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.

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Cover image: © Mike Mei

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 two of *Brush Talks*. Late this year, I traveled to China for the first time since this journal was founded. One reason was to visit Gulangyu, an island off the coast of Xiamen, in Fujian, which was newly christened a UNESCO World Heritage Site this past summer. This status derives in large part from its history as a meeting place of East and West, a history which lives on in Gulangyu's unique architecture that blends elements of both cultures. This reminded me of one of the goals I had for founding this journal—to create a meeting place where voices from both East and West could bring their unique perspectives to the singular topic of China, thus creating a rich amalgam of ideas.

To that end, this issue includes work from two individuals who are not Chinese and from one born and raised in China who now resides in the U.S. We begin with a travel essay by Jacob Rawson about his journey to Mount Heng in Shanxi and the people he met along the way. In the interview and portfolio section, calligrapher and artist Mike Mei shares his thoughts on his craft, along with some representative pieces of his art. And interspersed throughout the issue are photographs that Mahesh Ramchandaani took in several cities on a trip to China in 2014.

Another reason I went to China this year was to visit friends, who have enriched my life beyond measure. Friendship is a blessing, of course, for all of us, in any culture, and Chinese literature has no shortage of poems that celebrate its joys. The poem I have chosen to close this issue with, "Farewell to a Friend" by Li Bo, is dedicated to the memory of Brian James Harvill (1966–2017). Though it is about seeing a friend off on a long journey, the imagery has a finality to it that is, lamentably, applicable.

Brian Kuhl

Contributors

Li Bo (李白 , sometimes romanized as Li Bai) lived from 701 to 762, during the Tang dynasty. He is widely considered among China's best poets.

Mike Mei (梅宇國) is an artist, calligrapher, and president of the Chinese American Fine Arts Society (CAFAS) in Boston. Originally from China, he now resides in Massachusetts. His website is www.wahar-art.com.

Mahesh Ramchandaani is a freelance writer for television based in Mumbai, India, who has written mostly comedy, as well as a script for a Bollywood feature film. He is also passionate about photography, and took the photos in this issue on a trip to China in 2014. He became curious about China after being bombarded with Chinese products, which are everywhere. His curiosity grew after reading about China's galloping economy. As India and China are neighbors, it has been interesting to see a neighbor grow and change at great speed. His website is www.longnosepictures.com.

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.

Beijing, 2014
Photo by Mahesh Ramchandani

Cave Dwellers of the North

by Jacob Rawson

You ask why I perch among green mountains
I chuckle, give no reply, my heart at ease
Peach blossoms and trickling streams have departed
Here in this no-man's world
— Li Bo (8th century)

A wind-carved dust-scape has the peculiar power to wake a dormant imagination. The sun is almost blotted out; only a dirty piece of pepperoni outlines its once prominent place. Empty field terraces, the only reminder that there may have once been a slab of green, are the same hue as vacant ravines and a blank sky. It is only the imagination that can dress up this dusty void, planting fields of corn, trickling creeks down the crevices, and clearing out a deep blueberry sky.

Before the spring sun turns bald hills green, the great Shanxi dust bowl swirls to life. It chokes farmers and covers homes and livestock in a thick layer of grit. The dust flies down the Yellow River basin and across the Yellow Sea to the Korean peninsula, where bundled-up Seoulites curse "that damned Chinese yellow sand."

I tramp across gritty farming paths in a late, dust-bowl April and question again the giddy indulgences that led me to travel so far for this dismal locale. These colorless ravines are the roots of the northernmost peak sacred to the Daoists, Mount Heng. Its summit is somewhere to the south, obscured by the soot clouds. This topography is also the inspiration for a pop ballad that has recently infected local radio waves. This I sing out loud to spite the frigid gusts.

My home, it sits on a high loess slope
The great winds, they blow past
The northwesterlies and the southeasterlies
They all blow my song, blow my song.

My research during the months leading up to my visit to the Shanxi plains turned up references to a novel type of local housing. *The soft loess plains of northern China offer ideal habitat for cave dwellers, and tens of millions of people in the region now live in man-made caves*. It was quotes like this from old tomes as dusty as my current surroundings that had compelled me to go sleuthing around the foothills of Mount Heng. I have never seen cave dwellings, and as I weave a path between the main highway and side roads my mood seesaws between the bliss of new adventures and the phlegmy regret of gulping down lungfuls of sooty truck exhaust.

Soon they appear, next to a grove of little squat pines and naked poplars, five arched doorways and two vaulted windows carved into a loess cliff platform. Inside the carved openings is nothing but coal-black darkness. As I approach from a path up the cliff, the silence is momentarily broken by a sound like a prop plane starting up, and then another, which I take to be two large partridges spooked by my arrival. The Shanxi locals call these birds "stone chickens" because of their gray color, and on a closer inspection of the site I am convinced they are the only inhabitants of the old caves.

The doorways are reinforced with concrete and vertical rows of brick that seem to penetrate the hillside and protrude from the top of the hill as chimneys. Inside each cave are the remains of bedding—mattress springs and steel bed frames—and a corner kitchen with coal stove and table. A pile of garbage, mostly plastic wrappers, looks newly formed. Shards of clay pottery lie strewn about the top of

the cliff, and a wily alder sapling sticks its roots right through the roof of one of the caves, dangling over a crumbling kitchen. The whole thing has the aura of recent exodus.

