Yu climbed this ridge he became paralyzed with fear and calligraphed a letter of desperation that he dropped over the ledge. Next to the trail, the story is commemorated with characters carved into a stone wall that read, THE SPOT WHERE HAN YU TOSSED HIS LETTER.

As I sweat up the top of the exposed ridgeline the sky turns the color of ink, lightning shoots across the eastern horizon, and the sound of thunder rumbles through the lower gorges. It is as if the Daoist immortals are countering my attempt to summit their fifth and final mountain, and I shrink at the added peril of a lightning strike that now accompanies the already dangerous ascent.

Finally reaching the summit area, I peer out from an overhang on East Peak that drops a half mile into the gorge below. There is nothing quite like sitting at the edge of a three-thousand-foot precipice to compel one to ponder his own mortality, and a mild fear of heights causes my head to race with adrenaline in the thin alpine air as I watch a flow of hypnotic vapors sway up from the deep abyss.

Once the lightning clears I perch under the gnarly spread of a Mount Hua pine, a hearty and handsome species that thrives at these inhospitable altitudes.

A mangy stray house cat joins me to share a lunch of peanuts and jerky, and once she has eaten her fill she slinks off with a piece of meat to divide amongst a litter of kittens hiding inside a small crack in the granite embankment.

Continuing up the windy paths of the summit area, I spot the famous Vast Sky Plank Walk where tourists can pay thirty yuan to strap on a climbing harness and scuttle along a sheer cliff face while standing on nothing but three boards that stick out not much more than the length of one trembling foot. It was little more than a decade ago when safety equipment was not required here and park authorities reported that hikers fell to their death at a rate of about one per month.

The man hawking the safety harnesses wears the blue robes, black headwrap, and white leg gaiters of a Daoist practitioner. He sits on the cliff edge blissfully counting a wad of paper bills. When prompted he tells me he has lived on the mountain for twelve years, but when I ask about a stone inscription that reads *FLYING IMMORTALS ROAM* he loses interest and turns back to his money.

Before nightfall I find lodging at a small cliffside temple between South Peak and West Peak where a sign purports that the sixteenth-century Daoist alchemist Gao Quanyang found an auspicious day to brew an elixir of immortality. Less auspicious to the site were the Red Guards, who during the Cultural Revolution destroyed the temple and threw the original iron alchemy cauldron down a gully. The temple was rebuilt in the 1980s, and a stone replica of the cauldron now sits out front. Inside an auxiliary altar room I share a small bunk bed with a young construction worker, and when I rise in the depths of the night I am startled by a celestial display so thick that the cliffs manifest their own strange shadows in the brilliant starlight.

In a hazy morning calm the alpine mists sway up the cliffs and across the summit, lending a magical allure to the cracked igneous formations. On West Peak the National Department of Meteorology has erected a display of old photographs that depict their scrappy staff hauling bags of rice up the mountain to a manned weather station in the 1950s. Young hikers donning blue jeans and polo shirts back up to the cliff's edge to pose for photographs in front of the misty

expanse, and a cell phone rings out the synthesized melody of Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On."

I spend the day gadding about the summit area, then perch in giddy meditation on a derelict concrete foundation structure overlooking the East Peak abyss. The house cat from the day before proudly carries a squirrel carcass back to her kittens, and I watch soft cumulus compositions roll over the distant crests and folds of the Qinling Mountain Range. The unfettered whimsy of these airy heights leaves one with the impression that this place really could be the edge of the immortal realm. Of the sacred mountains I have climbed, I find it easiest to understand how Mount Hua has continued to capture imaginations from ancient times to the modern day, and I know I am not its first visitor to feel some yearning to experience the quiet detachment of a highland hermit.

I climb down the mountain by way of Mount Hua Gorge, the most common route used by hikers today. Aside from a few steep stair sections, this route is not as perilous as the path I had taken on the way up, and I enjoy stopping in and chatting with the caretaker of each shrine that dots the landscape.

Throughout my days on the mountain I have not seen any sign of a Buddhist presence, which is why I am surprised to see a man wearing maroon-colored robes now walking beside me. I ask if he is from the area, and he introduces himself as a monk from Mount Wutai, one of the four sacred Buddhist mountains in Shanxi Province.

"I'm here to check out the mountain. I'd like to build the first Buddhist temple, but the rules here are strict. This is a socialist country, and they require an official stamp on everything." He asks if there are Buddhists in the United States, then continues. "I'd have to get permission from the local Daoist and Buddhist committees, then go to Beijing and win over some cadres. I don't expect to succeed, but it's worth a shot."

As he speaks, three boisterous college students pass, and we overhear their excited whispers.

"A foreigner!"

"A monk!"

“A foreigner and a monk!” We pick up our pace and I pray we are not becoming the subject of some ill-conceived punchline.

“Buddhism is great for the soul,” the man continues. “It teaches us to avoid the evil tendencies of man. The locals here in Shaanxi are poor and uneducated. I want to open a temple and teach them the sutras.”

The monk stops to rest at an overlook and I push on, reaching the flat gorge bottom after the sun has ducked out of sight below the ridgeline. On the opposite side of the gorge I spot a narrow ladder of iron chains and stone footholds carved into a vertical cliff wall next to a three-character inscription that reads “Great Upper Place.” I stand peering at the spot where the footholds disappear at the top of the cliff and wonder what secrets could be shrouded by these granite bluffs.

