

A Charming Melange

Malini Seshadri

NO PROBLEM, MR. WALT

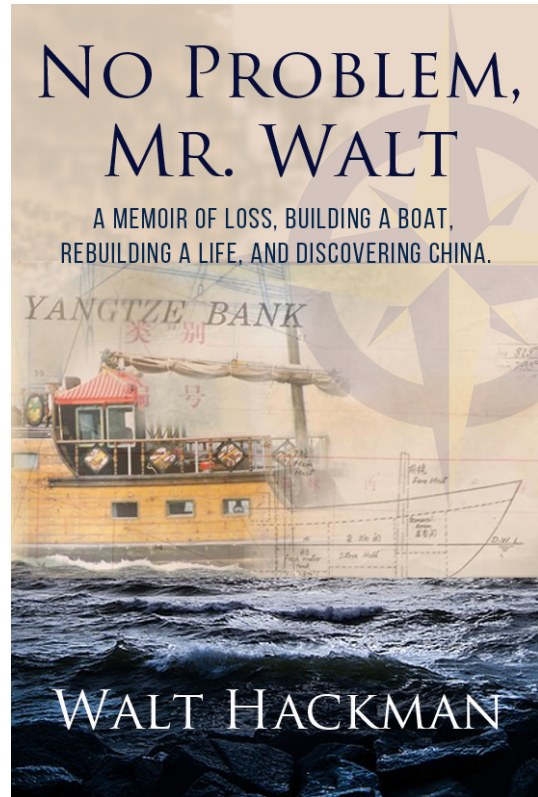
By Walt Hackman

Publish Authority, 2015, \$14.95

A piano instructor told a student's mother, 'Madam, I have been teaching piano to generations of students. I have heard students play on the white keys, and I have heard them play on the black keys. But your son is the only one who can play in the spaces in between.'

Walt Hackman's book plays all the notes between the keys, and often many at the same time. It produces music of a kind that defies a label. It scoffs at the concept of 'genre'. It is the story of an inner journey. It is the story of a journey in China. It is a memoir, an autobiography, a diary, a travelogue. And a history lesson ... and a recipe book ... and a how-to guide. It is a merrystream-of-consciousness rambling from the pen of an astute observer of people and events. And somehow it all comes together charmingly.

Except for the photographs. They look like pictures taken by a schoolboy with a pinhole camera on a cloudy day. Or taken on a sunny day but overexposed. These pictures are not worth a thousand words, so let us stop here. Oh, did we remember to say that there is a lot



of junk in the book? Fifty-four feet of it, to be exact.

But let's start at the beginning ... or in the middle ... or whatever. Meet Mr. Hackman, 'Walt' to his friends. By the end of the 1980s, he has 'a wonderful family, a mortgage, an MBA, and owns an art gallery and a computer maintenance company.' In April 1989, the heavens fall.

His young son Wally is shot dead, and Walt's world implodes. The reader gets a hint that drugs played a part in this tragedy. The wife walks out of the marriage, the daughter moves away to seek relief from a dysfunctional home. Walt is left to pick up the pieces of his life. He does not know where the pieces are. He does not know where to

start looking. He loses interest in his business and wallows painfully through the mess of divorce proceedings. Then, in a bookstore in Melrose Avenue, West Hollywood, Walt finds words of wisdom from the Dhammapada. The Buddha said: *We are what we think/ All that we are arises with our thoughts/ With our thoughts we make the world.* Walt recalls: 'Day by day, the guilt, confusion and anger over my son's death and the impending end to my marriage kept me driving over to the Buddhist temple to sit on my cushion and meditate and "seek nothing".'

All the while, teasing at the edges of his consciousness is an old dream ... to build a boat and live on it. Not just any boat ... a hand-made boat. Fast forward to a rendipitous meeting with a 'China trader' Don and his Chinese wife Mei.

Boat ... China ... wait, do they still build traditional wooden boats by hand in China? They do?

So there it was. In 1991, the decision was made. A traditional wooden junk shall be built by hand in China. And it shall be brought to the California coast, where it will become Walt's new home. *Mei wen ti*, Mr. Walt. No problem.

No problem? Of course there were problems. But was the effort worth it? Just look at that fifty-four foot junk in Ventura harbour. Just think of a life turned around from the brink of a precipice. Just think of the joy of seeing a dream take

shape in front of your eyes. And then you decide.

What is the story Walt tells? He describes it as 'a journey of discovery'. It is about ancient China and modern China. It is about crickets in cages. It is about congee and Tsingtao beer. It is about tedious transcontinental journeys and waterless latrines. It is about an American with no knowledge of the Chinese language talking to Chinese boat-builders who have never heard English spoken. It is about the ubiquitous Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin, whose statue resides in many Chinese homes. And it is about endless cups of green tea, brewed just right and drunk at the proper sedate pace, in parlours and eating houses, boatyards and stores. This is a warm patchwork quilt of a story, stitched together from bits and pieces of serendipitous encounters and Chinese trivia, and stuffed with drawings and designs for a wooden boat.