I leave the site and find a village a few hundred paces further up the farm path where twenty houses of mud and straw-packed bricks lie in a dry ravine lined on two sides by derelict cliff dwellings. Ten farmers gather by the road in pre-planting leisure, but when I approach they stop talking and stare at me nervously. The previous inhabitants of the caves had all departed ten years ago to find city work, they tell me, and the twenty-foot-tall mud-brick structure nearby was a fire signal tower used in the Qing dynasty. This is all the information the timid group cares to surrender. They stare at me as I continue down toward the highway until I disappear behind a crumbling mud wall.

The mud bluffs are layered in folds out to the horizon so dense that in places it seems that I could almost leap over a ten-foot crevasse to the other side. I have sufficient doubt, however, not only in my leaping ability, but that my travel insurance will cover bluff-dust asphyxiation, and so I elect to scamper carefully down each divide and then back up in a process that leaves me dustier than the bluffs themselves and certainly looking more miserable.

It is during my fourth scramble up a flaky wall that I see a cave dwelling that stands out from the rest. The main door is recessed into a slick new brick wall, and a power line runs up from the highway electrical grid into a steel box next to the cave's only window. I scamper up a trail toward the cave and a man appears wearing a green Mao-style beret, a blue work shirt, and dull brown slacks. His face is old and withered, and I cannot tell if the black rash around his left eye is a result of sun or old age. I wave at him and he laughs a full-throated chuckle that ends as a hacking cough. He points me up the trail.

Zhang Dehua is 78 years old and has lived in this cave his whole life. "My ancestors carved it out by hand five hundred years ago." Zhang smacks his lips together as he talks, and I struggle to understand him as much from the thick local dialect as his toothless mumbling. The spoken language of Shanxi Province, called Jin, has the soft trailing intonation of a nanny's prayer. Linguists remain in fierce debate as to whether the Jin brand of speech belongs to the group of Northern Mandarin dialects, or whether it should occupy its own category altogether. Memorizing tables of glottal stops and retroflexes in a university classroom is, however, an altogether different challenge from shopping for fruit in a rural Shanxi marketplace and not understanding basic numbers. To my ears, the word for "two" sounds the same as "six," and the day before I had nearly huffed away from a melon vendor whom I had taken as a thief for his high price quotes.

Zhang swings the wooden door open and pulls me into a ten-foot-wide domed bedroom. The large bed next to the wood lattice window is a raised platform over an empty space where a coal fire can warm the bed during the winter. On the opposite wall there are two posters, one of a young Mao Zedong shouting "Long live the people!" and another of the Daoist god of prosperity. Under the posters there is a new color television set with stickers that indicate it was a gift from the Datong Respectful Cabbie Team. Zhang leads me to a dark room deeper into the hillside.

"This is where they hid the women." I ask why the women needed to be hidden. "For the invasions, of course!" he chuckles. A five-hundred-year-old cave in this part of China would have been under constant threat of attack by northern tribes. Scanning the sparse condition of the cave, it is apparent there are no women currently in hiding. I ask Zhang if he had been married. "Marriage!" And he laughs again, but this time the chuckle ends in a sad sigh. "I'm far too poor."

Outside in the dusty front yard two more small caves are set into the hillside. These have no windows or doors, only open passageways that lead back ten feet and are filled with grain stores and scrap plywood. “The old house!” Zhang yells this time. “Now it’s storage.” He hobbles over to the other side of his yard to show off a wire-frame structure propped up with a pile of discarded construction bricks. It is his new satellite dish that can pull in four television channels on a good clear day. He proudly poses in front of it with a wide toothy grin. We walk down to the highway together, where I help haul two vats of water back up the hill, then thank him and wave goodbye.

In the village below Zhang’s cave, donkey carts pull farmers up dirt trails between mud-brick houses. Most of the fifty-some families had moved out of their ancestral caves, but the newer freestanding dwellings copied the arched doors and windows of the ancient grottos, and with their loess mud-brick construction, they look no different than the originals. I had seen the same arched design used in the poured concrete houses in the well-to-do neighborhoods of Shanxi’s cities, an indication that this unique architectural trait will survive the region’s impending modernization efforts.

The village residents eye me with cautious suspicion as I try to move discreetly down dirt paths past octogenarian women washing potatoes in plastic tubs and mules resting in the shade of stone walls. A middle-aged woman in a blue head wrap and a surgeon’s mask for the dust steps out from a mule-sized snack booth to speak to me in an anxious hushed voice, and I realize that I have unwittingly stepped into her family courtyard, which is indistinguishable from the main path.

“Are you a journalist?”

I instinctively shake my head. The seemingly benign question can be a harsh accusation in China’s impoverished rural areas where local governments have little tolerance for unregistered foreign travelers and

even less for unaccompanied journalists. "If you are, you should go check in at the cadres' office," is what I think she said, although through the thick surgeon's mask and equally dense Jin accent she could as well have been inviting me to tea with the cadres. The possibility of beginning my visit to the area with police detainment and interrogation is less favorable than the benefits of lingering, so I slink back to the highway and hitch to the nearest town.

I later confide my story in an elderly restaurateur who knows of the village. From him I learn that the woman had actually been asking for help. The cadres of Donggetuopu village are planning to demolish the older homes, he tells me, and the woman was worried she would not be compensated as the law requires. She had hoped that I would, in my supposed power as a foreign journalist, expose the village's plight and save her home.