A brawny porter balancing a bamboo pole with a load of empty beer bottles sees me gazing across the gorge and smiles. “They say it’s a real ‘otherworldly peach spring’ up there.”

The common Chinese phrase references a well-known fifth-century tale in which a fisherman becomes lost exploring the upper reaches of a river, encounters a forest of peach blossoms at the river’s source, navigates a tight mountain cave, and emerges on the other side to discover a harmonious society that has been isolated from the outside world for centuries.

The phrase means something like “utopia” or “paradise,” and the romantic images of a hidden Daoist abode dance in my mind as my railroad car speeds away from Huayin and the mountain disappears under the gentle veil of night.

* * * *

Back in the city, I am haunted by the porter’s words and the image of chiseled steps leading up the granite cliff. In my noisy guesthouse I wake up in the night to a faint taunt echoing inside my head.

A healthy fear of heights is not a bad thing altogether, I have reasoned. My evolutionary predecessors had, by all logic, propagated their genes to me in part by an ability to avoid falling from cliffs. But fears aside, I desperately want to

reach the hidden abode, and I decide to seek out a solution in modern safety tools.

At daybreak I scout out a rock-climbing shop and rent a climbing harness to bring back to the mountain. Soon again I am gliding back across the wheat fields then strolling up Mount Hua Gorge where a porter passes with a load of instant noodles bound for the summit and the wooden visages of carved Daoist immortals peek out of small shrines. The morning draws on and sunlight pours into the narrow canyon, and I finally spot the carved footholds from my dreams.

Fifty or so vertical feet up the first cliff there is a prominent ledge with a cave and a stone inscription that marks the site as Lesser Upper Place. When the American author and translator Bill Porter visited this spot in 1989, he found the cave overgrown and abandoned and learned that Daoist practitioners had become frustrated with the increased focus on tourism and were leaving the mountain in droves. Today I see that the cave looks inhabited, with a display of pots, pans, and laundry drying on the ledge. When I pull myself up the chain and step onto the main platform I am greeted by a middle-aged man with a long goatee wearing a yellow cloth tunic and hair tied into a topknot.

The man tells me he has lived in this cave for three years practicing the meditation, breathing exercises, and scripture recitation of the Supreme Clarity school of Daoism. He hauls his water up the cliff from the stream below and every so often hikes down the valley to restock his pantry with rice and vegetables. Beyond his wood-thatched cave are smaller openings carved into the stone and filled with Daoist idols.

“What a time this is!” The man chuckles. “Even an American has found his way up here!” He leads me into the cave dwelling and introduces me to an eight-foot-tall wooden carving of the Sun Goddess. “It’s just like Greek mythology,” he offers, describing Apollo. I place a twenty-yuan note on the altar, and he lights a pack of incense sticks. At his cue I kowtow thrice and place the sticks into a shallow sand burner.

Back outside on the cliff’s edge he rinses two tomatoes in an aluminum wash basin. I ask about his secluded life as we bite into the pungent fruit. “I’m

a modern hermit.” He laughs, and just as we have finished our tomatoes and I am considering where to wipe my juice-covered hands, I hear the ringer of a cell phone, which he pulls out of a pocket in his robe.

He yells into the phone with a cough and a laugh. “I have company! A guest from afar.”

The man asks for my Chinese name, which is a simple phonetic transliteration of the English. “Oh, that won’t do!” He curls his eyebrows and takes it upon himself to give me a Daoist appellation.

After pondering this for a few moments, he says, “Meihua.” *Mei* most commonly means beauty, but that is not what he has in mind. “Because you’re A-*mei*-rican! And *hua* because Mount Hua is now a part of you.” I repeat my new name out loud, and I like it. To make the occasion official, he grabs the notebook out of my hand and writes in quick characters that read:

Meihua — In the year 2010 on Mount Hua’s Upper Place, the Supreme Clarity school Daoist practitioner Zhou Gaojun chose a name for an American friend.

I tell him that this place has been in my dreams, but admit that climbing the steep cliffs frightens me. “You must open your heart up here,” he insists. “Everything you see is natural, a part of nature. Just climb up naturally and you will have no worries.”

I complain about the recorded music blaring from a food stand at the bottom of the gorge, and ask if the cacophony of the tourism trade has detracted from his sanctuary. “The noise bothers me too, but I have to take things as they come. You may think it’s bad that we can hear the music from here, but they hear it up in heaven too. They hear everything we say.”

He waves goodbye as I dangle from the hand chain, then traverse the cliff on a narrow plank walk to reach the main climbing route for the Great Upper Place. A stream trickles forty feet down the cliff face as I clip my carabiners into the chain and struggle to keep footing on the slick holds. At the top of the cliff the

path traverses a narrow stone bridge, and I pass through a steep deciduous forest before arriving at the bottom of another sixty-foot cliff where I slowly scale the carved footholds on both sides of a right-angle corner crevice.

The hiking routes up the main peaks of Mount Hua have steps formed by broad blocks of stone, an additive process designed to accommodate the millions of annual hikers. On this secluded path the steps and footholds are removed from the cliffs in small indentations just wide enough for a single person to pass. There is an intimacy here that I have not felt on other climbing routes, and as I climb I feel a strange sense of kinship with the workmen who chiseled out my way. Engraved on a rock face near the trail there is a clue to the identity of my predecessors. The stone inscription is worn and dulled by centuries of wind and rain, but the terse Classical Chinese prose is still legible.

