

# Brush Talks

Vol. 1 No. 2 Summer/Fall 2016

A Journal of China



# 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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Cover image: *Boy at Shanghai City God Temple* (上海城隍庙)

[photo © 2014 by Brian Kuhl]

*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 issue 2 of *Brush Talks*, what you might call our first themed issue — on the topic of China and America. We knew at the outset that we would devote entire issues to various themes from time to time and put out specific calls for submissions at such times. However, this issue came together organically through our general call for submissions.

This is not really surprising. China and the United States have had a long relationship going back centuries, encompassing such complex phenomena as trade, immigration, imperialism, world wars, the Cold War, and China's period of "reform and opening up" of the last thirty-five years or so. Within these larger circumstances and events, however, are always people living their lives, trying to make their way in the world. Such people are at the heart of this issue. One writer explores the origins of his family's immigration to America, another examines her experience of being adopted from China and raised in an American family, while a third looks at the role of language in her immigrant family. Our portfolio of photographs focuses on the world of recent Chinese immigrants to the United States, preserving in time one step in the journey to a new life in a new culture. Other pieces look in the opposite direction: Americans going to China. Author Michael Meyer discusses his years of living in a Beijing *hutong* and a small village in northeast China, while two of the poets featured in this issue depict scenes of China from their travels.

As we read through all the submissions and viewed the photographs we received, it was apparent that the work on the following pages belonged together. We owe a debt of gratitude to all our contributors, not only for their fine work but also for unwittingly helping us jump into the first of our themes to explore: China and America. Call it part one — to be continued.

Brian Kuhl

## Contributors

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**Monika John** is a writer, attorney, and world traveler living in Washington State. During a five-week solo journey through China, she visited sites sacred to Buddhism and Taoism on Tai Shan, Emei Shan, and Huang Shan as well as in Tibet. Her writings have appeared in numerous publications in the US, UK, Kenya, Hong Kong, and Canada.

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**Michael Meyer** is the author of three books about China, the latest forthcoming in 2017, and has written numerous articles for major publications. He is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. [*Please see page 33 for more details.*]

**J. R. Solonche** is the author of *Beautiful Day* (Deerbrook Editions), *Won't Be Long* (Deerbrook Editions), and *Heart's Content* (Five Oaks Press). He and his wife, the poet Joan I. Siegel, are authors of *Peach Girl: Poems for a Chinese Daughter* (Grayson Books). Their connection to China is their daughter, Emily Ni Tao, whom they adopted in 1995.



## Foreword and Afterward<sup>†</sup>

by H. C. Hsu ( 許翔程 )

At 17 my father left home. “17” meant it was November 1948. “Home” was Pingdu, Shandong. With hundreds of his classmates, who then joined thousands of students from elsewhere, over the course of a year and a thousand miles, they walked, took trains, and boarded ships from mainland China to an island in the South China Sea called Taiwan.

They thought they would return home — wherever home was — after a couple of months. A year or two, at most. When they, my father, crossed the threshold and stepped out the door, he imagined an adventure, a school field trip. “Bye, *ma*! Bye, *da*! See you in spring!” he waved nonchalantly. He didn’t even think he cast a glance back. He, one among eventually two million people, didn’t know this field trip would last forty years.

My father was born on July 4. When his ship, among hundreds of other ships, pulled into Wharf #18 at Keelung harbor, he saw a row of tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed Americans, standing on deck waiting to unload them. They were dressed in astonishingly white and crisp uniforms, white cup-shaped canvas caps with a black ribbon tied around the brim, black neckerchiefs crossed on the chest, pants flared at the bottom, black leather shoes buffed to a shining glare.

My father decided to quit school and join the Republic of China Navy.

One of his fleet’s first assignments was to receive a ship transfer from the United States at the San Francisco Navy Shipyard, then called Treasure Island Naval Station. He would be the first in my family to set foot on American soil.

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<sup>†</sup> This essay is the foreword to Hsu’s forthcoming novel *Metaphysics*.

Oh, yes, he changed his name from “Xu Jicheng” to “Xu Zhiqiang” — “strong-willed.” I find it interesting my father never celebrated his birthday according to the lunar calendar as is common, as my mother does hers, and ours. He stuck to the solar Gregorian calendar, established in Rome in the sixteenth century under Pope Gregory XIII so that all Christians can celebrate Easter on the same day.

It seems to be always about naming, renaming, founding, starting over.

Xu Jicheng, or Xu Zhiqiang, was not a Christian, but he kept a cross by his bed, and often prayed to Jesus. He died at 79, on Good Friday.

In the hospital room I ran my hand over his short, white prickly hair as I liked to do when I was little, and gazed at his face, unexpectedly small, withered, crossed with wrinkles as if caught in a net of time.

*(Sometimes when he's on the bus now and he sees an old man, in the seat in front of him, with the same kind of buzzed, white bristly hair, he still gets the same strong urge to reach out, and run his hand over it.)* Ravaged by sickness in his last years, he, I thought, could finally go now.

Things happen, but we rarely know what's happening when we're in the middle of them. We try to mark certain dates we think should be important — births, deaths, weddings, anniversaries. Countries do that, too. But often what's important happens in those grids on the calendar that don't have anything in them, and only much, much later — if ever — can we see their full significance, and reckon with all their consequences.

When I was eleven, my parents asked me if I wanted to move to America. I said, “Sure,” in truth without giving it much thought either way. When I boarded the plane, I didn't feel especially happy or sad. I often wonder how my life would have turned out had the coin landed the other way. It's not regret, but a thoughtfulness now about “why” and “so,” that's maybe balancing out a thoughtlessness then.

In the forty years he was in Taiwan, my father met my mother, married, had children (seven), and their children had children. He transferred to the Coast Guard, and would often be out at sea for months patrolling up and down the 100-mile-wide typhoon-infested “ditch,” as it was called, between China and Formosa. I often wondered what was going through his mind as he gazed out into the seemingly boundless and abyssal black sea on those turbulent nights. In some ways, just as a country’s time started, a man’s time stopped. Many people’s times stopped. Of course, a part of it continued to grow, change, wither, and die, but another part, somehow, disentangled itself, became buried underground, lay dormant, and waited.