* * * *

The town of Hunyuan squats in the shadow of Mount Heng, its old tile rooftops stretching almost to the base of the sacred peak's rippled northern face. It is a town that seems to have fallen off the timeline of forced progress the way I sometimes wished I could: Its music shops still sell cassette tapes, and in the narrow boulevards schoolgirls dance in lines outside cosmetic stores to scratchy disco music. The owner of the guesthouse I wander into is busy tinkering with the disassembled guts of a videodisc player. He waves a hand clasping a Phillips head screwdriver and apologizes for the simple accommodations.

The night market is the only excitement in town. This I gather from a combination of the guesthouse owner's grumblings and the animated phone conversation of a prim young stationery shop attendant whose gossiping friend takes precedence over my transaction for three

pens and a notepad. As the sun goes down and the food stalls rise up along Hunyuan's only wide avenue, I claim a plastic stool to watch a line of thirteen teenage salon stylists running down the sidewalk dodging motor scooters and waving a red canvas flag that promotes their new "layered dome" haircuts.

The first vendors ready for business are three Turkish-looking boys with curly dark hair spilling out from white Muslim skullcaps. They are Uighurs, part of the largest ethnic group from China's arid northwest. Uighur migrant vendors are a common site in small towns and cities across China, and are always the best bet for a tasty mutton kebab. I order a handful of kebabs and try to start a conversation, asking how long they had been out east, but they shrug and laugh and continue slapping each other and joking in the Uighur language. They have not been in town long enough to learn Chinese, and it feels comforting to know that I am not the only visitor to Hunyuan struggling with the local brand of speech.

A motorcycle carrying two denim-wrapped delivery boys pulls up next to me. They ask why I am not eating *kuailei*.

"What a pity it would be to come all this way and not try our specialty." They motion to the *kuailei* vendor. The trouble is, I had seen families hover over bowls of the congealed potato-and-flour meal and had been avoiding it since I arrived in town. Now with the boys eagerly standing over me I have little choice, and at the first bite, which reaffirms for me the reason Shanxi is not counted in the distinguished line of Chinese culinary traditions, I battle the grimace now forming on my lips and force it into a grin. For extra effect I force a thumbs-up and a "Well, that certainly is special!" which earns me a hearty back slap courtesy of the boys and another bottle of pale Yanjing lager courtesy of the vendor. The boys keep me in conversation as I labor through the rest of the dry, starchy bowl.

"Why did you come here?"

"To climb Mount Heng."

"Where to next?"

"Mount Wutai, I think."

"And after that?"

"I'm not sure." A gust of wind bats the Uighur kebab stand umbrella into the air and sends it soaring through the market. A vendor boy chases after it into the street, and his skull cap flies off and tumbles into traffic. The night market bathes in a soft white haze under the crescent moon, the crest of Mount Heng barely visible in the starry glow. I finish the last swig of lager, and when I return to my lodgings the innkeeper has now turned his attentions to a malfunctioning power supply and a quickly shrinking pile of Zhongnanhai cigarettes. Under the chipped-paint ceiling fan I slip into dusty and vacuous dreams.

* * * *

On a soft, soggy morning I hitch to the base of the mountain on the back of a motorcycle with a friendly driver wrapped in a brown leather jacket and wearing a red ski cap. He brags about the safety of his bike while swerving through sharp turns and weaving between coal trucks and passenger buses on the slick highway.

"You can really take in the scenery this way!" he yells above the din of the motor. "Can't see anything from inside a car!" I cautiously grip the contours of his jacket as he throttles through a blind turn, hoping again that the bike's narrow tires will somehow find grip on the wet asphalt. We wind up the bottom of a steep ravine past Hunyuan Reservoir and a dripping lumberyard. The gray walls of the canyon close around the top and the wind whips through, my bare fingers raw and numb. We pull into a wide and vacant parking lot and he stops to

let me off. He grins and offers a hearty salute, then pulls the ski cap down around his forehead and speeds away.

I stand staring up at the cliffs that rise a thousand feet through the drizzle into a gray haze before disappearing into a flurry of snow. The trail is marked by a granite staircase with vertical lines chiseled into the surface to help footing. Up that trail, and somewhere in the mysterious white veil lie the splendors of Mount Heng.

The mountain's status derives from China's oldest creation story, which was again narrated to me by a tipsy cell phone salesman in the Hunyuan marketplace the night before:

> *At time's beginning there was nothing but formless chaos. From this chaos the polar forces of yin and yang found balance, and from the primordial egg emerged Pangu, the first being. Pangu went to work chiseling out the cosmos, first separating the heaven and earth with a mighty swing of his mallet. For many thousands of years he stood between heaven and earth and pushed them apart. Each day he toiled the sky became ten feet higher, the earth ten feet wider, and Pangu himself ten feet taller.*
>
> *After eighteen thousand years of labor he lay to rest in the center of his creation. His breath became the wind and his voice became thunder. His left eye became the sun and his right eye the moon. His blood ran as the rivers and his beard became the Milky Way. His bones formed the minerals and stones, his fur became the forests, and his sweat fell as rain. The fleas that crawled in his fur, blown in the wind, became the myriad creatures that walk about the cosmos. His head became the great peak of the east, his belly the peak of the center, his left arm the peak of the south, his feet the peak of the west, and his right arm Mount Heng, the peak of the north.*

