

LIFE

The plum blossom, our greatest 'friend' of the winter

If anyone had ever told me as a child growing up in the United States that a flower could flourish in



Jocelyn Eikenburg
Second Thoughts

the coldest days of winter, a flower that bloomed straight from the bare branches of a tree, I would have thought they had a vivid imagination or a penchant for spinning tall tales. Yet years ago in late February, while strolling the eastern shores of the West Lake in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, with my husband, Jun, I encountered a

spray of brilliant pink petals cascading over tree branches, which looked as artfully windswept as a bonsai. That striking shade, more typical of spring and summer flowers, seemed utterly defiant against the melancholy gray of the overcast sky and the mournful silhouettes of other trees, their leafless limbs stretched upward as if praying for an end to the chill of the season.

I almost didn't believe my eyes at first. Surely flowers couldn't bloom like that, direct from the branch, without the usual green leaves? And how could they thrive in this weather, where temperatures that hovered just above freezing had led us to don our warmest down jackets

and even hats?

After my astonishment, I felt a certain appreciation for this ethereal beauty before me, painting the otherwise dreary February landscape into such a gloriously hopeful hue, promising better times just around the corner.

That is the power of the plum blossom, one of the most distinctive and cherished flowers in China.

My initial encounter with the plum blossom would lead me to seek it out in subsequent winters in Hangzhou, longing for the heartening sight of its flowers in the deepest cold of the season in January and February. On one trail through Xixi wetlands just after snowfall, my

husband and I encountered a grove of trees adorned with rows of creamy yellow plum blossoms.

While not as splendid in color as those I first viewed beside the West Lake, these flowers perfumed the air in a beguiling fragrance full of optimism, even amid the bleak white scene all around us. I inhaled the scent with greedy breaths, knowing that these flowers would only remain a short time and the first blooms of spring still wouldn't emerge for weeks if not months.

In China, people have long known plum blossoms as one of the "three friends of winter", or *sui han san you*, along with the evergreen pine trees and bamboo. These "friends"

retain a certain vitality easily forgotten in this most trying season of the year. Among the three, the plum blossom stands out as my favorite. There's a Chinese saying: The fragrance of the plum blossom comes from the bitterness of winter. Is there any more marvelous symbol for resilience than a flower that unfurls its aromatic petals despite the frigid temperatures and the snow? I have found great inspiration in remembering the spirit of the plum blossom — that even in the "winter" of life's challenges, we can find the strength to bloom and grow, displaying our own beauty to the world despite the hardships. January and February bring with

them the bluster of winter, which can overwhelm even the best of us at times and dampen our cheer. But nature has endowed the Earth with a trio of winter wonders that light our way through this season, and that includes the plum blossom. A tree, bereft of any signs of life on its branches, can still produce such a dazzling array of sweet-scented flowers as frost threatens the world around it, standing as a miracle and one of the greatest "friends" of winter.

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Candid camera: Air of expectation



A boy flies a kite on Sunday near mascots of the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Beijing Shijingshan Amusement Park. Decorations celebrating the Winter Games are part of the park's preparations for Spring Festival that begins on Jan 25. JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY



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Artist draws heartfelt lessons from the world

By RENA LI in Toronto
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In a world facing increasing conflict and instability, a Chinese Canadian is sending messages of love and peace through his artwork.

William Ho, 60, who arrived in Canada from Hong Kong 42 years ago, teaches Chinese brush painting at his art gallery in Unionville, Markham, a suburb of Toronto.

He is known as a goodwill ambassador of love and hope, and founder of One Heart Beat, a global initiative to help needy people and vulnerable children through art, culture and relief work.

The United Nations invited Ho to exhibit his art and his masterpiece, also called *One Heart Beat*, at its headquarters in New York in 2006, and he then became a global partner of the UN.

"This one heartbeat that all humanity shares has been demonstrated by a single stroke in Chinese ink, symbolizing the simple truth that we, as one global family, are all interconnected by the common heartbeat," he illustrates.

His one-stroke painting *One Heart Beat* is currently on display at the UN headquarters, the Canadian National Museum of Civilization, Beijing University and cities across the world.

Ho has been doing Chinese art and Chinese brush painting for more than 50 years and teaching for more than 30. He has over 3,000 students from around the world.

"I actually started with Western art when I was younger, working on pencil drawing, oil painting and water color. However, after I encountered Chinese brush painting a couple of years later, my eyes and mind were enlightened," Ho recalls.

Chinese brush painting has utilized almost all the colors going back at least 2,000 years. In many instances, Ho says that it is Western painting and artists learning through or being influenced by Chinese painting. Monet and his Water Lilies series is one good example, Ho says.

Chinese and Western artists should respect, appreciate and learn from each other, Ho says. "Self respect and mutual respect are the keys for real cultural exchange and global harmony."

Ho's artworks embody his philosophy that every life is non-replaceable and precious; people of different races, religious affiliations and beliefs should all be respected, as global harmony is rooted in global and local mutual respect.

That is a reason he emphasizes that "lives can be the most beautiful masterpieces of art, and art

can be living".

Ho says one of his passions and missions is to bring Chinese culture "back" to the center stage of the world, as it had been for thousands of years.

"Being of Chinese descent, on one hand, we're very proud of our 5,000 years of history and civilization. On the other hand, we have a painful history marked by weaknesses and humiliation more than a century ago," Ho says.

A principle of ancient Chinese wisdom has been: "Don't overstate ourselves; don't understate ourselves."