DURING THE GREAT SONG, ZHOU DAOJIN AND WANG WENYOU
REBUILT THE ANCIENT TANG DYNASTY PATH. THE WORK REACHED
COMPLETION DURING THE FOURTH MONTH OF THE THIRD YEAR OF
EMPEROR GAOZONG'S REIGN.

The inscription references the year 1129, a time when war raged between the Song dynasty and the Jurchens, and when this mountain lay within the boundaries of Jurchen control. I pause and wonder whether the fighting ever reached these heights, and whether “Great Song” was inscribed as a message of defiance toward the Jurchen rulers.

The trail wraps around steep inclines and at the next cliff rises at a seventy-degree slope for nearly two hundred feet between patches of bushy vegetation. The steps become steeper toward the top with footholds barely deep enough to place the balls of my feet. When I reach a flat ledge near the top I see that the cliff extends upward in a way that blocks all passage and that the only way to proceed is through a dark opening in a granite crevice. Inside there is a small altar marked with characters that read “Cave of the Thunder God,” and a rusted iron ladder leads thirty feet up a tight vertical shaft to a small square of sunlight.

Scrambling up the dark tunnel and emerging from the small opening, I am greeted by an encouraging inscription in the cliff wall above: *AMBITION LIES IN HIGH MOUNTAINS.*

After two hours of climbing from the lower gorge, the trail flattens out and widens into a small glen surrounded by steep bluffs on three sides. Here there are gardens growing on two broad terraces, and on closer inspection I find an old grindstone surrounded by rows of peas, green beans, pumpkins, potatoes, tomatoes, and wildflowers that paint the margins with yellows, reds, and purples.

A woman wearing a blue tunic wrapped in a white cloth sash emerges from a small stone cooking hut carrying a rack of steamed buns. She waves to me with a kind smile and sets the rack of buns down on a large ceramic pot.

In thick Shaanxi dialect that I struggle to follow, she confirms that I have reached the Great Upper Place where she lives as a lay disciple of and assistant to Master Cao. The master, she tells me, is a ninety-year-old priestess who began her Daoist studies on Mount Hua before the founding of the People's Republic and has lived on the mountain full time since the 1970s. She is known to spend weeks at a time meditating and fasting in a cave, and when not fasting her spiritual cultivation often dictates that she subsist on the scant diet of a small handful of walnuts and pine nuts each day.

The disciple tells me she spends her own time between meditation and Daoist studies, tending the garden, and doing all of the cooking with firewood she collects on the mountain. She points across the main trail to where the two women reside in a small two-story edifice built against a cliff wall, and I imagine what must have been an arduous process of hauling the stone blocks and other building materials up the difficult climbing route.

Master Cao appears on the footpath wearing a full-length blue tunic and white leg gaiters. She moves well for her age, and clicks her bamboo cane up the stone steps as she approaches. I straighten and prepare an introduction, but she walks past without slowing or looking in my direction.

"She doesn't like people." The disciple laughs.

I cannot blame the master for her hesitation toward strangers. As the disciple tells me, during the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards climbed all over the mountain and even up to this glen to destroy the worship altars. During this period the master was forced to leave Mount Hua and went into seclusion on another mountain a day's journey to the west.

The disciple returns to her chores, bobbing up and down the stone paths with a spry agility that belies her almost eighty years. I spend the afternoon exploring the steep side trails around the hermitage, and find scattered altar rooms cut into the porphyry granite bluffs. Along their threshold stones and side posts there are engravings that show names like Cave of the Jade Emperor, Cave of the Gold God, and Cave of Copper Alchemy.

From a viewpoint outside Cave of the Eight Immortals I enjoy a dramatic vista of wispy shrouds drifting below the West Peak summit, and I begin to wonder why I never before considered how the Chinese character for “immortal” depicts a person on a mountain. Inside the small grotto someone has left a cryptic verse written in brush ink on the rough wall.

*It is best not to come and not to leave.
In coming none find joy. In leaving none find sorrow.*

I am reluctant to part from this lofty sanctuary where the silence is broken only by the song of birds and the rustling of leaves, but the sun has now dropped below the high ridges and the master and disciple have retreated into their hut, so I begin to clip my carabiners back down the cliffs.

By the time I reach the main trail at the gorge bottom the afternoon shadows have elongated and consumed the floor of the rocky ravine. Still wearing my climbing harness, I rest on a granite slab looking up at the cliff as the carved footholds slowly fade into the twilight void.

Two young women from Guangzhou — college students on a school break, they tell me — see my harness and ask about the footholds. As they listen wide-eyed to my tale of vertical cliff walls and ancient cave dwellings, the valley becomes

immersed in darkness and a row of electric lights flickers on to illuminate the canyon trail. The women pause and look at each other, and I turn back to the cliffs and smile. “They say it’s a real ‘otherworldly peach spring’ up there.” 🍑

ANNALS OF LITERATURE

Eileen Chang (张爱玲)

This year is the centenary of the birth of author Eileen Chang, an important figure in twentieth-century literature. She was born into an upper-class family in Shanghai on September 30, 1920. Her great-grandfather on her father's side was Li Hongzhang, the famous general and diplomat of the late Qing era. She lived with her father when her parents divorced in 1930, before they had a falling out when she was eighteen. She then lived with her mother in a modern apartment in Shanghai until leaving for college in Hong Kong two years later. (She had received a full scholarship to the University of London in 1939, but the Second World War prevented her from going.) She was one month away from graduating with a degree in English literature from the University of Hong Kong when the island fell to Japan, in December 1941.

Chang returned to live in Shanghai during the 1940s, where she found great success as a writer in the middle of the decade. As Karen Kingsbury, a translator of her work, puts it,

Chang's great achievement was to meld the language and conventions of Qing dynasty vernacular fiction with the ironic, worldly stance of Edwardian British writers . . . then project her stories by means of a visual imagination that had absorbed many scenes and techniques from the Hollywood films of her day. The result was a rich, flexible, marvelously apt medium for exploring middle-class mentalities, both traditional and contemporary, in modern Shanghai.[†]

The political climate after the Communist takeover in 1949 led her to return to Hong Kong in 1952. Three years later, she left for the United States, where she wrote screenplays, spent time at the MacDowell artists' colony in New Hampshire, and continued her fiction writing, this time in English. She died in Los Angeles, in 1995, in relative obscurity, although there has since been a renewed interest in her work.

[†] From the introduction to Eileen Chang, *Love in a Fallen City and Other Stories*, trans. Karen S. Kingsbury (New York: New York Review Books / Penguin Modern Classics, 2007).



Eileen Chang, ca. 1944 (Used under CC BY 4.0. East Asian Library, USC Libraries.)

Love†

by Eileen Chang (张爱玲)

THIS IS REAL.

There was once a daughter of a tolerably well-off family in the country who was very lovely and sought out by many matchmakers, although nothing had come of their efforts. That year, she was only fifteen or sixteen years old. One spring evening, she stood by the back door, hands resting on a peach tree. She remembered that she was wearing a moon-white tunic. She had seen the young man who lived across the way, but they had never spoken. He walked toward her, came to a halt close by, and said softly: “So you’re here, too?” She did not say anything, and he did not say more. They stood for a moment and then went their separate ways.

That was all.

Later, the girl was abducted by a swindler in the family and sold as a concubine in some far-off town, then sold several times more, passing through any number of trials and ordeals. When she was old, she still remembered that incident and often spoke of that evening in spring, the peach tree by the back door, that young man.

When you meet the one among the millions, when amid millions of years, across the borderless wastes of time, you happen to catch him or her, neither a step too early nor a step too late, what else is there to do except to ask softly: “So you’re here, too?” ☺

† From Eileen Chang, *Written on Water*, trans. Andrew F. Jones (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 79. First published 1945, in Shanghai.



Genghis Khan and Charlie Chaplin.

Interview and Poems

Niels Hav

NIELS HAV is a Danish poet and short story writer with awards from the Danish Arts Council. He is the author of seven collections of poetry and three books of short fiction. His books have been translated into many languages, including English, Arabic, Turkish, Dutch, Farsi, Serbian, Kurdish, and Portuguese. His second English poetry collection, *We Are Here*, was published by Book Thug in Toronto; his poems and stories have been published in a large number of magazines and newspapers in different countries of the world, including the *Literary Review*, *Ecotone*, *Acumen*, *Exile*, the *Los Angeles Review*, *Absinthe: New European Writing*, *Shearsman and PRISM International*. He has traveled widely and participated in numerous international poetry events in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North and South America. Hav was raised on a farm in western Denmark and today resides in the most colorful and multiethnic part of Copenhagen. His most recent book, *Øjeblikke af lykke* [Moments of Happiness], was published by *Det Poetiske Bureaus Forlag* in 2020.

BT: Can you tell me a little about your connection to China?

NH: Over the past twelve years I have been to China quite a few times to attend literary events or festivals. And also for separate personal readings with Chinese poets. My wife Christina is a concert pianist, and we have an agent in Hangzhou, who organizes our events. These six poems were written during such a tour. I was contractually obligated to write a new poem to, and about, each city on our route. I signed the contract without fully realizing that this would be a demanding and extensive task. It became a wild ride; China is a very large continent. In less than two weeks, we landed six times at Shanghai Airport. We traveled by plane, train, and car around to distant destinations. Along the way and when we arrived I had to write these poems. Usually I write in my mother tongue Danish, but these poems are written in English; it was necessary for temporal reasons. When we

arrived in a new city and the poem was written, I sent the poem to Shao Jiajun in Beijing, who translated it into Chinese. In the evening when I read the poem on stage, the Chinese translation was shown on a screen. It worked, the Chinese are very advanced in everything technical. But I got very little sleep those days. The last town on the tour was Yulin in Shaanxi Province. I found myself in a slightly manic exalted state of fatigue and lack of sleep when we arrived. In Yulin is the famous Zhenbeitai Tower, the largest watchtower along the Great Wall. I decided to let Genghis Khan meet Charlie Chaplin there to discuss the true values of life. The poem “With Charlie Chaplin in Yulin” was written there.

BT: The origins of creative ideas are always fascinating to me, so how did you decide to bring Charlie Chaplin and Genghis Khan together in a poem? Were there other pairs you considered as candidates before settling on these two? Or did they just pop into your head at some point?

NH: As always these things happened mostly on the unconscious level. I was tired and crazy from lack of sleep, my brain was running on overdrive and snatching what came flying. Genghis Khan is a big phenomenon in Yulin, the museum and all that. I needed a character of format to confront him. Chaplin was perfect, a humanist with a sense of humor. Chaplin’s reply in the poem is from *The Great Dictator*.

BT: What did you do to prepare for writing these poems? In general, did you approach writing about China in a different way than you would about other topics? If so, how?

NH: I had a small anthology of classical Chinese poetry at hand, otherwise nothing. I wanted to go completely unprejudiced to the task. Traveling at that pace, over long distances, with a task, is inspiring. Otherwise you can lazily wait for the good idea. Not here — it had to be done, now!