The mystery surrounding Mount Heng begins with simple geography. It is the northern Daoist peak, farther north than every historical Chinese capital and even the inner defenses of the Great Wall. During the tenth century all of northern China, including Mount Heng, fell to the Khitan people, who took an area stretching from Central Asia to the Yellow Sea under dynastic rule for two centuries. After Khitan rule came subsequent conquests by the Jurchen, Mongols, and Tartars, leaving the mountain inaccessible to the Chinese for many centuries. Emperors from the Song court wishing to complete the sacred Daoist circuit to procure heaven's graces took to a practice of "worshiping from afar," in which they erected a proxy shrine at the northern limits of their realm where they could continue the due sacrifices from hundreds of miles away. Mount Heng's eventual return to Chinese hands did not completely cast off its wild reputation, and for many centuries more it was considered the boundary of the realm of barbarians.

The savage reputation surrounding the mountain held until the early twentieth century when the local farmers experienced a crippling drought. The farmers reasoned that foreign missionaries possessed the sorcery of ancient Daoists who could keep away the rain clouds at will. In an agricultural movement solely in the interest of crops and harvest, the farmers ran through towns slaughtering all missionaries on sight.

It is this riotous history of Mount Heng that has helped maintain its marginal place in Chinese history. While the classical poems written on each of the other sacred peaks fill volumes, there are only a small handful of verses that mention the northern mountain. While modern travelers' guidebooks to China, both domestic and foreign, lavish praise on the sacred pilgrimage sites, most do not include Mount Heng even as a footnote. While Chinese school children can list off, with

encyclopedic accuracy, the official points of interest at the Daoist heights, most cannot place Mount Heng on a map.

An hour after starting up the stone steps, rain turns to sleet and sleet turns to snow. This is not the soft winter-wonderland stuff, but little icy specks that sting the skin like wasps. I curse myself for not bringing gloves despite the many warnings of a late winter. The curses come out in Chinese and trail off in English with a prosodic meter that makes the murderous farmers of a century ago seem like the more civilized inhabitants of the mountain.

Three hundred feet above, a temple structure hangs impossibly off a cracked ledge on a vertical face of granite. Directly above, the cliff top closes in around it, where four tenuous pines send out timid roots to test the expanse. Between the pines and temple is a twenty-foot-tall inscription in the stone surface: *Amidst the Clouds, Unrivaled Footprints*.

I trudge up the steep staircase that hugs the cliff wall and when I reach the top and stroll out on the ancient platform to inspect the snowy void below, a Daoist priest donning a blue cotton tunic and Ringo mop-top emerges from behind a thick curtain. He leads me back under the cliff to the upper temple and pulls open a red lattice door. This is the main chamber of the Bedroom Palace, a temple used by emperors as a place to rest while making sacrifices to the northern peak since the fifth century. Their sacrifice of choice was a black ox, as black is the color associated with the North and Mount Heng.

Inside the small candlelit room is an image of the immortal of the northern peak carved into a wooden block and shrouded by a glass screen. The block is surrounded by carvings of the immortal's four yellow-robed attendants. The priest holds out three sticks of incense and motions me toward a lit candle on the altar. I hold the sticks downward into the flame, and as they begin to slowly give off fragrant smoke, I hold them out front and kowtow three times to the immortal, then stick

them upright into the sandy pit. The priest coaxes me to kneel on a raised yellow cushion and again kowtow three times. The prayer completed, he holds out a tin filled with bamboo strips and I pick one out at random. "Sixty-eight," he reads, and leads me to a glass case, dusts off an old book, and begins flipping through the pages. "From the Ming dynasty," he affirms, as he carefully picks through the faded, taped-up pages. He stops on a page labeled *Sixty-Eight* in old-hand calligraphy. "Two 'ups!' This is a good fortune indeed!" And he begins reading the ancient text, providing his own commentary after each line. "*In days of late the rotting log sprouts new branches*. Old things become new! *The steps of a distant journey are unhindered*. No obstacles in your life! *Ailments can be flattened, betrothal finds virtue*. You'll be healthy and have a strong family!"

He leads me to a Ming dynasty brass carving of a lion and recites in rhymed verse, "Rub, rub the lion's head, and in all you do, there will be no sorrow." I touch the brass lion's head, and the priest pulls the entire carving down on a hinge to reveal a small chamber filled with folded bills. I take the hint and reach into my pocket to pull out a fifty-yuan note. The priest blocks my hand and pulls up the notes inside to show me: all hundreds. "Red is better," he recites again, referring to the color of the hundred-yuan note. I reluctantly exchange the fifty for a hundred, wondering how many good fortunes had been doled out right before a heavy-handed donation request.

He senses my unease and leads me around to the side of the temple where a four-foot gap between the temple wall and the stone cliff is occupied by a smaller altar and another image of the Mount Heng immortal. Next to this, on the cliff wall, are two characters carved into the stone: *Cave Mouth*. The priest points to the dark, two-foot opening below it. "Legend says this cave stretches to Hebei." I ask if he had ever sought to explore the passage that would have to be, by the legend's

reckoning, more than thirty miles long. “No one has ever been down there.” I peer into the hole that is likely a short natural gutter, but whose mystery has managed to excite the imagination of Daoists for many generations.