For what?

I was looking for the word for this part. And then I found a word — “root.”

Someday I am going to write more about my father’s childhood and that arduous, inhuman one-year, thousand-mile journey from Pingdu to Keelung, to the final years of his life in Milpitas, California.

I can only take a slice, one slice, like a microtomy, and look at it under a microscope here. I want to know more about those forty years.

This book is that slice.

History books say, in August 1987, a supposedly watertight dam suddenly broke. Xu Zhiqiang, his wife, and their youngest son, who was then five years old, boarded an airplane, took a taxicab, and walked back, to Pingdu. His home was still there. He crossed the threshold. A very old woman was sitting on a chair inside. “*Ma*, I’m home,” he said, as if he just got home from school.

His mother was already 88 years old. She used to be an elementary schoolteacher. Hunched back, ashen hair tied into a bun, mere skin stretched over bones, the lines on her face forming the fraying net of time through which you couldn’t tell if she was squinting at something

ahead. He also found out his father was executed in the Cultural Revolution twenty years ago.

The next day she died. I remember firecrackers being lit outside, veiling the old dilapidated house in a shroud of white smoke.

Jicheng said goodbye to his mother at the funeral. He said, *Ma*, you can finally go now. He suddenly realized the reason he came back. He got to do what he wasn't able to do forty years ago, when he crossed that threshold, and stepped out the door, waving nonchalantly, without looking back once.

Time started again.

He could finally go now.

That was the last time Xu Zhiqiang went back home, to China. In 1992 he brought his entire family to the United States.

This time he didn't look back, either. ☯

**Before Convergence**  
by Allison Chen ( 陈卓婷 )

**L**anguage can unite a family, yet it is also possible to divide one, creating a line of separation that distances family members from one another. It is the separation of regions and histories before unification, like wading again in a stream, before it has converged into the waterfall.

Cantonese is the native tongue and home of my mother, but not of my father. Cantonese is the lather that bathed her and the harmony that soothed her as a child. Yet my father has rarely touched it.

Although all of us know Mandarin, when my maternal grandparents come to visit, my father accepts and understands the sudden space — the distance. No longer are we all shielded and held before the world in the refuge of a large umbrella. Instead, Mother's voice grows low, hearty, and relaxed — the melodies of Canton. It is strange; Mother is not an anxious person, yet her shift in tone is so utterly apparent, and all of us sense her minute relief — from what we do not know, as if she sighs from weight lifted off her back — a weight we did not know of.

Father does not catch the jokes of his in-laws, *waipo* and *waigong*. He does not understand what they mean.

Perhaps, Cantonese is, unintentionally, a way to remind all of us of where we stand — a reminder to my father of his own parents who have passed and can no longer share their own words of the Chaozhou dialect, *Chaozhouhua*, and a reminder to me and my brother that although we can understand everything, we must reply in other words, other sounds, other voices — Mandarin.

It is not malicious, however. Cantonese reminds Mother of her past — her maiden home — and reminds Father that he, too, has his own

dialect, even though he does not have parents to speak it with anymore.  
Dialects may separate us, but they remind every one of us of our  
different roots, even if we share the same bowls of rice on the same  
wooden table every night. ☯

## Before Convergence (*translated by the author*)

### 合流之前

作者：陈卓婷

语言能团结一个家庭，但有时也可以悄悄分割一个家庭，造成一条无形的隔离线。不同语言源自不同区域有不同历史，像汇成合流形成瀑布之前的支流。

粤语是我妈妈的母语和声音记忆的港湾。妈妈从小讲粤语，粤语是乡音，一切是那么自然和谐又亲切。但我爸爸很少讲。

虽然我们一家人都讲普通话，当我外公外婆来看我们，我爸爸承认和懂得这突然的空间变化和无形的距离。那时我们不再只讲普通话，这个统一的语言一直连接着我们，像大伞一样保护凝聚着我们。外公外婆讲粤语，妈妈的语音变轻了，亲切和放松，哼起了广东小调。很奇怪，妈妈不是一个很急躁的人，但她声音的变化是那么的明显。我们都明显感到她的变化，像重担突然卸下，虽然我们没看到她的肩膀的重负。

爸爸听不懂外婆和外公的笑话。他不懂他们的意思。

可能，粤语无形中提醒了各自的情况。无意中，提醒着爸爸自己的父母已经去世了，他不能再跟爷爷奶奶说潮州话。提醒着我和弟弟虽然我们都听得懂粤语，我们只能用别的词，别的声音，别的语言普通话来回答对话。

但是，不是有意或有恶意，粤语让妈妈轻松自如，使想起她的童年和家乡；也提醒着爸爸也有自己的方言，虽然他已经不能跟他父母讲了。方言可能分割我们，但也提醒我们有不同的根，虽然我们每个晚上都在同一个木桌上吃着同样的米饭。☺





**Mountain Pine**  
**(Huangshan)**  
by Monika John

Seeds take root in granite fissures  
growing into one-sided pines.

Branches reach wide over chasms below  
gathering mist and drops of dew.

Clouds are chasing across the sky  
evoking dark eerie specters.

Mists are raising a gossamer wall  
from valleys towards the sky.

Massive mountains drown  
in milk white ocean of clouds.

Artists copy with black ink on silk  
the Buddha's living formations.



## Chinese and American

by Tianli Kilpatrick

People have told me that children abandoned and raised in orphanages are permanently broken. They say such children don't form close connections with caregivers as infants, so they will never be able to form close connections with anyone else: foster or adoptive family or friends. They are a social psychologist's nightmare. According to John Bowlby's attachment theory, early experiences in childhood have an important influence on development and maturity. He identifies four distinguishing characteristics of attachment, none of which describe most adoptees. They are not raised in a safe haven, even though many orphanages are as heavily guarded as prisons. They don't have one person that's a secure base and they can't uphold proximity maintenance when there are ten children to one caregiver. They don't experience separation distress in the absence of the attachment figure because they've learned not to create lasting ties with any one place or person. However, I don't think it's fair to label a child broken by circumstances outside their control. So do I think I am broken because my parents adopted me from Hefei, China just after my first birthday? No.