"Non-Chinese people, particularly Western people, often misunderstand other cultures, particularly Chinese culture," Ho says. "They prefer to self-believe and they think they understand when, in fact, they have half-knowledge or half-understanding."

One of the themes in Ho's speeches delivered at the UN headquarters, the Canadian parliament and Beijing University was "position well China, and position well the world".

Ho says that some countries demand special treatment from the world or the international court in the name of democracy and freedom.

"This mentality is sick, selfish and bad. The people of the world and Mother Nature are saying no to the greedy. In fact, the whole world cannot afford these types of demands. We as a global family wouldn't allow this to happen."

"The double standard behavior may violate basic human rights, human standards, equality, democracy and freedom. The truth is everyone in this world is born equal and should be treated equally, fairly and with mutual respect," Ho says.

Contrary to greed, Chinese culture believes that "less is more."

"We create paintings not only through the expression of the look or form of the subjects, but more importantly, through the void, emptiness and nothingness — spaces of imagination," he says.

From his perspective, there are three pillars of Chinese culture: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, with Confucian thinking predominant. But in Chinese brush painting, Taoism has more influence.

"We respect, treasure and learn from nature as our teacher. Nature, in general, includes human lives, landscape, animals and plants, (which) have been our traditional subject matter in art and painting," he observes.

Ho believes that a true Chinese outlook consists of wisdom, principles, freedom, romance and creativity.

Homecoming can be a journey of discovery

By WANG RU
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The lure of the hometown remains strong for those who left, seeking opportunity amid pastures new. Visiting a place that we left can bring a kaleidoscope of emotions.

After staying in the capital as a *beipiao* (Beijing drifter), a term used for those struggling at the periphery, for nine years, singer Qin Hao announced on his Sina Weibo account on Dec 25 that he had moved back to his hometown in Southwest China's Chongqing city.

Like many who took the same journey, the 34-year-old has mixed feelings toward his hometown. He was once impatient to leave and applied to study, at 19, at Jilin Animation Institute in North China's Jilin province, far away from his hometown. He drifted in Beijing for nearly a decade.

In 2017, Qin went back to his hometown for a month to explore the relationship between himself and where he grew up. He put down his feelings on paper and took scores of photos, which are collected in a recently published book *Dear Passersby*.

In 2010, Qin who had tried various jobs, like illustrator, photographer and art teacher in several cities after graduating in 2009, organized a folk music band called Good Meimei with Zhang Xiaohou who worked as an engineer at that time. They then gave up their jobs and went full time into making the band a success. Their first album *Spring Time*, which cost only 2,000 yuan (\$291) to make, sold 5,000 copies in 2012.

The songs of Good Meimei are

melodious, soft and warm, a far cry from his upbringing.

"Qin sometimes recalls his childhood in an amusing tone, but nobody knows how many tears he shed and the sense of helplessness in his early life," says online message board Zhihu user Miao'er, a fervent fan. "I want to have a time travel and embrace the lonely boy."

He grew up with his grandparents in Chongqing before attending university. His parents got divorced when he was quite young. Then they formed other families and had more children, leaving them little time to take care of Qin. His mother passed away when he was 11.

His childhood memory in Chongqing is linked to uncomfortable physical feelings. "Being car-sick and allergic were my abiding memories, and I always found things outdated there, which made me feel tired of the place."

The dislike may explain his unwillingness to speak in the local dialect. "Most Chongqing people are used to speaking in their dialect instead of Mandarin, but I was the one who insisted on speaking Mandarin at school and was often laughed at by others," says Qin.

After he chose to study in Jilin, his grandparents moved to Xi'an, capital of Northwest China's Shaanxi province, where Qin's aunt lived. Qin went there to spend summer and winter vacations with them every year.

Unfortunately, his grandfather died in a traffic accident in Xi'an when Qin was a sophomore. His grandmother sold their house and bought another one in Xi'an to help her recover from the grief.

In 2015, Qin's band played in the capital's Workers' Stadium,



Top: Singer Qin Hao, a member of Good Meimei band.

Above: *Dear Passersby*, a book written by Qin Hao to explore his relationship with his hometown, Chongqing.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

attracting 40,000 people. It marked a huge stride in the band's development. "Since the concert, I began to seriously make music my career," says Qin.

The band went from strength to strength after the concert.

Qin could then afford to rent a larger house in Beijing, and his grandmother came to live with him.

During the 2017 Chongqing trip, Qin found his view of his hometown had developed. "Although I didn't like and left it at a young age, now I find it prosperous and beautiful. After drifting for 13 years, I suddenly want to be close to it."

He also finds traces of hometown in himself, like the choice of food or a habit of speaking fast.

He is willing to give it another go. "I try to gain a sense of ownership through having my own house there, a space of my own that can nurture my spirit. I cannot afford a satisfying one in Beijing. And my grandmother says she wants to return."

After the tour, Qin gained a new understanding of his relationship with his hometown. "We may not belong to a place forever, but we can become a regular visitor of the place. I was rebellious when I was young and left it, but now I feel grateful for its influence on me."

Qin's move to Chongqing marked a new starting point in his life. His band is also welcoming a beginning with its new song *Primordial Color*.

"Stepping into 2020, our band has now been established for 10 years. This song opens a new chapter in our development, and we will try to make songs with new styles," says Qin.



William Ho and his masterpiece of *One Heart Beat* exhibited at the United Nations. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY