Biography of Mai-Mai Sze



The Tao of Painting

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Chapter 1
Born in Tianjin, Raised in London (1909–1927)



施美美，Photographed on February 12, 1940, by Ca

On 2 December 1909, Mai-Mai Sze was born in Tianjin. Her birth name was Yuen Tsung Sze. Her father, Alfred Sao-ke Sze, was one of the most distinguished diplomats in modern Chinese history, while her mother, Tang Yuhua, was a niece of Tang Shaoyi, the first Premier of the Republic of China. “Mai-Mai,” meaning “little sister,” was her childhood nickname and subsequently became the name under which she published all her works.

In 1915, six-year-old Mai-Mai accompanied her father to London. Alfred Sao-ke Sze had been appointed China's Minister to Britain, and the family lived in London until 1921. That year, her father was appointed China's first Ambassador to the United States, and the family relocated to Washington, D.C. Mai-Mai attended the National Cathedral School in Washington before entering Wellesley College in 1927.

At Wellesley, she studied the humanities, including English literature, religion, philosophy, European history and art. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1931. This educational background shaped the foundations of her life, combining the cultural heritage of a traditional Chinese diplomatic family with the intellectual training of an elite Western education. Through these two cultural languages, she would construct a bridge across the Pacific in the worlds of art and literature.

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Chapter 2
From Paris to New York: The Rise of a Landscape Painter (1931–1936)

After graduating from Wellesley, Mai-Mai Sze identified herself primarily as a painter. She studied oil painting in Paris and subsequently became a successful landscape artist, exhibiting her works in New York, London and Paris.

In 1933, her paintings were exhibited for the first time at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. An art critic referred to her in a review as “the painter Sze,” a description she remembered for the rest of her life because it marked her first public recognition specifically as a painter. She also held an exhibition at the Marie Sterner Gallery.

Yet Mai-Mai did not confine herself to landscapes. Her most celebrated portrait was that of the American playwright Eugene O'Neill. The painting was reproduced on the cover of the book edition of O'Neill's play The Iceman Cometh, in theatre programmes, and on the cover of Newsweek in 1957. For a Chinese-American woman artist still in her twenties, having her work appear on the cover of a major American news magazine was itself a significant breakthrough.

She later wrote to her friend Dorothy Norman: “I began originally as a painter, and did a great deal of illustration,

advertising, package design, textile design, wallpaper design...” Her artistic abilities were remarkably versatile, extending from easel painting to commercial design.

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Chapter 3
Lady Precious Stream: The “Honorable Reader” on Broadway (1936)

In January 1936, Mai-Mai Sze undertook something she had never previously attempted: appearing on Broadway.

Chinese playwright and director Hsiung Shih-I had adapted the traditional Chinese story of Wang Baochuan into the English-language play Lady Precious Stream, which received its American premiere at the Booth Theatre in New York. Mai-Mai was invited to perform a role created especially for her, that of “the Honorable Reader,” who served as the narrator of the production.

Contemporary reports described the role as “very important,” although producer Morris Gest declined to disclose further details “for national reasons.” Mai-Mai had previously seen the play only in London and had received no formal theatrical training. Nevertheless, Hsiung Shih-I told her, “You are doing this in the service of your country.” She accepted the invitation and devoted herself to memorising her lines and rehearsing. All the other members of the cast were white; she was the only performer of Chinese descent.

The specially created role received some of the production's most favourable reviews because of Mai-Mai's outstanding

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performance. Through her distinctive contribution, not as a conventional character but as a storyteller, she brought an ancient Chinese narrative to audiences across cultural boundaries. When First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt posed for a photograph with members of the production, Mai-Mai was among them.

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Chapter 4
The War Years: Public Speaker and Columnist (1937–1945)

In 1937, Japan launched its full-scale invasion of China. The course of Mai-Mai Sze's life changed accordingly.

From 1937 until the end of the Second World War, she organised the first China War Relief Committee in New York and began travelling across the United States to deliver lectures. She explained the background of China's resistance against Japan, the sacrifices made by the Chinese people during the war, and the contributions China could make to the postwar world. She devoted seven years to these efforts, travelling extensively throughout America.

At the same time, she wrote a column entitled “East-West” for the New York Post and contributed articles to several nationally circulated magazines. For a woman of Chinese descent to have her own column in a major American newspaper was exceptionally unusual during the 1940s. Her writings and speeches pursued the same objective: to help Americans understand China and to make China more visible to Western audiences.

In 1944, at Dorothy Norman's invitation, she wrote a booklet about China for an international relations series published by

Western Reserve University Press. That same year, a North Carolina newspaper reporting on one of her lectures observed: “She is first of all a sincere and intelligent young woman who is doing everything she can to help Chinese and Americans better understand one another as human beings.”

