

Qu Leilei with
Sylvia Vetta at
the Ashmolean



Nine eventful lives

Sylvia Vetta talks to Qu Leilei in our Castaway series asking what important personal items he would take to the fictional island of Oxtopia

Qu Leilei – a founder of the first Chinese contemporary art movement The Stars – has had such an extraordinary existence that it’s possible to present his 64 years as nine distinct lives.

But there is one thread which runs through them all... his passion to draw and paint.

My first encounter with Leilei was at the preview of his exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in 2005.

Everyone’s Life is an Epic consisted of 21 striking contemporary portraits. Each subject had been asked by the artist to describe their philosophy of life. Under his portrait a homeless man had written “You are not a failure until you give up trying” and his chiselled features were surrounded by bold colour with the Chinese translation in calligraphy that was integral to the work.

East and West had met in this brush. I returned several times to the exhibition and learned more about the epic life of Leilei.

What a life journey from when he arrived here in 1985 owning just \$35 and a roll of paintings. He earned his living how he could while he improved his English. He worked as a pavement artist in Piccadilly Circus, washed

dishes in Chinese restaurants, cleaned houses and typed features in Mandarin. Why did such a talented artist need to do that?

We begin at the beginning.

Life one: childhood

“When I was born in the province of Heilongjiang in Manchuria, my parents Qu Bo and Lu Bo expected that my brother Jingjing and sister Miaomiao and I would grow up there,” says Leilei. “I was only four when the unexpected happened and we were uprooted and too young to realise how unusual were my parents. By this time, my mother was managing a large hospital and my father, although only 28, was a senior [Communist] party official in charge of a work force of over 20,000 people. His factory manufactured railway rolling stock and was the biggest employer in the city of Qiqihar.

“As a child you take your circumstances for granted but I was aware of how people treated him as their local hero. There was no jealousy among the workers who circulated stories of his valour fighting in the civil war. His limp was testimony to his battle injuries but his face was unscarred so he looked the part, too.

“Railways were glamorous in those days but

unlike his work force, some local politicians were jealous of his meteoric rise. For a party with ideals of socialism, the local Communist Party was a hot bed of factionalism and ambition. Our lives were cast under a dark shadow when my father’s enemies suspended him and he had to submit to self-criticism.

“In the Chinese Communist Party that is not a private matter: self-criticism is a public performance intended as humiliation. Young

Oxford and the Ashmolean are fortunate in having one of the world’s greatest collections of twentieth century Chinese art including works by Qu Leilei, thanks to Professor Michael Sullivan and his wife Choan.

When Michael died in 2014, their collection was bequeathed to the Ashmolean.

Michael once said: “What is so special about Qu Leilei? Sheer talent. As a painter and draftsman, there is nothing he cannot do. Surely the human hand is one of the most difficult things to draw: he draws hands beautifully; he makes them a powerful expression of thoughts feelings, humanity, and love.”

and energetic and suddenly faced with a life confined to home, he turned to writing as a positive outlet for his frustration. Through it, he relived his experiences fighting the bandits allied to Chiang Kai-Shek's forces, in the mountains of Manchuria. He called his novel *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* and that could be a reminder of my father if I took it to Oxtopia."

Later Madame Mao used it for one of her model operas; Qu Bo's career was to blossom again when he was transferred to Beijing. The family even enjoyed a grace and favour home within the grounds of the exquisite Summer Palace.

But it was not to last, having succeeded in getting the young people of China to hero worship him, Chairman Mao was able to turn these radicalised youth against their parents' generation. In the Cultural Revolution which began in 1966 his parents were branded as capitalists. Leilei and his family were not divided so it is perhaps not surprising that his father was humiliated, his mother sent to labour camp, his brother to prison and Leilei was beaten up and interrogated.

Life two: midshipman

His father found a way of getting Leilei enlisted in the navy on the island of Hainan. He remained safe until his "undesirable background" was discovered and he was discharged and sent back to Beijing.

Life three: peasant

Salvation came when, in 1968, like all educated youth, Leilei was sent into the countryside to be re-educated as a peasant. Leilei says: "In Wimbledon where I live, it rarely snows. Here, winters are warm, wet and grey. After my daughter Taotao was born in 1996, I took a walk in the park. All around me was transformed. I had never seen it like this. I stopped to sketch the scene. It was innocent, even virginal. The crisp white snow did not last long but for a while the world around me shone as brightly as my heart radiated love. As I sketched, I remembered a time when I did not possess the paper to draw the beauty around me. Each of my nine lives has exposed me to a different landscape. Remembering my life as a peasant, I have a vision of a dark purple sky that reflected blue on the snow of Manchuria."

