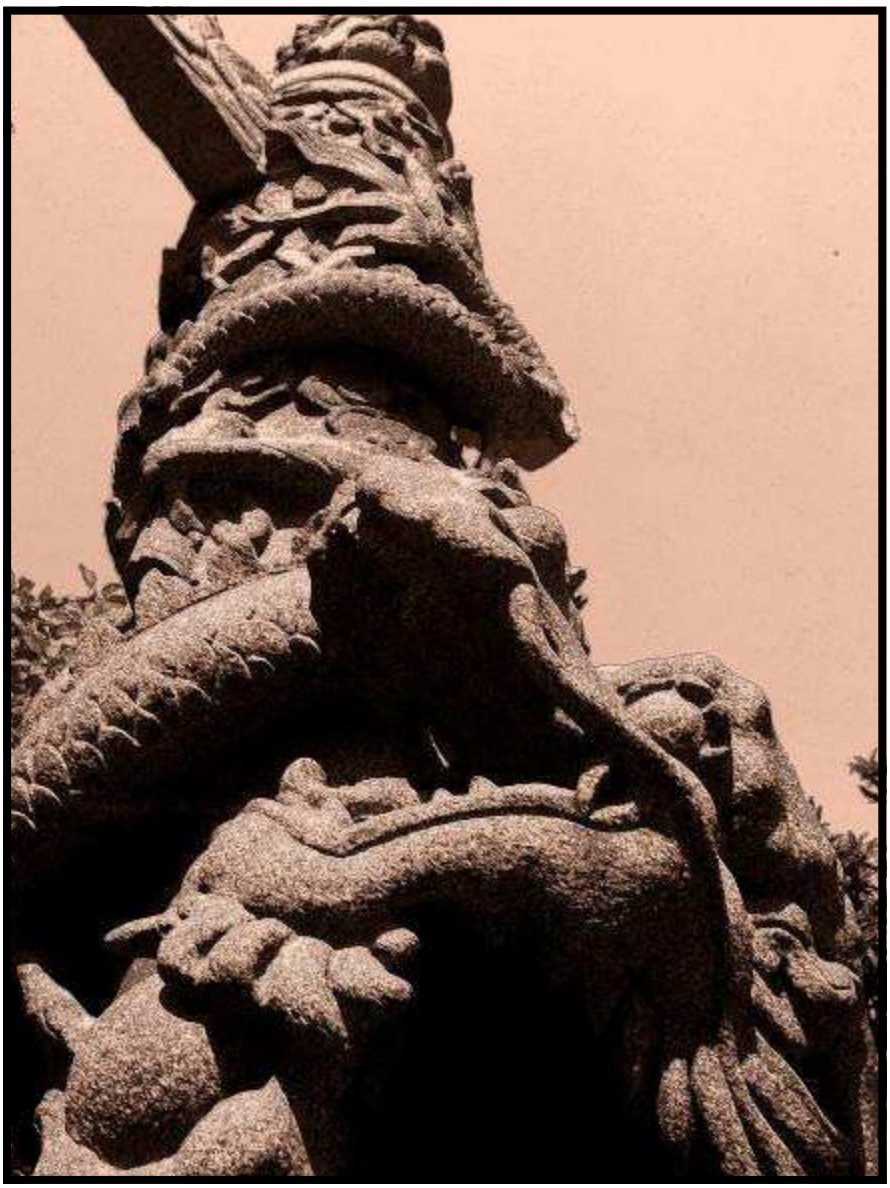
Terracotta Typewriter

A Literary Journal with Chinese Characteristics



Issue 8 Spring 2011

Unsolicited manuscripts are welcomed throughout the year.

Terracotta Typewriter seeks submissions of literary works with a connection to China. The definition of "connection to China" can be stretched as much as an author sees fit. For example, expatriate writers living in China or who have lived in China, Chinese writers writing in English, translators of Chinese writing, works that are set in China, manuscripts covered in Chinese food (General Tso's chicken doesn't count), or anything else a creative mind can imagine as a connection to China.