Along the way I was approached by Chinese poets who knew my destinations from the internet. At that time the anthology *The Importance of Elsewhere: Twelve Contemporary European and American Poets* had been published with a selection of my poems in Chinese translation. In China they consider me to be a poet who writes in English; for them Danish is just another minority language in the Western hemisphere. In Changzhi colleagues came up with a magazine with some more of my poems in Chinese. The trip offered several pleasant surprises. I was just there, trying to keep up with events. I wanted to challenge myself and see how much I could open up and take in. Most of the time we are overloaded with identity — in these years identity is the big theme. A mental trap threatening all of us to forget that we are just human beings.

BT: Speak about the silence you write about in the poem “The Silence in Anji County.” I’ve been to Anji—it’s beautiful countryside. I like this idea that “what’s most important happens in the silent zone.”

NH: Yes, we tend to forget that what matters happens in the silent zone. Inside ourselves we all carry a silence, or we walk around mumbling a lonely inner monologue. That’s where poetry meets us, when it happens, in magical moments. An intimate talk about important things.

Most of the time we are surrounded by an infernal noise — everyone blabbers away in the mouth of each other, and silence becomes a precious luxury. We have two ears and only one mouth; often you could think it was the opposite. The art of shutting up is not much appreciated. To be silent, to listen, to wait . . . Maybe we can learn it from classical Chinese sages, or from the tall trees in old forests.

BT: In addition to Chinese, your work has been translated into several other languages, including Arabic and Turkish. You write in both Danish and English yourself. How important is this interplay of various languages, for both your poetry and you personally? And how about intercultural influences? You have

traveled widely in China. What other countries have you been to? What does that do for you and your poetry?

NH: I grew up on a small farm, outside a small village in a small country. I was lucky when a selection of my poetry was translated con amore by the Canadian poets Patrick Friesen and Per Brask, and a book was published in Toronto. My poems travel, and I travel to support them. Occasionally I am invited for a reading or to attend events. I have seen some continents, South Africa, Egypt, America, the Far East. A book was published in Iran, I was in Tehran and Isfahan. This is my first life and I want to see the planet. I do not know how it influences my poetry, but these poems from China show that something is happening. My latest book abroad was a Portuguese translation published in Brazil, and I was in Rio for the book fair. Just before the coronavirus arrived, I attended an Arabic festival in Dubai.

BT: In another interview, you said, “I stumbled around and harvested defeats.” I love this word “harvested” you use in the context of defeat. It makes me think of the English collocation “a bountiful harvest” — which is inevitably a good thing. Today, it seems, people look for instant success without defeat or failure: a large following on social media, a book deal before completing one’s MFA, etc. Tell us about some defeats you “harvested” and why that was a good thing.

NH: I’m a collector of defeats. The only thing one can learn from is personal mistakes, and I have harvested a few. My first wild dream was to be a sailor; sixteen years old I boarded a ship bound for India. It turned out to be a disaster. I had to clean and cook, a complete new agenda for me, I was used to farm work. Quickly I escaped and wandered around. I ended up in Oslo, where I lived as a homeless. I was sixteen years old, and finally I realized I had to go back to school and learn something in earnest. A crucial defeat in my early youth.

Since then I have reaped countless defeats. My new book is being translated into English entitled *Moments of Happiness*. The word “moments” is important

here; happiness is not available by subscription, only over the counter. And in the end we will all be losers, alone in the cold grave with a shovelful of soil in the mouth. The final defeat. ☯

The poems that follow on pages 30–43 are all from Hav's six-city tour of China in 2015.

Translations by Shao Jiajun (邵嘉骏).

With Charlie Chaplin in Yulin

by Niels Hav

It is said that the Great Wall of China
can be seen from the moon —
That's complicated and expensive to verify
But it is for sure that the moon can be seen
from the Great Wall

When Charlie Chaplin meets Genghis Khan someday in Yulin
they can stand on the Great Wall or in the Zhen Bei Tai watchtower
studying the moon as they exchange values

“The greatest happiness is to triumph over your enemies, rob them
and take their wives and daughters in your arms,” says Genghis Khan
“I'm sorry but I don't want to be an emperor,” Chaplin replies,
“that's not my business, I want to live by others' happiness”

When the moon is a metaphor for love and longing
the Great Wall is a metaphor for the empire-builders'
powerlessness, all empires grind to an end

Today Genghis Khan is a Mongolian barbecue
and Charlie Chaplin is dead. God created this world
with a good sense of humour, most of our glorious history
is just a big joke. So let's not forget how to laugh

在榆林，想起了查理卓别林

有人说，万里长城
在月球上都可以看到——
想要证明它既困难又昂贵
但是有一点可以肯定
在长城上，可以看到月亮

如果某天，查理卓别林和成吉思汗在榆林相遇
他们可以相约登上长城，或爬上镇北台
赏月观景，交流想法

“最大的快乐就是征服敌人，凯旋而归
并将他们的财富占为己有”成吉思汗说
“很遗憾，我不想当皇帝”卓别林回答
“我擅长征服别人的心，而不是肉体”

如果月亮是爱和渴望的象征
那么长城则代表了秦皇汉武的
无力感——再高的长城也无法阻挡帝国的灭亡

如今成吉思汗早已入土
查理卓别林也已逝去。创造这个世界的上帝
还真有幽默感，我们大多数光鲜的历史
不过是个大笑话。所以，重要的是别忘了开怀大笑

The Princess of Light Comes Ashore

by Niels Hav

Let's go to Wenling to see the ocean
at the edge of People's Republic of China
where the princess of light comes ashore
as we stand face to face with the China Sea