Life four: barefoot doctor

While he still had to work in the fields, Leilei was given the opportunity to embark on another life that of a barefoot doctor. He says: "My qualification for the role was non-existent. I was simply provided with a copy of *A Barefoot Doctor's Manual*. The name arose because we were meant to live like the peasants we served and they preserved their precious shoes whenever possible for use when they weren't working in the fields.

"Armed with this, I was to care for people in this vast semi wilderness where there were no doctors. It was terrifying and yet flattering that grown men and women came to me for help and advice, trusted and confided in me. Armed with my manual and a clinic stocked



Qu Leilei is a master of calligraphy.

with basics like penicillin, antibiotics, acupuncture needles, surgical spirit, aspirin, paracetamol and a sterilizer I tried to live up to my patients expectations."

Leilei enjoyed his eighteen months as a barefoot doctor. Meanwhile in Beijing life was improving and Qu Bo found a new career for Leilei but he was a reluctant recruit into his fifth life.

Life five: soldier

"I was expected to enlist in The People's Liberation Army. Although angry and disappointed I said nothing. I tried not to show my feelings because I saw that my mother and father were happy. Everyone expected that I should be delighted with this arrangement which was the pinnacle of desirability in Cultural Revolutionary China."

Qu Leilei described one of the most bizarre assignments: "My pai (platoon) was one of the propaganda teams sent to fight the revolutionary fight against the academic establishment. We were posted to the National Academy of Science. Our task was to re-educate the best brains in China. We were mostly 19-year-olds and some of my fellow soldiers couldn't even write their names properly.

My pai was assigned to the Department of Metallurgy and our guinea pigs were the 30-40 scientists plus lab assistants. While there we joined an audience of 2,000 to watch a film. The head of the propaganda team stood up and addressed everyone: "This film will show you what the Americans are doing. We must criticise this. Don't be taken in by them. This project is just designed to make money to

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further the capitalist ideal.' What was this movie? I was riveted, as the film started to roll and showed Apollo orbiting the moon.

"I could not believe what was before my eyes when I watched Neil Armstrong walking on the moon. I thought this must be make believe. But I sensed the mood of the scientists was one of excitement. We were watching a dream become reality but this incredible achievement was not even reported in China. Only the scientific community was allowed to know these things. Only the scientists and a few platoons of soldiers who happened to be occupying the academy at the time - and some of them fell asleep."

When the Cultural Revolution drew to a close Leilei was able to leave the army.

Life six: lighting technician at China TV

During this time Leilei had rediscovered his love of art by sketching in the margins of military magazines. In 1976, he was sent by China TV to TangShang which had been devastated by an earthquake.

"We were the lucky ones supplied with



Qu Leilei with his calligraphy collage titled I Know



Sylvia Vetta with Qu Leilei at the Imperial Summer Palace, Beijing

tents and clean water. In the evening we could do nothing but survey the panorama of a city in ruins. Tangshan was flattened like Hiroshima after the bomb. I took out my sketch book and began to draw. My sketches were completely spontaneous. They flowed like water. The results were unlike anything I had done before," he says.

"A dam in my brain had burst and new images appeared on the paper. A face with a single tear drop becoming a river... an eye in the wind, soldiers drawn not as humans but machine men on wheels crushing flowers and everything of beauty beneath them, a heavy figure but with hair blown lightly in the wind. Page after page, I drew."

Life seven: the artist

In 1976, Mao died and Deng Xiaoping gradually took power and created the China we see today. Young poets and artists came to together to create new magazines. Leilei met other artists who were inspired by Western art and a desire for self-expression. They called themselves The Stars. The other four leaders were Huang Rui, Wang Keping, Ma Desheng and Yang Li. They tried to find a gallery to display their work without success, so held an "illegal" exhibition hanging their work on the railings outside the Chinese National Gallery (among the 20 artists displaying work was the renowned aerist and activist Ai Weiwei).

People flocked to see this new art. When the police closed the exhibition, two political activists, Lui Qing and Xu Wenli encouraged them to march to Tiananmen Square. Leilei describes that momentous day: "While Ma addressed the crowd, Wang Keping and I held it up a banner reading 'In politics we want democracy and in art we want freedom'.