\* \* \* \*

Twenty years later, I returned. After flying over by myself, I met Lin, my childhood best friend, in Shanghai. Our parents had traveled with the same adoption agency in 1995. History made us friends, and we tried to keep it that way. Therefore, when she asked me to visit over winter break, I obliged. Lin spent the year in China as part of a study abroad program. Together, we planned to spend two weeks exploring Shanghai, Hefei, and Beijing. The purpose of visiting Hefei was for the orphanage, and that type of visit needed a guide. Georgiana picked us up

at the Hefei airport shortly after midnight. Shorter than both of us, and louder, she almost solely carried the conversation the whole way from the airport to the hotel.

Unlike the big cities of Beijing and Shanghai, which never sleep, Hefei was ghostly silent. The fog dulled the surroundings to a canvas of grays. Our car was the only one on the roads — roads too wide and too empty — an odd image compared to the busy streets of Shanghai, where we slept to the background conversations of car horns. As we got into the city, I noticed the bases of all the trees were painted white. I asked Georgiana about this and she said it was limewater to protect them from pests burrowing under the bark in winter. The buildings, both the ones we drove by and those further away, stood like silent sentries — dark, sans advertisements, empty. Most of the buildings were left partially developed, perhaps an echo of how Hefei used to be rural. A light flickered here and there in the apartment buildings near our hotel, the only little signs of the myriad of people who would swarm the streets the following morning.

Only five years older than us, Georgiana was also an English major, and interested in connecting adoptees to their heritage. Like most Asian guides, she was overly animated, a polar contrast to the silent, observant atmosphere Lin and I preferred. Perhaps her excitement was for our benefit, more part of her job than how she existed normally. The Hefei Children's Welfare Institute is the largest orphanage in Anhui Province. "It's the best because it has the most children!" Georgiana said, her enthusiasm and tone almost glorifying the institution. There are two ways to interpret that statement: 1. All these children are here and have another chance at a family, and 2. *All these children.*

\* \* \* \*

Lin has always been shy and I've rarely seen her stand up for herself. Perhaps this is her personality, or perhaps I have not given her

the chance. Because I love her, I've always felt like it's my responsibility to protect her. And yet maybe I've missed the point completely. Lin's mastered the Chinese flat affect where crying or showing any form of elevated emotion is frowned upon. Simply, sympathy is a weakness. Amy Tan calls this "Chinese invisible strength." But I'm not so sure there's much strength in this. The goal is to appear like we don't care.

\* \* \* \*

As an orphanage kid, I needed a home. Yet growing up labeled an adoptee taught me it's better to not be tied down to one place or one person. Change is the only reliable constant. I am afraid of becoming too dependent on one place or one person because I know it won't last.

I returned to China because Lin asked, because she wanted to go back to the orphanage but wouldn't go without me. My heritage is Chinese but China is not home. In America, I'm seen as Chinese. Yet when I entered China, I was roughly directed to the customs line labeled "alien." I walked up to the desk and handed over my American passport, very aware of the plethora of police officers and cameras. The officer handed it back to me less than a minute later without looking up, saying something in Mandarin.

"I'm sorry, what?" I asked. He repeated it.

"I don't speak Chinese," I stuttered, feeling very singled out.

"Write name in Chinese," he said, pointing to my passport.

"I don't know how," I said.

He took my passport, again not looking at me, stamped it, and handed it to me. This is routine for him. For me, this was the first reminder that I didn't belong, that legally, this was no longer my home.

\* \* \* \*

People say that you cannot quantify love, but actually I can, as can any adoptee who knows their price of adoption. When a parent tells you how much they paid for you, of course not in those words, it can

subtly change the relationship. I know the price because I found it in a folder of adoption documents; not every adoptee has access to this knowledge. Even though I didn't see this folder until I was in high school, my parents made sure I knew I was adopted at a very young age. The books like *A Mother for Choco* by Keiko Kasza and videos like *Big Bird in China* that they provided were merely entertainment.

I think I only learned what being adopted actually meant when kids at school asked why I didn't look like my parents. However, since my parents set the foundation early, I was comfortable telling people they were my real parents. But there was still a difference in saying these words and believing them. I am the child my parents were handed by chance, by fate, or whatever you want to call it. I am also the child they paid for, without having met me, with only a postage stamp-sized photograph to base their final signatures on. I am the one thing that's made in China you can't return.

\* \* \* \*

Approaching the orphanage, we could see tall silver utilitarian buildings over the top of the spiked gate. Three armed guards came out to our car, talked with Georgiana for a moment, and then the gate was pulled aside and we were allowed to enter. This site was not the original orphanage where Lin and I lived; these buildings were newer, larger, more expensive, and better protected. Officers patrolled inside as well. However, Zhang Yuxia is still the director. The old orphanage, where Lin and I lived, is now a nursing home. This is culturally rare to China, as the elderly generally are taken care of by their families. But the buildings of the old orphanage still stand, as does the representative statue of the orphanage: a young woman with three children.

In 2007, I had returned to China with my parents. We visited the original orphanage site. I remember the faded pink walls that made a square around an open courtyard. Laundry lines hung across connecting

the walls. It wasn't so heavily guarded then, and so the doors of the nurseries were propped open. I remember feeling like I couldn't show how being here affected me. I wanted to cry but choked back tears because my parents were watching. The caregivers picked up the kids and presented them to us like trophies, but their demeanor was tired. Even in 2007, no one wanted this. Returning eight years later, I thought I knew what I was walking into. I thought I knew what to expect more than Lin did, and yet it was still hard seeing it again.

The assistant director met us outside the shiny silver doors of the main building. She welcomed us, shook our hands, and spoke eagerly in Mandarin while Georgiana translated. Just inside the doors glared a huge electric sign. Clashing against the blue background flashed the red Chinese characters and corresponding English letters of our Chinese names given to us when we lived there, the names they have on file. The display was extravagant, not just in color, but it covered most of the wall facing the entryway. The assistant director wanted pictures of us to add to our files, so we stood under our respective names. It was strange seeing those words that were both my name and not my name. It put us under a spotlight, literally, and reminded us that we used to be someone else. I kept thinking: *this is not me*.