I begin to leave, but the priest invites me into his small, two-room hut. I duck under the low awning past his coal stove and vegetable pantry and into his sleeping quarters, where he is stir-frying a simple dish of celery and tofu. He serves me tea while tending the wok.

“Daoism has a five-thousand-year history, unlike Buddhism, which only goes back two thousand years,” he boasts. “It’s our national faith.” Not convinced I have picked up on the subtleties of his thesis, he grabs the notepad from my pocket and writes in careful characters: *Daoism is the national faith of China. It was born and cultivated on this soil, and has a five-thousand-year history*.

My host had driven a cab in Hunyuan before entering the priesthood, and had lived alone in the Bedroom Palace for more than a decade. I ask about the cigarette box and lighter on the bed.

“The Zhengyi sect,” he rattles off like it was a question he had fielded many times. “It’s not so bad. We can drink, smoke, and marry.” He turns back to prodding the frothing wok with his wooden chopsticks. “But it is quite lonely up here.”

Further up the trail I pass three miserable men from the southwest city of Chongqing wearing thick, designer-brand leather jackets, their necks sagging under the weight of blocky Nikon zoom lenses. They ask if I know the quickest way down the mountain.

“This place has nothing on the mountains back home,” one mutters.

“And it shouldn’t be snowing this time of year!” groans another.

At an upper temple complex, the trail is blocked by a metal gate with a faded sign: TO PROTECT THE FOREST AND PREVENT FIRES, ENTRY IS

STRICTLY PROHIBITED. The elderly caretaker on duty reaffirms the closure.

"The wind and snow are too strong today. Can't let you up the summit. Orders from above!" I slouch behind an enclosed pavilion out of the wind and snack on roasted soybeans. Inside the pavilion, three young men from Hunyuan puzzle over an ancient inscription on a Qing dynasty stone slab. The four-character inscription reads: *Transform—Droop—Anxious—Longtime*. They call the caretaker over to interpret, but receive no solution to the puzzle. "What do I know? I can barely read."

In the cliff face thirty feet above the temple, a wooden statue of the Immortal of Protecting Mountains peers out of a small cave, furled eyes mocking me. I am overcome by a perverse determination to reach the summit, as if it were somatic necessity.

I pull the caretaker aside and plead. I've come from far away to climb this peak. "Can't let anyone up the trail. Orders from above." He repeats his earlier admonition, and pulls out an empty cigarette carton. "Although in this cold, a smoke would be nice." I admit that I did not have cigarettes to offer, and he grins. "Money works, too." I stuff a folded fifty-yuan note in the breast pocket of his blue Mount Heng Park Management coat. The bribe secured, he motions toward the eight-foot-high locked gate. "The key is with my supervisor. You'll have to climb over."

Avoiding the rusted barbed wire perimeter, I shimmy over the high metal wall and continue up the narrowing trail. I cross the main ridge of the summit to its unprotected face and the gusts grow to gale force, shards of ice pelting me sideways. The flurry blows me off my feet and onto a snow-cushioned meadow. I climb the final two-hundred paces on hands and knees, the hood of my coat pulled so tight around my face that I can only see the stone step immediately below me. Crawling,

panting, and shivering, I make careful and steady progress until a stone slab appears out of the white cloud. Its red-etched characters are covered in ice: MOUNT HENG MAIN SUMMIT.

I lie down behind the slab and use it to shield me from the icy gusts. I am numb and humble in the great white void, wrapped in the immortal's cold embrace. ☯

Shanghai, 2014
Photo by Mahesh Ramchandani

Shanghai, 2014
Photo by Mahesh Ramchandani

Beijing, 2014
Photo by Mahesh Ramchandani

Interview and Portfolio†

Mike Mei (梅宇國)

Mike Mei (梅宇國) is a celebrated calligrapher and artist, as well as the president of the Chinese American Fine Arts Society (CAFAS) in Boston. He is the recipient of many prestigious awards and the winner of many international competitions. He was invited by Raymond Flynn, then mayor of Boston, to write a tablet of calligraphy displayed at the gate to Chinatown. To celebrate the new millennium, Mei was asked to write 2000 different styles of the Chinese character 寿 , meaning "longevity." This was framed and then carved in marble and displayed in the city park in Taishan, China.

Mei teaches calligraphy at Brandeis University and the University of Massachusetts. He has given courses and lectures at Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Wellesley College, the Worcester Art Museum, Northeastern University, the Chinese American Fine Arts Society, the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association, and the Peabody Essex Museum, among others. He also has given lectures at many universities in China. His art, including the pieces Dragon, The Blue Waves Are Ripping, *and* Quiet to See All, *has been collected by the Worcester Art Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum. He is the author of several books, including* Three Steps to Master the Clerical Script *and* Mike Mei's Calligraphy, *which was published in 2008 by the prestigious Chinese publisher Rong Bao Zhai.*

BT: Where were you born? Did you grow up there or somewhere else? When did you come to the U.S.?

MM: I was born in Taishan, Guangdong Province, China. I came to the U.S. in 1985 when I was thirty.

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† The interview was conducted with questions sent in English, which were answered by Mei in Chinese. Translation of the questions into Chinese and answers into English was done by Yang Zhengxin.

BT: What is your educational background? Did you study at university? If so, where and what was your major?

MM: After I graduated from high school, I had two years of training at a normal university. My major was English.

BT: At what age did you begin to seriously study and practice calligraphy?

MM: At about seven or eight years old I became interested in calligraphy and began to practice.