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Chapter 5
Echo of a Cry: The Autobiography of an Ambassador's Daughter (1945–1948)

In 1945, Mai-Mai Sze published her first book, Echo of a Cry: A Story which Began in China.

This autobiographical novel recounted the childhood and subsequent achievements of a Chinese ambassador's daughter growing up between Chinese and American cultures. Mai-Mai personally created the black-and-white illustrations accompanying the text. In 1947, Jonathan Cape published a British edition in London, with reviewers praising the lively descriptions of boarding-school experiences and the English countryside.

The publication of this book marked Mai-Mai's expansion from painter to writer. She was no longer depicting landscapes solely through brushwork but was now using words to portray her own life, telling the story of a “little sister” raised between two cultures.

In 1948, she published her second novel, Silent Children, a story about children deprived of their rights in an imaginary country.

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Chapter 6
The Tao of Painting: Her Most Important Work (1956)

In 1956, Mai-Mai Sze published the most important work of her career, The Tao of Painting: A Study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting. First published by the Bollingen Foundation and later reissued by Princeton University Press, it appeared as Volume 49 of the celebrated Bollingen Series.

The two-volume work consisted of an original study of the aesthetic principles of Chinese painting in its first volume, followed by Mai-Mai's English translation and annotations of The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting (1679–1701) in its second volume.

Mai-Mai's translation was distinctive in its interpretation. She believed that The Mustard Seed Garden Manual conveyed not merely painting techniques but also the spiritual essence of traditional Chinese landscape painting: the Tao. She wrote that the highest ideal of Chinese painting was to communicate the Tao inherent in all things through the flowing movement of the brush and the profound meanings of artistic expression. She transformed a seventeenth-century Chinese painting manual into a philosophical text exploring the meaning of the Tao.

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The book had a lasting academic and literary influence. After reading The Tao of Painting, the American modernist poet Marianne Moore drew inspiration for her poetry collection O to Be a Dragon, published in 1959, which reflected an aesthetic experiment in adapting the Tao to Western artistic expression. Mai-Mai's translation became the most widely circulated English-language version of The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting in the United States.

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Chapter 7
A Lifelong Companion and Later Years: Irene Sharaff and the Memorial Stone in Cambridge (1950s–1992)

Mai-Mai Sze never married, but she shared many years of her life with her companion, Irene Sharaff, one of America's most celebrated costume designers, who had won five Tony Awards and an Academy Award.

Relatively few public records document their relationship. It is known, however, that the two were living together when Mai-Mai died in 1992. In 1989, they jointly donated their personal book collections to the New York Society Library and contributed £1 million to Lucy Cavendish College at the University of Cambridge.

The donation supported the construction of the college's Music and Meditation Pavilion and established two research fellowships: the Alice Tang Sze Fellowship, named in honour of Mai-Mai's mother, and the Lu Gwei-Djen Fellowship.

On 16 July 1992, Mai-Mai Sze died of throat cancer at a hospital in New York, aged eighty-two. Irene Sharaff passed away a few months later. Their deaths occurred within months of each other. They had expressed the wish that their ashes be interred in the gardens of Lucy Cavendish College. Today, their ashes rest beneath the two halves of a memorial stone at

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the entrance to the Meditation Pavilion, “surrounded by the music and beauty they loved so much.”

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Chapter 8
Concluding Reflections: Building a Bridge Between Two Cultures

Mai-Mai Sze's life can be summarised through words written about her in 1944. Reporting on one of her lectures, a journalist observed: “She is first of all a sincere and intelligent young woman who is doing everything she can to help Chinese and Americans better understand one another as human beings.”

She was a painter, the “painter Sze” of the Paris Salon d'Automne, whose portrait of Eugene O'Neill appeared on the cover of Newsweek. She was a writer, the author of the autobiographical novel Echo of a Cry and Silent Children. She was a translator, responsible for the most widely circulated English version of The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting. She was a public speaker who travelled throughout the United States for seven years advocating support for China's resistance against Japan. She was a columnist who wrote “East-West” for the New York Post. She was also an actress, the only performer of Chinese descent on a Broadway stage, appearing as the “Honorable Reader.”

She was the daughter of an ambassador, yet she did not become a diplomat. Instead, she chose another way of interpreting and connecting two cultures. Her translations were

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not confined to words alone. She translated the Tao of Chinese painting for Western readers, explained China's wartime experiences to American audiences, and transformed the story of her own upbringing into an autobiography.

From Tianjin to London, from Washington to Paris, and from New York to Cambridge, Mai-Mai Sze spent eighty-two years building a bridge between East and West. That bridge was not constructed from steel and concrete, but from paintbrushes, words and public speeches. Her final choice was to have her ashes placed alongside those of her lifelong companion in the garden of an English college, beneath the two halves of a single stone. Like her life, the stone symbolised two inseparable halves: one representing China, the other America. Together, they formed the complete story of Mai-Mai Sze.

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