In contrast to the fancy office building where we were welcomed, the hallways of the orphanage were rough and dark. Floors were designated by age, with nurseries, playrooms, and conference rooms alternating down the hall. However, despite the dim lighting, the walls were decorated with drawings by the kids and decals of Winnie-the-Pooh characters. In the nurseries, cribs lined up like parking spaces, leaving just enough room for caregivers to maneuver through. We passed rooms with multicolored matted floors where toddlers were left on their own because the two or three caregivers only had attention for one child at a time.

When Lin and I lived at the orphanage, the majority of the children were girls due to the one-child policy. But now, the majority are boys with disabilities. Tears put pressure in the back of my eyes for these kids who did not ask for this life. We saw an albino boy, a girl with no eyes, a little boy on his back drinking from a bottle held between his feet because he didn't have arms. In one playroom we entered, I helped a girl with bowed knees walk across the room. Out of nowhere, I felt guilty for being adopted. I didn't have to grow up here. Other than dumb luck, what right did I have to be on the other side of the glass? A little boy grabbed my hand and smiled up at me. I couldn't do anything to help him. I looked away, unable to meet his brown eyes, afraid I wasn't responding in a correct way. I never cried. I didn't want to feel any of this.

\* \* \* \*

When we were in Shanghai, we went to the Shanghai Museum in the middle of People's Square. This museum houses more than 120,000 cultural relics from the Neolithic period to the Qing dynasty. We were on the third floor looking at paintings when a security guard approached us dressed in pressed pants, a dark green jacket, and a cap; his right hand rested on the baton tied to his hip. He said something in Chinese, and I looked at Lin. She responded. They talked for a few minutes, and he crossed his arms. I stayed suspicious but unhelpful. At one point, Lin gestured to me and the guard looked up; I smiled, completely ignorant of their conversation. I felt like I should understand, that the language should sound more familiar, and when it didn't, I felt awkward.

After what was probably only fifteen minutes, the guard nodded to us and walked off. I looked at Lin hoping she would explain what just happened, but she turned away to keep walking through the museum. I grabbed her jacket sleeve, swung myself in front of her. She explained



that he had asked if we were sisters, and she said no, telling him that we were students visiting our home country. I stopped listening after she said we weren't sisters. As we kept walking, I wondered if she remembered pretending we were sisters when we were younger because no one could prove us wrong. And here we had a chance to play this out for real, but perhaps that meant more to me.

\* \* \* \*

Georgiana and Lin got along very well from the beginning. They exchanged Chinese phrases, laughed about cultural differences that I didn't understand and they didn't bother to explain. Lin isn't fluent in Mandarin, but she understands enough to carry on a conversation. Yet I stand somewhere in the middle, not between Georgiana and Lin but between Chinese and American. I look Chinese but I don't speak the language, leading a lot of people to ask if I was Korean. Lin told me someday she might move back to China. I am the opposite; I have no interest in living in China. I'm a better ghost here than a girl. But I am Chinese; I shouldn't feel this way. I feel like I owe China something, even though as an adoptee, legally I've severed ties with China. I have a dual identity, one by heritage and the other by situation, but in order to be both, I must prove them separately. And being in China, I've never felt more out of place. It's weird to even say that because I don't know how to explain it.

I've always been jealous of Lin's ability to portray carelessness. She's always been more stereotypically Asian than me: she's better at math, she's skinny with long thin hair, she's a fangirl for K-pop, and hangs out with Asian cliques. In contrast, I needed a math tutor, and my body is a combination of muscle from softball and horseback riding and the bag of Fritos I can't reject. I don't have many Asian friends, partly due to different interests, but also because my grades never qualified me.

However, the greatest separation I create from the internal conflict

with my mother. Even today, my mother reminds me that Lin is an inch and a half taller, that Lin took two Advanced Placement classes and I only took one, that Lin was out running track while I sat on the couch reading a book. It took my mother two years to finally stop fighting the fact I am an English major. Even with all her love, I grew up wondering if she ever regretted adopting me.

However, the main difference between us is that Lin is largely career driven. Part of her interest to study in China was to experience her birth culture, but it was also to further her career interests. She's an economics major, and Shanghai is a huge financial hub. She's always put grades and schoolwork first, never really having a hobby outside of school. She's always looking to the better opportunity, the next promotion. In high school she didn't study to learn, she studied for the A. For me, my friends and horseback riding were always more important than schoolwork. I love learning, but I dislike school, and I don't think Lin differentiates those. Despite sharing the history of adoption, growing up as best friends, and now spending this time alone together in China, these differences still separate us.

\* \* \* \*

The orphanage visit didn't seem to affect Lin at all, or if it did she didn't tell me. Lin likes little kids even less than I do, so although seeing these kids was sad, to her it was just the norm. And this norm is desensitization. It's a rejection of compassion because we are now in a place where can do this.

By 2015, the statistics are better. There are about four to six children per caregiver now. After the kids turn three, they're moved in with foster families on the orphanage grounds. These families are paid by the government to foster, and often volunteer once their own children have grown up and moved on. The goal is to give these children a "family" experience. There are sometimes six kids per apartment,

ranging from four-year-olds to teenagers. We visited one apartment where the bedrooms looked like college dorm rooms. There were pictures of other children on the walls who had previously lived here: the families and caregivers never forgot these children. Everything for the children is provided here including clothes and food. The only time they leave the orphanage grounds is for school or when they're adopted.

Lin and I are the success stories; we are the lucky ones. We used to be these kids, and while the orphanage will always be part of our lives, it is not us anymore. And yet the staff talked to us like we'd come home and we were just getting a tour of the renovations. But I agree with Lin: what's done is done. I cannot go back.