BT: Who influenced you in your art and calligraphy? Did you study with anyone who helped shape your direction as an artist?

MM: My father encouraged me to imitate the *xiaokai* [a type of calligraphy] of Zhao Mengfu. I self-studied most of the time.

BT: Can you describe your learning process a bit more? If you are self-taught, how did you go about learning calligraphy? Did you seek guidance from others at various points in time, did you mostly copy the masters, did you learn the styles from reading books, etc.? And did you learn the five styles in any particular order one by one, or a little of each at the same time?

MM: If my calligraphy art is successful, as I taught myself, it means that my learning is smooth and easy, or my way to learn calligraphy is efficient, even special. For example, the way that I use for *zhongfeng*, the most critical method of stroke writing, is special because of my unique learning, gesturing, mastering, and understanding of it. I think once you master the gesturing of *zhongfeng*, other methods like "eight ways for Chinese character *yong*" will be very easy to handle. Therefore, I think the most efficient way of learning is

following the evolution and development of calligraphy, that is to say, first learn *zhuan* style, and then *li*, *kai*, and the last *xing* and *cao*; imitate the ancient masters well, and then you can find your own style. This is my way of learning calligraphy. It's inevitable to learn from the ancient masters and borrow their techniques; however, as a form of art making and creation, we should adopt their techniques and experience with our own interpretation, not simply repeat what they had. This is the way we should advocate, and only in this way people of today can express themselves and the technique and essence could be developed.

BT: Is there a particular style of calligraphy/writing you are most drawn to? And is there a certain historical period of art and writing that you like best? If so, why?

MM: People say that my clerical writing is the best among the five styles, but I can write all of them. Different strokes for different folks.

BT: What themes does your work deal with?

MM: I include various themes, for example as little as one word such as "dragon," or as many as over two thousand variations of the word *shou* [longevity], or the *Heart Sutra* [a Buddhist text], or my own poems, among others.

BT: If you have done most of your work while living in the U.S., how do you think this has influenced your development and style, compared to if you had lived your whole life in China?

MM: If I had lived all my life in China, I probably would have become famous and also have a good development in my writing. However, I might also have

become fickle, or less solid in the foundation of skills, as the environment is about seeking quick success and instant benefits. I felt this way from the writing meeting with some calligraphers (some of whom are famous in the province) a couple of years ago when I was giving an exhibition and speeches in China.

BT: What impacts do you think that today's increasing technology has had or is having on traditional arts like painting and calligraphy?

MM: Art and all kinds of technology mutually influence each other, and have mutual absorption and adaptation; therefore, it adapts to the aesthetic needs of the times and development. Art is the most sensitive and leading element among all those which influence and push the development of society. However, calligraphy is unique: it is a way and a technique to write Chinese characters, so you can only change the "technique of writing," you can add people's feelings in the new era by changing the "technique of writing." Therefore, the new calligraphic art of today, which is different from the ancients and others from the same time, and reflects the spirit of our times, is the new technique of writing.

BT: In the 1980s and 1990s, the phenomenon of "modern calligraphy" (现代书法) arose. How do you define it and what is your opinion of it? What do you see as its influence on traditional calligraphy? What is the relationship between the two?

MM: "Modern calligraphy" seems to be different from the concept of "calligraphy." It contains a lot of writing styles and concepts beside the traditional brush writing; for example, writing looks like painting, painting looks like writing, English script is written in *kai* style. They all have different functions for different purposes, and won't be developed if they only fulfill a

certain function, especially the “English names in calligraphy strokes,” which is unrelated to art, as it is focused on the application of strokes to English letters.

BT: You are also the president of the Chinese American Fine Arts Society (CAFAS). What is the Society’s mission or purpose?

MM: I founded CAFAS twenty years ago. It has about a hundred members, including calligraphers, Chinese painting painters, oil painters, poets, photographers, collectors, and amateurs. We hold activities once a month, like galleries; exhibitions from time to time; and classes of photography, calligraphy, Chinese painting, and other subjects. We also invite domestic and foreign artists for exhibitions and exchanges.

BT: When is the next exhibition at CAFAS and what is it about?

MM: [In September] we had an exhibition for a Hong Kong painter, Chengzu Rong, [and] a photography exhibition in November. And my gallery of painting and calligraphy will be next April.

BT: Do you see that the new generation of young people is interested much in calligraphy? What indicates to you that they are or are not?

MM: I found some. Some children have great interest in calligraphy and Chinese painting. It’s necessary to foster the sense of art and aesthetics when educating the young generation. I think that only parents with this idea and practice make their children smarter. In order to have more children be interested in calligraphy, parents should create a learning environment for them, coupled with the appropriate teaching method of teachers, so that their

interest could extend and develop, and more and more people participate in calligraphy and benefit from it.

BT: Many people like Chinese calligraphy and find it beautiful. What advice (in general) would you give someone who wants to learn it? And what would you advise Westerners who are interested in learning it but have no background in the Chinese language or culture?