"As we marched I carried a placard which I am not sure how many understood - 'Kollwitz is our flag and Picasso our pioneer'. Word had got around and more than 2,000 joined us as

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The late Professor Michael Sullivan and, inset, the portrait Qu Leilei painted of him



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we marched towards the Central Government building. As we drew near, we saw that we were expected. Hundreds of white uniformed police had blocked the road ahead. The tension was so intense that you could almost touch it. Then someone burst into song – *The Internationale*. We all joined in and the sound inspired me and helped overcome my fear. I had no doubts; I believed in the rightness of our protest even more passionately as we approached the solid unmoving ranks of police.

“Suddenly the singing stopped and I turned to look. The people behind melted away into the sides of the street. Only twenty of us were left facing the police cordon. We could not run. We were the leaders. The police said ‘Our orders are to stop you going on to Tiananmen’. They were expecting a fight but Liu Qing and Xu Wenli said ‘We will follow police instructions and change our route’.

We avoided confrontation by turning right and heading in the direction of the Beijing local government building. Wang Keping and I climbed its steps and held the banner aloft. Huang Rui made a speech and Liu Qing and Xu Wenli went inside. They found just three people in this huge building. Everyone else was on holiday. The international press arrived on the scene and took our pictures and we hurried

home before the police could arrest us.”

The Stars had an exhibition in the National Gallery and were celebrated, but a day neared that would catapult Leilei into another life.

In 1979, his friend Wei Jingsheng, an early democracy campaigner, had been arrested for publishing an article warning people to make sure “Deng Xiaoping does not generate into a dictator” and calling for a “genuine election”.

As a lighting technicians, Leilei was due to film at the High Court during his friend’s trial. He secretly recorded the show trial and the transcript was seen by the international press. Wei Jingsheng believes that saved his life but from then on Qu Leilei’s life became increasingly unbearable. In 1985 he left China.

Life Eight: the exile

Leilei says: “I delighted in the freedom from political pressure but discussed the situation with my younger sister CuiCui who was already here as a student. ‘How can I earn my living? I am 34 and yet I must start over again from zero’.” And from zero, he struggled until he got his first exhibition organised by Edith Lederer in her home. In 1986, the Holland Gallery held a show called East and West and invited Leilei to take part. This was followed by exhibitions in the Royal Festival Hall and the Pompidou Centre and shows in the Tricycle and Redfern galleries.

Life 9: Family man and teacher

In 1989, an artist called Caroline Dean sought Leilei’s advice. She was on course to go to Beijing for a year when the events of Tiananmen Square happened. Should she go? What happened next is a long story but one with a happy ending. They married and built a good life together and their daughter Taotao was born in 1997. Caroline introduced Leilei to adult and continuing education including at the Ashmolean. He became a successful teacher, publishing *How To* books with Cico Books.

But he still dreamed of being a full time artist and eventually that dream came true.

Leilei’s work is now recognised around the world including in the country of his birth. In 2011, he was given a one man show in the National Gallery Beijing and a biopic of him was shown on China TV. In the UK, he is honorary president of the Chinese Brush Painters Society.

We had not really talked about the objects, art and books he might like to take on the island. After his nine lives what will he want to inspire his tenth life on Oxtopia?

“I have admired Rembrandt’s portraits since my first sight of prints of them but I don’t think I could be happy on the island without a supply of artist’s tools and materials so that I could paint my fellow Oxtopians,” says Leilei.

“Life on Oxtopia will suit me because Caroline and I hope to retreat to the wilds of Devon to concentrate on painting and maybe do a bit of Tai Chi.”

- To see more of Leilei’s art go to quleilei.net.
- The Stars movement inspired Sylvia Vetta to write a novel called *Brushstrokes in Time*, published by Claret Press this month. See claretpress.com for details.

Leilei’s school years in his own words:

“In England, I paint portraits of people from all backgrounds and think of them as heroes and heroines.

“At school I had little choice for portraits and I painted them over and over again.

“Any subjects apart from Chairman Mao and revolutionary heroes were frowned upon. Everywhere you looked in school, on the street, and at home, there were pictures of him. His features were etched into my soul.

“Another subject was our leader’s favourite, some say invented but certainly conveniently dead, revolutionary hero, Lei Feng. He was a model ordinary soldier who came from a poor family. Lei Feng’s ambition was to become a cog in the revolutionary machine and Mao liked that so much that he wanted every Chinese to copy him.

“As a child, I sketched our idol climbing mountains of knives and plunging deep into a sea of flames all for Chairman Mao.”

- One of Qu Leilei’s latest paintings on display in the British Museum is called *Lei Feng*. Only this time there is a satirical edge to the portrayal. Lei Feng is depicted as a terracotta warrior; all sense of self obliterated.