I don't want to always be defined as the girl who is adopted. I don't like when my parents say, *you could just walk away from us because no one knows we're together*. I didn't want my mother to tell me I needed to emphasize being adopted on my college applications because it would make me unique. I didn't want to be told the same thing by a professor when I applied to graduate school. I am tired of the attention I get for something I couldn't control.

\* \* \* \*

*Who are your real parents?* A group of kids in my third grade class teased me. Dakota jumped off the base of the silver slide at me; we fell and I landed on top of her. She bit me, leaving teeth marks just below my left collarbone. We pushed away from each other but I went after her, leaving my teeth marks on her right shoulder. *Why didn't your real parents want you?* Dakota ran to her mother, a teacher at the school, and received a hug. I ran to the principal, as kids are told to do when there's trouble, and received a three-day suspension. Yes, I am a hand-me-down; no, you don't get to call me out on it.

*Are you going to be sent back home?* At fifth grade recess, Madison continued her mantra of adoption jokes. I walked past her letting her

voice become background music. Lin was a few steps behind me and I heard the jokes turn on her. I don't remember what was said, but I remember kicking Madison and almost breaking her finger. I was given an in-school suspension for a week; meanwhile, Madison showed everyone her silver splint, spinning her version that I bullied her.

Kids are mean, and unless prompted, they don't change. I had to stop being suspended; I had to stop the awful phone calls home because I refused to tell my parents first; I had to change the way I reacted. So I got sarcastic, which made me a bitch but kept me out of the principal's office.

\* \* \* \*

Kids aren't the only ones who can be insensitive. In my college town's public library, an older resident came up to me and asked about my major. I told him I was an English major.

"Aren't most Orientals like yourselves doctors?" he said.

A younger me would have punched him in the face. And despite that option being tempting, instead I laughed. I let him talk himself further into a hole, watching as he became more and more uncomfortable. Finally I told him I was adopted. "Oh, that makes sense," he said. It would have been easier on him had he just asked me outright.

Adults can be as curious as kids. And if it's genuine curiosity, then I'll answer their questions honestly. However, for those who are already judgmental, those who don't care about my answers, I have more fun being sarcastic and unhelpful. But at times even sarcasm can be unhelpful. A close Caucasian family friend once told me, "It's a shame you don't speak Chinese." It wasn't my place to tell him I didn't care about his opinion.

\* \* \* \*

After the tour, we ate lunch with the assistant director and some of the staff. Plates were served family-style on a large glass lazy Susan. People reached across rather than spinning it around, and everyone conversed in Mandarin, including Lin and me sporadically. The conversation was too fast for Lin to keep up with, so mainly we busied ourselves with eating and listening. There was one dish that tasted like tofu, but chewier. We only ate a few pieces from it. After, we asked Georgiana what it was. We had eaten tongue.

After lunch, we moved to a long wooden table in a conference room. Lin and I sat facing Georgiana and the assistant director. Over tea, she gave both of us presents: a black wire artwork of the Welcoming Tree from the Yellow Mountains. We were also able to look at our paperwork they had on file. The records were from 1995, so there was nothing I did not already know since I have an identical file at home. The pages were just thicker than rice paper, so we handled them carefully. There were adoption forms in Mandarin and English with official seals from the Chinese and American governments, and reports by U.S. Child Protective Services that included their pictures of my home in Massachusetts. Lin's file contained similar reports. The assistant director asked us to e-mail her photographs from our childhood to add to our files. Their request sounded more like a courtesy than actual interest, but I obliged anyway.

\* \* \* \*

Locked in a box at home, I have my own copies of these files along with my original Chinese passport and American citizenship papers. Also in that lockbox are papers detailing the adoption process: forms and receipts between my parents, the adoption agency, and the orphanage. I haven't looked through all of it yet. Partly because I tell myself I don't need to know the politics of my adoption; I know the basic information and for now, that's enough. I know my birthdate is

correct. I know where I was abandoned and what day I showed up at the orphanage. Considering the minimal records kept in 1994, I know a lot already. I've emotionally distanced myself from this part of my life so I don't know how I would feel about reopening those files. On the other hand, I'm also afraid that I won't feel anything. I still don't understand how the Chinese part of me has to be unemotional while the American part of me wants to explore and test my vulnerabilities.

\* \* \* \*

Back at the hotel, the last person to bed boiled water and made tea for both of us. I tried to talk to Lin about the orphanage, about her study abroad, about what we would do the following day. Often I only received short answers; she preferred to spend the time distracted by her phone. Since the Chinese government has banned Google and Facebook, whenever I wanted to check my e-mail or Facebook page, I had to alternate between temporary VPNs. Each time they expired I became more frustrated with being technologically incompetent and how connected Lin was with the rest of the world but not me.

My bed was closer to the window so I could see out the break in the curtains. The crescent moon's light was choked by pollution and I couldn't hear the few cars passing below. Yet this quiet was comfortable; it wasn't telling me: *you don't belong*. ☹

**Of Wei Qingzhi**  
by J. R. Solonche

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Of Wei Qingzhi  
almost nothing

is known.  
He planted

a thousand  
chrysanthemums.

But that alone  
is everything.





## Interview

Michael Meyer

*Michael Meyer went to China in 1995 as one of its first Peace Corps volunteers. As the author of the acclaimed The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed, he received a Whiting Award for nonfiction and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His second book, In Manchuria: A Village Called Wasteland and the Transformation of Rural China, won a Lowell Thomas Award for Best Travel Book from the Society of American Travel Writers. Meyer's stories have appeared in the New York Times, Time, Smithsonian, Sports Illustrated, Slate, the Financial Times, Foreign Policy, Architectural Record, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune, as well as on National Public Radio's This American Life. He is a member of the National Committee on United States-China Relations' Public Intellectuals Program, a recipient of a 2017 National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar fellowship, and an Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, where he teaches nonfiction writing. The final book in his China trilogy, Into the Middle Country: Learning China from the Ground Up, will be published by Bloomsbury in 2017.*

**BT:** To get readers up to date, do you have any news about your old neighborhood and neighbors in Beijing? When was the last time you went back, and what was the state of things?