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A Cultural Revolution of Literature

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Brian Kuhl

Just a Formality

Several semesters ago, during my literature final exam at the Chinese college where I teach, I caught a student cheating. Not surreptitiously, but boldly, openly. I had clearly explained the rules by projecting them on the computer screen and discussing them one by one—even listing what the students should and should not have on their desks during the exam. Yet, when I walked up the aisle near this young woman, I saw what looked like extra papers before her. At the end of the aisle, I turned and walked back down, slowly, stopping a little behind her to stare. There sat the notes I had given the students to study from, right next to her exam questions, as she copied answers from them. She made no attempt to hide them, but surely she had seen me walking by. After teaching in China for five years, I am all too aware of how widespread cheating is, yet this shocked me for its brazenness. When I spoke to her out in the hall afterward, she made no excuses, her only explanation being that she was afraid of doing poorly.

Various instances of cheating in China were in the news last year. In October, *The New York Times* published an article under the headline "Rampant Fraud Threat to China's Brisk Ascent" that gave several examples of cheating in both society and academia. We've all heard of the melamine scandal, but what of academic dishonesty? One such case happened not far from me, in the city of Hangzhou. Zhejiang University, the highest ranked university in the province, conducted an investigation in which it submitted a number of its scien-

tific journals to a computer program that identifies plagiarized passages. According to the *Times*, about one-third of the articles submitted for publication had at least some sections likely to have been copied. In another example, cheating shut down the MBA program that New Jersey's Centenary College had run in Beijing, Shanghai, and Taipei since 2004. That one shocked me. I once worked at a university in Xiamen that partnered with a Canadian college to offer a business degree program, so I've seen that dynamic firsthand. Western universities are so starved for cash at the moment that they jump at an opportunity to expand into China. Based on what I saw and heard, I would guess that many such schools are willing to accommodate lower standards—even to the point of ignoring problems of academic integrity—in exchange for the influx of cash. So for Centenary to completely close its program, it had to have been quite bad. *USA Today* also reported on this last summer when it happened. All of the college's 400 students in China, the newspaper noted, had their diplomas withheld and were given the choice of a tuition refund or the chance to gain their MBA by taking another exam. Only two chose to retest.

Cheating comes in many forms, and new technology, such as cell phones, only adds to the myriad methods students can choose from. One decidedly low-tech approach that's always intrigued me for its being so unlikely to succeed is when one student simply substitutes for another to take a test. Called *qiang shou*, this kind of cheating is fairly common in China, where so much of the assessment is done by examination, and exams invariably include large numbers of students. The two Chinese characters literally mean "gun hand," and are sometimes translated as "gunman," though a more

accurate English term would be "hired gun." A former student once served as a *qiang shou*, and told me about it shortly afterwards. A petite young woman bursting with intellect and energy, Ann was among the best students in the three classes I taught at her grade level. Based on her work in class, her involvement with the campus English club, and our discussions during my office hours, I knew her to be an honest, thoughtful, and ethical young woman. Yet a year later, when she was a senior, she took someone else's English exam for him. I was taken aback when she told me, and at the same time curious about why she had decided to do it.

Ann had been sick and was in bed with a fever when her classmate Mary called to ask if Ann would do this to help out a friend. Despite being a little nervous at the idea, Ann allowed Mary to give the friend her phone number because she wanted to be kind and do her a favor. Mary only told her that it was a person "in society"—a person in the working world—taking adult classes that the university held during the summer and winter breaks. Ann expected a call a couple of days later, but instead received one the very next day: "It's time for [the] examination this morning," the caller told her. They arranged to meet near the library at 8:50 A.M., and a car picked her up. The driver was the man for whom Ann would be taking the exam; he gave her instructions as they drove to the building where it was held.