I want to write a poem about the mystery
of all existence. I know it requires humility
but also action, protest, joy, anger and delight
to get it up. In addition: a stroll and language skills

All day I have been trying to catch up with Du Fu (杜甫)
who traveled in Zhejiang a thousand years ago
But finally, at sunset, I must be honest and give up
the old master interprets reality with greater precision:

“Behind the gates of the wealthy
food lies rotting from waste
Outside it's the poor
who lie frozen to death”

The wind blows where it wishes, nothing happens
for a thousand years. Let's go to Wenling and face reality
in front of the China Sea, when the princess of light comes
ashore. She opens when someone knocks on the door

光明女神降临

让我们去温岭看海
在中华大地之滨
那里，光明女神降临
当我们面朝大海之时

我想写一首融合了所有存在的
神秘的诗。我知道这需要谦卑
行动，反驳，欢乐，愤怒和欣喜
方能完成。当然，再加上散步和表达

我一直试图追上杜甫的脚步
那个千年之前在浙江留下足迹的先哲
但是最终，落日之时，我必须坦诚并且放弃
古老的大师更加擅长表达：

“朱门酒肉臭
路有冻死骨”

当风吹过时，可不会考虑人们的感受，沧海
桑田。让我们去温岭揭开它的新面目
面朝大海，当光明女神降临
人间。她为走投无路的人打开了上帝之门

Beneath the Sky of Li Bai in Zaoyang City

by Niels Hav

We are nomads, just like you —
Tonight I sit in the doorway dreaming,
I don't want to go in, I don't want to go out —
I stare at your old moon,
 your old moon stares at me,
a breeze hums in the dark
insects play an ancient concert somewhere
and far away the mountains speculate . . .

On the motorways traffic roars
anxiety hides in skyscrapers
the soul shivers in an overheated office
rage glows in ashes from burned-out visions

The dead have returned to home
the living are still on the move
The driver having neither route nor direction is lost
a minor personal disaster, we empathize with him —
But when humanity and all the world
 have lost the way
no one notices

Tonight we are in Zaoyang
I sit in the doorway dreaming
Zaoyang is a beautiful city, real people live here
they care about right and wrong and chasing happiness —
the universe is pervaded by insatiable longing
Hello Li Bai, where are you?
I sit alone beneath your sky in Zaoyang
drinking your wine

在枣阳，李白的天空下

我们浪迹天涯，就像你——
今晚我怀着梦想，门扉倚
我不甘停留，亦不愿流徙——
我凝视着曾与你共舞的明月
 仿佛它也瞧着我自己
黑夜中一阵微风凄凄
小虫儿不知何处将音乐奏起
远山揣摩其中真谛

高速公路上车水马龙
欲望隐藏在摩天楼之中
灵魂在楼里的办公室中颤动
愤怒在憧憬破灭后化为的灰烬中喷涌

逝者得到解脱
生者依旧奔波
既无航标也无罗盘该如何掌舵
对于个人的遭遇，我们感同身受——
但当全人类和整个社会
 都茫然失措
无人看破

今晚我们在枣阳
我坐在门前梦想
枣阳是如此漂亮，鲜活的生命被滋养
明辨曲直是他们的信仰，追逐幸福是他们的理想——
世界上弥漫着贪得无厌的欲望
嗨，李白，你在何方？
我独自坐在你曾停留，枣阳的天空下
斗酒十千

Watching the Tide in Haining City

by Niels Hav

We are water creatures, born out of water, the embryo swims
in the womb. The screaming baby is hauled ashore
there is the greatest confusion in this world

Qiantang River flows unconcerned towards the sea
We are like fishes flapping their tails in the mud
while the tides come and go

We are water creatures, we bring our joys and sorrows
down to the river. Maybe the water bird knows
what we still have to endure

Sometimes winter changes its mind and snow
begins to fall like frozen tears. I've become a stone,
coatless in the wind — it's doomsday

海宁观潮

我们是水生动物，因水而生，鱼翔在
母亲的怀里。却尖叫着被拖上岸
这是世界上最大的无奈

钱塘江悠闲地向大海进发
我们就像鱼儿在泥泞中拍打尾巴
随潮起潮落归家

我们是水生动物，悲欢与共
水中嬉戏。也许水鸟会懂
我们为何依旧惶恐

冬天让人琢磨不定，鹅毛大雪忽至
像结晶的眼泪飘坠。我心如磐石
风雪中茕茕——这是世界末日

The Silence in Anji County

by Niels Hav

I.

We come heavily loaded with all these instruments
cello, piano, violin, double bass and viola
The turtle, the elephant, the swan —
and some invisible butterflies

Thank you Anji for your beauty and love
of music and poetry

We come with sounds and poor words,
but we know, we know, we know for sure:
What's most important happens in the silent zone
and we must apologize, because we disturb
the silence of Anji county with our little fairy tale

2.

Deepest inside everything what happens
is a silence

And the one, who says nothing
Imagines the silence
that surrounds his silence
says everything

But that silence speaks in its own voice
that's the problem
What's most important happens
in the silent zone, but no one can control that
There angels and demons speak in chorus

If you want something said
you'll have to say it yourself

安吉的静谧

I.

我们满载着乐器旅行
大提琴、钢琴、小提琴、低音提琴和中提琴
乌龟、大象、天鹅之音——
还有些无法触及的小生灵

安吉，谢谢你与生俱来的

乐与诗的美和爱
我们带着自己的声音和拙作而来
但是我们知道，我们了解，我们明白：
在这静谧之域，何谓真正的天籁
因此我们必须道歉，为我们的礼拜
小小的童话叨扰了安吉的悠闲自在

2.

万物
皆为
无相

那人
默然
参禅
无相
心中之无相
解世间万象

然无相
似阳春白雪
众生不解

绝真理之众相
谓之无相
无相无形
亦佛亦魔

当仁
不让

Cosmic Days in Changzhi City 山西长治

by Niels Hav

Everything happens so fast;
soon the trees will have leaves again,
the birds sing in Changzhi city
animals have their young.

We push strollers
like astronauts fallen from the sky,
we look at the trees, listen to the birds;
everything is so real. Now we live
on Earth again among humans
and animals that drink from the light.

*

The light from the first seconds
after the beginning of everything
can still be observed

Everything happens
for the first time
Now

*

The Earth
The sun
The moon
The planets
The stars

is sea spray
in cosmos

*

The galaxies
are moving apart
with dizzying speed.
You and I are partakers
in this acceleration

*

Who are we, you and I?
The spark of life pulses also in us

In our little brain
with its thin shell
is everything: God
and his angels;
the memories
about life up in the trees.

Joy Pain
Light Darkness
Beauty

长治·玉宇之日

朝晖夕阴；
转眼树木重新披上绿衣，
在长治，鸟儿鸣啼
小动物们繁衍生息。

我们走马观花
眼前景色瞬息万变，如从高空坠下
我们看着树儿，听着鸟儿叽喳
一切都如此真实。如今的我们
在地球上筑起人类的家
与其他生灵一起被光明滋养

*

那伴随着宇宙开始的光明
从万物开始至今
依旧在星际旅行

任何事情的第一次
都发生在
当下

*

大地
赤乌
婵娟
太白

启明
都是天河中
小小浪花

*

银河系
正在飘移
白驹过隙
我们都是参与者之一
留下加速的轨迹

*

你、我都是谁？
生命之光在你我涌动
在我们小小的脑中
填补了虚空
那生命之光就是上帝
以及他的天使；
还有记忆
最初的生命体验。

欢乐 痛苦
光明 黑暗
美



Portfolio

Logan Family Photographs

Dr. Oliver Tracy Logan and his wife Jennie, a nurse, were medical missionaries in China during the early twentieth century. They first arrived in 1897, settling the next year in Changde, Hunan, where they established and ran a hospital. Both served with the Red Cross in Vladivostok, Siberia, at the end of World War I. Back in Changde during the latter half of 1919, they battled a cholera epidemic before Dr. Logan was shot and killed by a mentally ill patient at the end of that year. Early in 1920, Jennie went to work at the hospital her brother, also a medical missionary, had founded in Zhejiang. She worked in the maternity ward and helped train nurses until 1938, when she returned to America. She died in 1961, aged 94.

The Logans had three children, all of whom were raised in China. The eldest, Elsa, became a teacher and missionary herself, working mostly in China, but also for five years in Korea, until she left Asia for good near the end of 1950. She then taught at colleges in Iowa and upstate New York until her retirement in the early 1970s. In 1979, after the normalization of relations between China and the United States, she heard from old friends and former students in China, who invited her to visit. Her first trip was in 1980, thirty years after she had left, and a second took place in 1985. She died in California in 1988, at age 90.

The poem on the last page of this issue was written by Elsa Logan when she was living in Shanghai and teaching at the Mary Farnham School in Nantao, part of the old city just south of the French Concession. She had moved there in 1936, but the school closed for the fall of 1937, after fighting between Chinese and Japanese forces had broken out in Shanghai. At the end of August 1937, while Elsa was away on summer vacation, Japanese warplanes bombed Nantao. She spent several months in Zhejiang before returning in late November 1937, not long after the Chinese forces had retreated.

***All the photographs that follow on pages 46 to 70 are from the
Special Collections at Yale Divinity School Library.
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Elsa Logan (center) with
two Chinese friends,
Changde, Hunan
ca. 1901-1905





Jennie Logan assisting
a Chinese physician,
Changde, Hunan
ca. 1900–1919





Hospital staff and volunteers with water distillation apparatus during cholera epidemic. A Chinese worker used two large woks to fashion the apparatus, in which 1.5 tons of sterile saline solution was made. (Jennie Logan is sixth from left; Dr. Logan is third from right). Changde, Hunan ca. 1912





Biplane being
transported by boat,
inland China
ca. 1915-1916





Irrigating rice fields:
the pedaling moved
water from one
field to another.
[Exact location
unknown.]
ca. 1900–1919





Huge raft in the
Yuan River for
transporting logs.
Families lived on such
rafts for weeks, with
their children, dogs,
and chickens.
Changde, Hunan
ca. 1900–1919





Teahouse open
to the street,
Changde, Hunan
ca. 1900–1919





Portrait of young child
and baby in infant chair,
Changde, Hunan
ca. 1900–1919



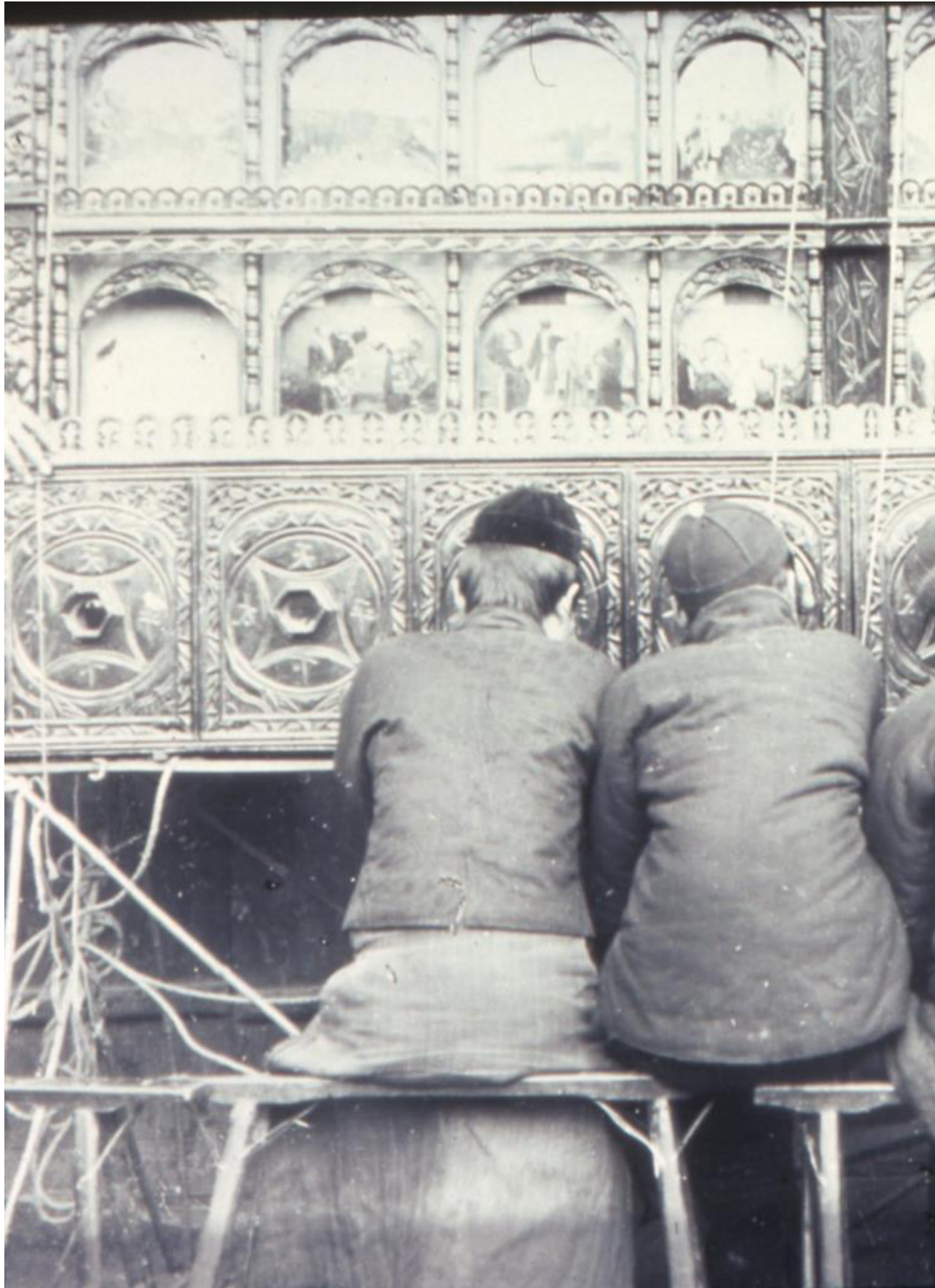


“Candy man” blowing
animals out of colored
molasses for children,
Changde, Hunan,
ca. 1900–1919





Close race between
two dragon boats
[probably Yuan River],
Changde, Hunan
ca. 1900–1919





Peep show,
Changde, Hunan
ca. 1900-1919





Man working as a
letter writer and
fortune teller,
with barber in
the background,
Shanghai
ca. 1900–1919



Elsa Logan in rice fields | China, ca. 1930–1950

Summer Evening from a Nantao Rooftop[†]

by Elsa Logan

August, 1938

Around us Nantao lies, a vast pool of darkness,
Unbroken save by an occasional furtive glimmer
And the one unwinking light in the fire tower.

A languid moon droops low in the haze over Pootung;
Over our heads stretches the gauzy scarf of the Milky Way;
High above the ashes of the afterglow
Hangs Venus, ablaze in the blue-black infinity.
From a lowering cloud-bank
Summer lightning flickers tawnily.
Below on the lawn, flitting their carefree way in and out of
the hedge,
Three fireflies throb through the soft darkness.

Upon the shores of Nantao's night
Beats the fierce surf of Shanghai's evening lights.
Big Ching's calm moon-face and the Race Course clock
Alone seem still; all else is motion:
The Park Hotel, unabashed, flashes its "Ve-tsing"* ad;
Little red and green curves
Chase each other around a steeple.
At the Great World corner, jittery green cigarettes
Jerk their endless way out, up, and over,
And back again into their carton.
From the region of the Whangpoo a battery of searchlights
Sends out nervous white fingers
Groping among the stars.

[†] From Nancy A. Logan, ed., *Dear Friends: Letters from Elsa Logan, Teacher and Missionary 1898-1988* (self-pub., MAAR Printing Service, 1989), 51. | * "Ve-tsing" = "Ve-Tsin" = MSG.