**MM:** I visited “my” *hutong* in March, 2015, and had an overpriced coffee at Soloist, a cafe that looked imported from Brooklyn. The lane, Yangmeizhu Xiejie, still stands, and is home to a few new shops and a

pilot program to drop a modular home within the existing walls of a courtyard, leaving the residents in place.

**BT:** And how about an update of *Wasteland*? What's changed since you left? Have San Jiu and Auntie Yi held out still, not accepting Eastern Fortune's offer of a new apartment? (And did Auntie Yi's "guerrilla poppies" come up the spring after the book ended?)

**MM:** Unlike my *hutong* home, which has long been slated for destruction, the farmhouse where I lived in *Wasteland* was knocked down, and its plot planted with organic rice. San Jiu and Auntie Yi remain in their homes, however, and yes, her poppies grew back in a riot of color.

**BT:** What I find interesting is that your earlier book, *The Last Days of Old Beijing*, and your more recent one, *In Manchuria*, are about the polar opposites of urban and rural life in China, yet certain themes are shared. One that struck me was how in both cases the basic dilemma was leaving the familiar, communal, less modern living conditions in which one has a bit more responsibility for one's life versus moving to a newer, cleaner, more modern, and more "convenient" area which is less familiar. As you started the second book, did you see this connection right away or did it just become apparent organically as the project progressed?

**MM:** Early in the research for *In Manchuria*, as the village began remaking itself, I felt a terrible, sinking realization that I was researching the same book, only this time set on a farm. In the end, of course, that turned out to be a fascinating parallel to *The Last Days of Old Beijing*. If nothing else, it's proof to my writing students that immersive reporting

means the story is outside of the writer's hands. This is why for my third, final book of this China trilogy — *Into the Middle Country: Learning China from the Ground Up* — I wrote a memoir about what has already taken place, rather than hoping lightning strikes a third time, and I luck into a captivating story and cast of characters in, say, a coastal China fishing village.

**BT:** Was it easier or harder to do research and interview people for *In Manchuria* given that so many of those involved are your wife's family members?

**MM:** It was much, much harder to write about people I knew. When you're following strangers, you're interacting with them in passing, or in scheduled bursts of interviews. But when it's family in a hamlet you're omnipresent — you don't schedule a talk any more than you schedule a walk together. What this means is that the stories they have told you are retold, or amended, to make the teller sound better. I found it strangely difficult to interrupt, or correct, family, the way I do strangers. And anyone who has spent time in China knows that being a stranger can make you a confessor; people will open up or spill secrets in ways family members will not.

**BT:** That book really deals with the future of Chinese agriculture, describing at length Eastern Fortune Rice in Wasteland and giving a glimpse of Cargill in Anhui Province. Do you see this large-scale farming as a positive trend? What would its effect on food quality and safety be? On the one hand, it's hard to monitor and enforce laws on thousands of individual farmers. On the other hand, do you think it will be easier when huge companies are involved, especially if the Chinese government strongly supports them or even has connections to them?

**MM:** That's a good point, and one I made in the book — that from the government's point of view, a shift to agribusiness management means a move toward safety, via standardization of soil monitoring, fertilizer/herbicides/pesticides, antibiotics, and harvesting/storage. China's reporting has become more transparent — after years of denials or obfuscations — about soil contamination, water pollution, and over-application of chemicals. It's certainly a lot easier to test, say, rice quality when it comes from a single, 1,000-hectare farm, instead of analyzing samples of a similar yield that has been produced by 500 growers.

Now, how food safety is monitored, and whether it's truly independent, free from, say, the “largesse” of a corporation (compared to a gift from those 500 growers) is a separate matter. China already faces questions, internally, on how “organic” crops are certified (sometimes the soil is tested, but not the water, which the United States requires). I'd bet that most consumers do not know what standards a producer has to meet to have a product certified as organic, let alone as a “Green Food.”

**BT:** In both books, you deal with twentieth century history as well as get to know some senior citizens where you lived. In some cases, their life stories would not be known without your writing; in others, you're making little-known stories available to a wider audience. I'm thinking, for example, of Hal Leith, the former OSS operative in Manchuria. His story that you relate is so gripping, and while reading it I couldn't help feeling that you were able to talk with him just in time, since he passed away only a couple of years later. And other main characters in both books were elderly when you got to know them. In some ways, your books are like oral history projects. What's that like for you, knowing you're recording someone's story for posterity?

**MM:** It drives me to find these people, quickly. I constantly remind myself that what seems like long-ago history is actually quite near. (Anne Frank, for example, would be 87 this year, younger than my grandmother.) I'm glad you liked reading Hal's story; when I was in residence at the New York Public Library in 2010, I learned that in 1945 he had parachuted into Shenyang to liberate Allied prisoners of war. I made phone calls and sent posted letters that afternoon, and learned he had recently survived a stroke. Two months later, I was in his Golden, Colorado home, interviewing him. For all of the people who appear in these books, there are dozens more I wish I could have reached before they passed away.

**BT:** Did you use any pseudonyms or think twice about what you included for fear of people reading about themselves when the Chinese versions of your books came out? For one thing, there are just people's reputations and the light they may be portrayed in, but there's also the gossip of a small village or neighborhood. For instance, there's a passing reference to someone in *Wasteland* whose alleged marital problems are noted by Auntie Yi. How do you deal with things like that as a writer who is immersed in a community, as you were while writing both books?

**MM:** I used pseudonyms in the English editions to help Western readers keep straight who is on the page: Miss Zhu, Recycler Wang, the Widow, Auntie Yi. In the Chinese editions, both Taiwan and Mainland, every single character wanted to be identified by their actual name — and have their portrait included on the page. There hasn't been any blowback, but I'm not surprised, since I fact-check all of their quotes before publication, and then the translator — my best graduate student at

the University of Hong Kong's journalism school — does the same for the Chinese editions.

**BT:** In an interview at the USC U.S.–China Institute, you said, “When you’re a writer in China, you always hear, ‘five thousand years of history . . .’” Since China is indeed so huge and diverse, and its history so long, what books would you suggest for beginning writers to sort of “ground” themselves in some fundamental themes? Can you recommend two or three books that you’ve found useful as sources for general background?

**MM:** A book that Peace Corps volunteers found helpful is Bill Holm’s *Coming Home Crazy*, which is a humorous book of great affection. I think approaching the country open to its humor is key — journalism provides the facts, often in the same supercilious voice as the “five thousand years” guy. A writer I returned to, and wrote about, in my new book is Lin Yutang. *My Country and My People* remains relevant, and sounds like it was recently published, not like a book from eighty years ago. He has a sense of humor, as does Lao She, of course, as in his satire *Cat Country*. My favorite contemporary Chinese novel is Liu Heng’s *Black Snow*, translated by Howard Goldblatt. In fact, maybe that’s the answer: read a stack of contemporary Chinese writers that he has translated. And of course when it comes to Western writers I have to plug my friends: Peter Hessler, Leslie Chang, Ian Johnson, and Rob Schmitz.

**BT:** You mentioned in a separate lecture at the same institute that with *The Last Days of Old Beijing* you set out to write one book and ended up writing a different one. How do you know as a writer when to follow that other path and when to commit to making that shift? I mean, you

could have plowed ahead with a book on historic architecture and preservation. What told you to focus more on people's lives and the community?

**MM:** Their lives were far more interesting than any old building. It also struck me how misinformed I was about the *hutong*, and if I, a well-meaning researcher who spent a year at Tsinghua University learning to read Chinese using planning and architectural histories, could get this story wrong from the outset, how could I expect an official, or developer, to understand what really was being torn down when a dense neighborhood was erased?

**BT:** The kind of nonfiction you write has narrative interspersed with expository passages on certain topics or themes. How do you choose which of the latter to write about and how to blend narrative and exposition? Some writers, like John McPhee and Simon Winchester, have emphasized the need for settling on a clear structure before they write. Do you use the same strategy or keep it more open-ended, allowing the book to sort of go where it takes you?

**MM:** The material shapes the structure, and in both books the story ended up coalescing around time. The school year, the seasons, and the eras of rebuilding in *Last Days*, and the man-made, ephemeral history of the northeast contrasted with the natural, ongoing cycle of a farm in *Manchuria*. The next book, *Into the Middle Country* is organized along a continuum that begins with being a novice, and, by story's end, achieving a level of expertise.

**BT:** In your book *In Manchuria*, Auntie Yi asks, "How do you know when a place has developed just enough?" As a writer, how do you know when your book has developed just enough?

**MM:** When the publisher demands I turn it in. I was a year late on *Last Days*, because I wanted to keep researching, and watch how the story would end. But then the Widow moved out of our courtyard, and I realized that was the ending — she was the embodiment of our community, and then she was gone. For *Manchuria*, I wanted to see what a full year of agribusiness-run farming would look like. But then my wife called to tell me I was going to be a father, and I knew, later, that our story had come full-circle, not unlike the northeast's recent history, and a growing season, itself. The twists and turns only made sense in the end.

**BT:** What are some things you've learned over the years not to do when writing about China (whether cultural or in terms of reporting, researching, or writing)?

**MM:** Don't assume anything, especially what people are thinking, or what their motivations might be. Not everyone is a "bad guy," nor is everyone an angel.

Don't predict the future — "X will be the event that will change China," for example. I've lived through many of these, from Taiwan's elections to the Falun Gong protest to the anti-NATO protests to SARS to the Olympics. The human stories within these events are far more interesting than their potential to transform society.

Don't parachute in, grab some quotes, and leave, thinking you've got the story. Linger. If you can't linger, return several times over a long period. Watch the story develop. Do a stacks or morgue crawl to learn if this event or story is new, or the progression of a much longer tale that's been unfolding. This is how I learned, for example, that people protested *chai*<sup>†</sup> in my neighborhood a century before, when the city

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<sup>†</sup> *Chai* (拆) means "to tear down, dismantle."



wall was pierced to make portals for trolleys and cars. And that attempts to modernize Chinese agriculture began in the era of John Lossing Buck, who founded China's first agricultural economics department. His wife, Pearl, accompanied him on his groundbreaking field research trips in rural Anhui, and wrote a novel set there, titled *The Good Earth*, which some Mainland academics now think should be considered Chinese literature, as native writers at the time mainly focused on urban life.

**BT:** You have said, “You know it’s time to write a book when the book you want to read doesn’t exist.” So what did you want to read that led to your next book, *Into the Middle Country*?

**MM:** I wanted to read a book about what it feels like to arrive in China knowing nothing about the place, including the language, the history, and expectations. I lived in London at the beginning of 2016, and being in a new place reminded me of that exciting feeling — after all, how many chances do we get in our lifetime to learn a culture from scratch? I wrote *Into the Middle Country: Learning China from the Ground Up* in a South Kensington flat a few blocks away from the residential hotel where I wrote *The Last Days of Old Beijing*. I wish my muse didn’t have such expensive residential taste.

**BT:** What do you miss most about China, now that you’re no longer living there?

**MM:** The feeling of walking out the front door and knowing that if I didn’t know what to write about, someone would soon walk up and tell me. Every day was a vision quest. ☺



## Portfolio

Louis Chan

*Louis Chan was born in 1981 in New York City, where he still works and lives. He received his MFA in Studio Art from Hunter College. He recently exhibited at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center in the Tribeca neighborhood of New York and at Murray State University's Curris Center Gallery. He had a solo show at the University of Tennessee's Downtown Gallery and has also shown at Arario Gallery in Manhattan.*

*Chan began photography through analog techniques and processes and now primarily works with digital photography. He had the pleasure of studying photography with the late American artist Roy DeCarava. He is interested in portraying socioeconomic issues through his art.*

*Besides producing his own work, Chan is also the photographer and photo editor for Borough of Manhattan Community College as well as an adjunct professor in Digital Photography at Bergen Community College in New Jersey. His advertorial work can be seen on subway cars and platforms on a biannual basis.*

*Chan was a coauthor of Peripheral Visions: Italian Photography in Context, 1950s–Present, a book published in conjunction with an exhibition curated by graduate students under the direction of Professor Maria Antonella Pelizzari. Artforum selected it as one of the best 2012 exhibitions.*