MM: I have a few foreign students who had no knowledge of Chinese, but wrote *A Thousand Words*, *Heart Sutra*, and other works. I wrote a book [*Three Steps to Master the Clerical Script*] specially designed for those who do not have a Chinese background. It's not necessary to know Chinese characters when learning calligraphy. ☯

采访：梅宇國

BT: 你在哪里出生？你在出生地还是其他地方长大？你什么时候来的美国？

MM: 中国广东台山。在哪里长大。1985 来 USA，30 岁。

BT: 你的教育背景如何？是否念过大学？学习什么专业？

MM: 高中毕业，两年师范大学进修。学英文。

BT: 你几岁开始学习和练习书法？

MM: 7，8 岁时已开始写，对书法感兴趣。

BT: 你的艺术和书法之路是否受到其他人的影响（比如当代的大师或者历史名人）？在成为艺术家的路上是否有人教授和指引你？

MM: 小时侯小楷临赵孟頫，得父亲鼓励。全属自学成材。

BT: 可以具体谈谈你的书法学习经历吗？你是如何自学的？比如遇到问题向人请教，还是主要靠临摹大师，或者是从书本上学到不同的字体风格？你是逐个攻破书法五体，还是五体同时学习？

MM: 假如说我的书法艺术是成功的话，我又是无师自通的，则说明我的学书法之路是较顺畅，或学书法的办法是好的，甚或可以说是作为一种较特别的学习书法的范式，比如我对书法最重要笔法 -- 中锋用笔的学习、掌握和活用或理解的深度，也许是较典型的。我认为＂中锋用笔＂吃透了，其他的笔法如什么 “永字八法” 等都可迎刃而解。所以，我觉得顺着书法发展的路子学习，是最容易获得成功的，也就是说，先写好篆书，

再学棣书，然后楷书，以后才行草，是一路走下来，先做古人，然后才自己。这就是我学书的方法和总诘。向古人学习是一定的，借鉴古人大家的技法也是一定的，但作为艺术创作，活用其技法、经验，而不是再重复其面目，才是我们应该提倡的，才会产生今人的面目，其古人技法经验才得到发展。

BT: 你有最喜欢的书体吗？是否尤其偏爱哪一个时期的书法艺术？为什么？

MM: 他们说我最好是棣书，但我书法五体都可以。所以不同书体都有赞赏的观众。

BT: 你的书法创作一般是什么主题？

MM: 书法主题各各我都涉及，少如一龙字，多如二千个寿字大碑，心经，自作诗词等等。

BT: 你的大部分作品是在美国生活期间完成的，你觉得这对你的发展和书法风格有什么影响吗，如果你一直在中国生活又会有什么区别？

MM: 假如我没来美而一直在中国，也许我也成名，书法也发展。但可能受急功近利的气氛影响，而变得浮躁，或说基础没这么牢靠。去年或往年回国内展览演讲，与书法家们（有些省里很有名气）笔汇，便很有这种感觉。

BT: 你认为现在日益更新的科技对传统绘画和书法产生了什么样的影响，或者将会产生什么样的影响？

MM: 艺术与各种技术一样，都是互相影响，相互吸收变通，从而使之适应时代审美需求而发展。而所有影响社会进步的元素，其中艺术类是最敏

感的，也是最前沿的。但书法却比较独特，她是一门书写汉字的方法、技法，你只能在 “ 写的技法 ” 上变化，只能通过 “ 技法 ” 注入今人的情感，所以与古人、甚至与他人不同的、反映现代精神的书法艺术 ----- 所谓有时代感的艺术，就是 “ 新的书写技法 ”。

BT: 二十世纪八十到九十年代，现代书法兴起。你如何定义和看待现代书法？你认为它对传统书法有什么影响？二者有什么联系？

MM: “ 现代书法 ” 似乎是一种有异于 “ 书法 ” 的概括。它包罗很多与用毛笔蘸墨除传统书法以外的林林总总，如 -- 挥字似画、写画似字、楷书英文字等等，它们的目的功用都不同，且以拥有某一天地而自足，由其是在美国发展的所谓 “ 书法笔划英文名 ”，可说是与艺术无关的，因为它们强调的是 “ 笔法在英文字母里的功用 ”。

BT: 你是纽英伦艺术学会（CAFAS）的会长，学会有什么宗旨和作用？

MM: CAFAS 是我一手一脚成立并发展至现在 20 年，约一百会员，有书法家，国画家，油画家，诗人，摄影家，收藏家及爱好者组成。一个月聚会一次。学会有画廊，不定期举办展览，开办摄影，书法国画等班。也邀请国内外艺术家来交流展览。

BT: CAFAS 下一次展览是什么时候？主题是什么？

MM: 学会的展览：一个香港书画家容承祖的展览上月完成，11 月应有一个摄影展，我的书画展排在明年四月。

BT: 你有发现对书法特别感兴趣的年轻人吗？有什么迹象表明他们喜欢或者不喜欢书法？

MM: 我看見一些。书法和国画都能让孩子感兴趣。作为对年轻一代的培育，让孩子有艺术感、艺术素养是必不可少的。我认为只有有这种想法和

做法的父母，才使他们的后代更聪明。所以，使更多孩子对书法有兴趣，父母要为他们制造出一种学习环境，再加上老师适当的教法，使他们的兴趣获得延长和发展，这样就可使书法越来越多人参与，并获得发展。