This man was supposed to be in a classroom taking an exam at that moment, yet here he was driving her in his car. And she did not go into the classroom for him? No, because the teacher giving the exam was her own class supervisor and head of the English Department, Ms. Zhang. Instead, the man brought the exam papers out to Ann in the car. He

turned out to the be the chief of police in the nearby city. Taking course work in law—toward a master's degree, Ann guessed—he needed to pass an English exam like every university student in China. Ann explained that teachers in these courses were fairly lenient, that they "will not purposely fail [the students] because they are all adults and they have—maybe some of them have 'backgrounds.'" In Chinese, this means they have both money and power. So for these kinds of exams, in Ann's words, "they hand in the money to the college, to the universities, and they just pass the examinations."

The police chief had two friends also taking the exam, one from a bank and another who worked at the local court. Ann began working hunched in the front seat at about 9:30, and an hour later the two others were copying the answers from her completed paper. The exam was supposed to end at 11:00, but the students in the classroom had all finished early and by about 10:40, Ms. Zhang came out and walked very near the car. Ann crouched down as far as she could. I was astounded that Ms. Zhang was not upset to find three of her students with their exam papers outside the classroom, but apparently she wasn't fazed. "It's very common," Ann assured me. "It's not very strict, that kind of examination. It's only—you know, in China we call it only a 'process.' No. I cannot find the exact word." I asked her to say it in Chinese so I could look it up. *Xing shi.* Formality. The exam was only a formality.

However farcical the logistics of this operation were, I was most intrigued by Ann's involvement. What had motivated her to cheat like this? It wasn't money: the police chief had wanted to pay her and she refused. She had mentioned

wanting to help out her friend who had initiated the meeting. But cheating is just inherently wrong, and the Ann I knew was honest and virtuous to the point that she would be considered a little naive in the U.S. At the very least, wouldn't she fear the repercussions of being caught—by her own class supervisor, no less? Hadn't she anything to lose? Not much. She explained that these classes were not as important as her own (those for full-time university students). Of all the possible punishments I put forward, she only agreed that Ms. Zhang would have been upset with her and given her a talking to. "But even Ms. Zhang found a gunman for other persons in our class," she added, laughing. "Secret!" And, I wanted to know, what would have happened to the police chief had they been caught? She had already explained that he had a "background" so I knew the answer even before she confirmed it. "Of course nothing," Ann said.

I asked her if she would do it again if she had a chance to go back and make that decision. "Maybe I want to experience this kind of thing," she answered. Why? "I don't know. I've never been a gunman before!" She continued:

> Maybe I think I don't have that kind of courage to do—you know, I know this cannot be called courage, but you know, all the time I'm just like a tortoise, a little. [*laughs*] When the danger come, I just put my head in the shell. So I want to experience different things. And in my hometown, in my home, in my house, my mother and my parents just protect me all the time, so I never know what the society really is.

And what to make of that society? In a chicken-or-egg sce-

nario, one wonders whether cheating by students continues into society at large or, conversely, the open secret of corruption among business persons and government officials signals to students an acceptance of academic dishonesty. It's not merely a hypothetical query, but one with significant ramifications. For example, when Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Washington in January, one of the continuing issues addressed in the U.S.-China Joint Statement was intellectual property rights—specifically, China's promise to strengthen their protection. I wanted to know Ann's thoughts regarding this larger system of corruption that encompassed cheating. Could it be changed? She seemed resigned to the realities of it and how pervasive it was in practice. Her own parents, she said, had to flatter their leaders, as well as give them presents (read bribes). "They cannot pass the situation or pass the difficulties if they don't do that." In the end, she weighed the matter the best any thoughtful college senior might be expected to when she said that she really believed "honesty is the best policy" but that it was hard to change things so deep-rooted.

Deep-rooted indeed. Once I visited a museum in Nanjing that had reconstructed an ancient exam center, with life-size displays depicting how students once sat for government exams, or *keju*. The participants were locked in their cubicles night and day for several days to prevent cheating (they slept on boards that doubled as desks). One cubicle, however, showed an enterprising young test taker holding a creative solution: a carrier pigeon.