*The following pages present photographs from his series My Home.*

*My Home* is an ongoing series that Louis Chan began in 2011 as way of exploring the Chinese immigrant experience and lifestyle in New York City. Chan's primary interest lies in the way Chinese people assimilate or resist assimilation to American culture, and how they are able to negotiate these dual Chinese and American identities. His large-scale photographs capture small, cramped, and crowded New York City apartments filled with decorative items that Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans treasure and display, representing Chinese culture, identity, and psyche in a very personal way. *My Home* expresses Chan's wish to preserve a record of the objects and lives contained in these interior spaces before they become displaced. Although the photographs capture the homes of friends, family, and strangers alike — sharing close similarities in the appropriation of posters, photographs, and ornaments as décor — they reflect Chan's own personal memories and experiences, and he sees the documented collections of objects as an extension of his own relationship with his Chinese American identity. *My Home* attempts to create accurate reproductions of the spaces at hand — oftentimes captured before the homes can be tidied or organized. As a result, the photographs are sharp and full-frontal so that the objects can fill up as much of the frame as possible. Chan wants the viewer to feel like they are inside the space, overwhelmed by the image. Chan ultimately views *My Home* as a contemporary marker for Chinese Americans to reflect back on the hopes, dreams, and sacrifices made for them by older generations in order for their own children to have a chance at a better life in America.























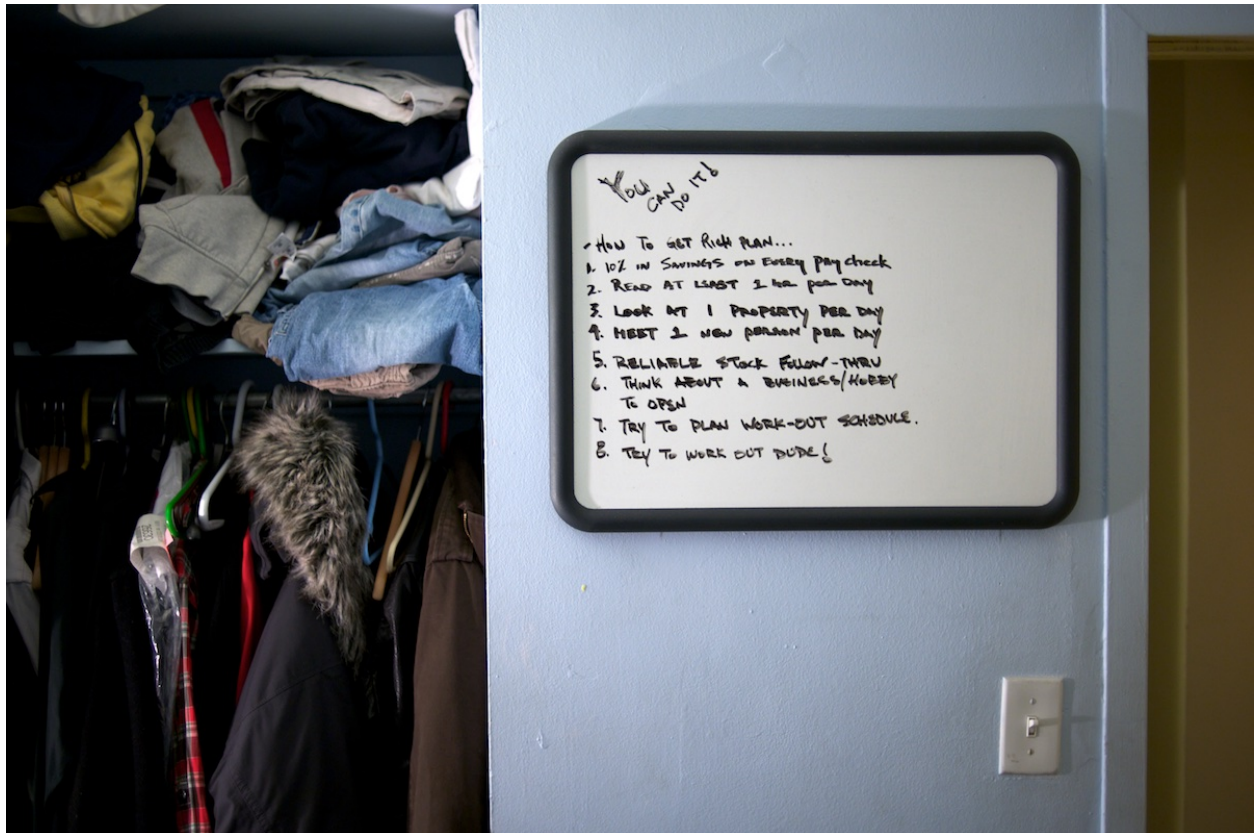














**Last Day**  
by Brandyn Johnson

I ding through the swinging door of my favorite  
noodle shop, approaching the kitchen window  
to order in my best Mandarin. The cook smiles to me,

his tank-top eclipsed with work, his white hat screwed  
on like a saltshaker top, glasses fogged with broth steam.  
From my plastic pink stool, I lean on my elbows to watch.

First, he folds a globe of dough, rolling it round and tight.  
Then he pulls it thin across his entire wingspan,  
folds it, pulls it again and again until he's holding golden

harp strings. He releases them into the pot, crashes the cymbal  
lid, grabs an egg from a plastic bag that hangs above the stove.  
His two-year-old son mouses out of the kitchen, then out of the shop

with his orange toy gun. I turn around to find my bowl of knotted  
noodles steaming on the glass top table, crowned with a fried egg,  
freckled with pepper flakes, green onions, clovers of cilantro.

With a little plastic spoon, I measure hot sauce as if I'm panning  
for gold and paint the egg before stirring it into the wide white bowl.  
I pay my six yuan through the kitchen window, trying to explain

that I'll be going back to America tomorrow. He smiles, repeating, *meiguo*.  
I thank him and bow before waving goodbye to him, to all of it,  
the motorbike raucous of the street current washes me away.