The frilly decoration for this colourful quilt is composed of vignettes from Chinese history. Hackman employs a unique artifice to acquaint the reader with the rudiments of the history of the Land of the Dragon. Eschewing the humdrum route of adding an appendix, he decides to use a kind of 'medicinal dose technique'. He ladles out the history in compressed 'tablets' as a preface to each of the chapters. By the time the reader reaches the end of the book, he has

a working knowledge of a hundred-year history of China from the early twentieth century onwards. Provided the reader has diligently ingested these 'doses', he will be clued in on Pu Yi, the last emperor who resided in the Forbidden City, and the rumblings of a new Republic that was plotting his downfall. He will have heard of the warlords who came and went at a bewildering pace as the dragon ran wild and the republic was throttled at birth. He will meet Mao and follow the rise of Chinese Communism. He will meet Sun Yat-Sen and Chiang Kai Shek and marvel at their fluctuating fortunes. He will be taken on the Long March and be introduced to a Little Red Book. And in time Deng will emerge to save the day and set a new and prosperous direction to a country impoverished by the myopic vision of Mao.

These little prefaces to the chapters are in no way related to the contents of the chapters themselves. For instance, the chapter prefaced by Chiang's retreat to Taiwan is devoted to dinner at Mei's family's new apartment in Shanghai. *Take the tablet before dinner.*

What was that you said? You wanted to hear about some of the ancient Chinese dynasties too? Well, just read over Walt's shadow as he pores through Chinese history books, and soon 'Qing and Ming will begin to ring a bell.

But come now, have we forgotten what this was all about? It was

about building a boat, wasn't it? So let's get to it. Walt knew what he wanted. Or rather, he knew what he *didn't* want. He didn't want a me-too, offthe-shelf vessel. He wanted an authentic, classic, traditional boat, built by hand by traditional boat builders. It took a lot of enquiring and research with the help of his China trader friend Don to home in on a boatyard in Changshu, not far from Shanghai. So here Walt is, taking his first trip to Shanghai in the company of the seasoned China traveller Don and his wife Mei. We the readers shadow him as he starts out on this brand new chapter of his life. We see with his eyes, and listen with his ears as he negotiates an unfamiliar cultural topography. His instinctive sensitivity to nuances of body language, his Job-like patience and cheerful good humour serve to smoothen many a potential problem.

Ah, did we say 'problem'? No problem, Mr. Walt, we can explain.

First, there is the matter of communication. A few words in English from Walt are turned into a welter of Chinese words in Mei's translation. Another verbal cascade is unleashed by the boat-builder in response. And so it goes, on and on, punctuated by endless cups of green tea. Walt is left wondering, did the boatman understand what I want? Can he read the drawings? *Mei wen ti.*

The more intricate matter of a building contract complete with

penalty clause. More talking. Done at last. Walt wants an insurance policy as well? Really? Please say that in Chinese. *Mei wen ti.*

These are the kinds of engines I want, says Walt. This is the list of bulkhead fittings. And I need a generator installed here ... here where I have marked it on the drawing. *Mei wen ti.*

There are documents to be translated into Chinese. There are multiple trips to be made back and forth between Los Angeles, Shanghai and Changshu, tying up the logistics at both ends. There are trips with Don and a trip solo. Drawings are misread, parts get mislaid. There are hiccups and delays. *Mei wen ...*

By now Walt is a familiar presence at the Yushan hotel in Changshu. He strides out every morning for a longish walk to the boatyard. He ignores the gaggle of pedicab drivers outside and they ignore him. They know he is not a potential customer; they tried to rip him off the first time, and he is now wise to their ways.

Walt stops off for a conjee breakfast and then stands by on the street to watch the intricacies involved in the making of hemp rope.

In China there is always time to stand and stare. It is not that time stands still in China. It is just that life moves slower here than back in Los Angeles. It takes longer to have a conversation. It takes longer to

brew tea and drink it. And it takes longer to build a boat. There's time to learn about medicinal herbs and Chinese recipes, how to caulk a boat and how to make a hemp rope, where to buy pet crickets and what to feed them... (We now know that Pu Yi the pet cricket, named in honour of the last emperor of course, can fly as fast as an aircraft when she and her cage are carried aboard by a passenger named Walt Hackman).

But back to the boat. It's now taking shape, but it's way behind schedule. The contract has run out. Will it be renewed? *Mei...* It will be ready for sea trials on March 15, 1993. The date comes and goes and the boat builders are still at it. Walt visits in the hope of speeding things along ... and drinks more green tea. And then, with Walt back in Los Angeles and waiting to hear, comes a thunderbolt all the way from China. We can't send the boat to California for the price we agreed on. We need another 40 thousand dollars.

Consternation, protestation, exploration of arbitration ... solution. *Mei wen ti.*

The boat arrives in Los Angeles harbour lashed securely on the deck of a freighter ship. A crane lowers it on to the dock. Walt doesn't tell us he is overjoyed. Or that he is relieved. Or that he is suffused with contentment. He merely tells us he inspected it and found it was undamaged; and that the tiger face

painted on the front by the Chinese boat builders was looking back at him.

And what was the name painted on the side? No prizes for guessing this one! *MEI WEN TI*.

Is a reviewer allowed to write an epilogue? Why not, for a book that plays its music between the keys! Walt lived on the *Mei Wen Ti* in Ventura harbour for a few years. He then sold the boat to his daughter, who sold it again some years later. The junk and its new owner live in Los Angeles harbour. This book took much longer to take shape than the *Mei Wen Ti* did. Walt now has a new life with a new wife. Another journey has commenced.

No problem, Mr. Walt.

Malini Seshadri is a freelance writer, translator and editor based in Chennai.

[The Book Review](#)

VOLUME XLI NUMBER 1
JANUARY 2017, pp. 290