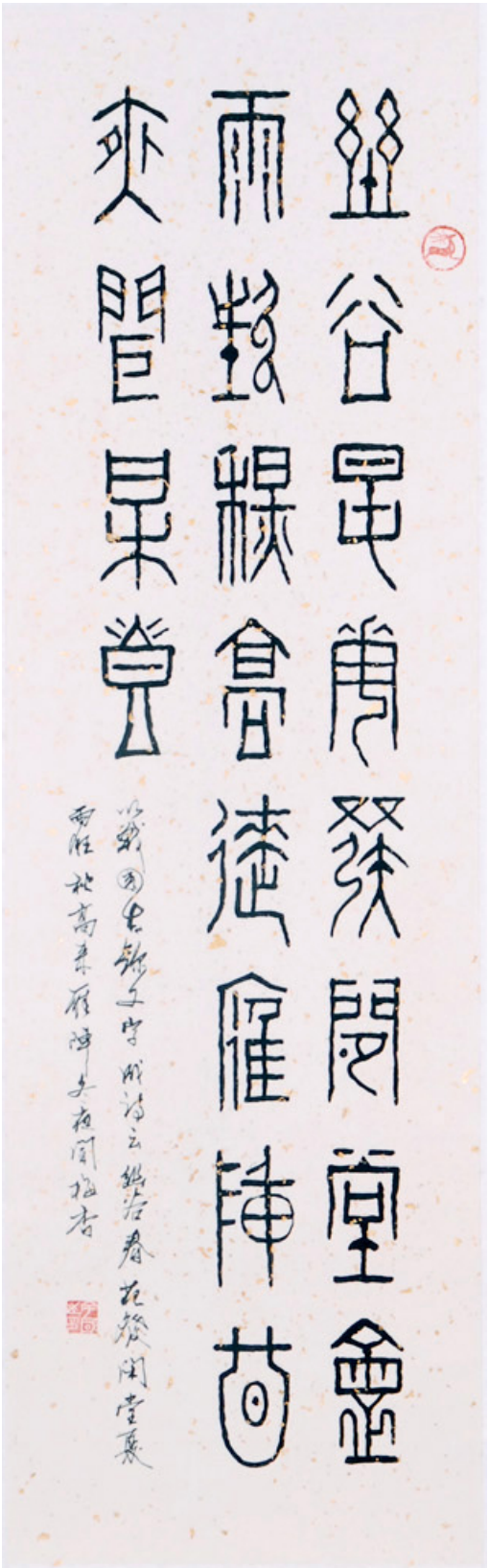
BT: 很多人喜欢中国书法并且欣赏她的美感，你可以给他们一些学习建议吗？有的外国人不懂汉语和中国文化，但是也喜欢书法，请你也给他们一些建议。

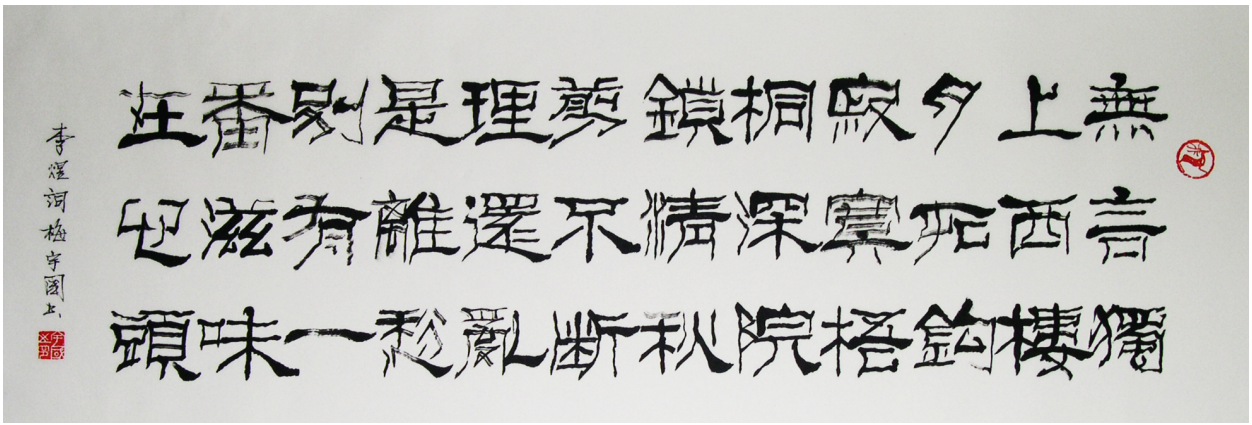
MM: 我有几个老外学生就是完全不懂汉语的，写了“千字文”、“心经”等作品。我专門写了一本书《三步法学好棣书》，就是专为无汉语背景者的。学书法在我这里不需要懂文字。☯

Portfolio

Mike Mei (梅宇國)

The following pages present a sample of Mike Mei's calligraphy.




李煜詞 梅宇國 書


佛手頭現


秉人間正氣
爲萬時代師表

Xian, 2014
Photo by Mahesh Ramchandani

送友人

李白

青山横北郭
白水绕东城
此地一为别
孤蓬万里征
浮云游子意
落日故人情
挥手自兹去
萧萧班马鸣

Farewell to a Friend†

by Li Bo

With a blue line of mountains north of the wall,
And east of the city a white curve of water,
Here you must leave me and drift away
Like a loosened water-plant hundreds of miles.
I shall think of you in a floating cloud;
So in the sunset think of me.
We wave our hands to say good-bye,
And my horse is neighing again and again.

† Translation by Witter Bynner (from Bynner, Witter, trans., and Jiang Kanghu. 1929. *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf).

Beijing, 2014
Photo by Mahesh Ramchandani