

BiLan Liao
Interview Questions and Answer

1. Tell us about yourself. (Background)

I am a contemporary Chinese artist, art educator, and author of the book *Diary of the Dragon's Daughter*. I was born and grew up in China during the worst holocaust in recorded history, under the dictator Mao Zedong. My family and I experienced much discrimination and many hardships because my father was a doctor. For me the darkest of times was when my sister died at school one day and we starved while my father was in prison. I almost lost my hope for a better life when all the schools were closed, the books were destroyed, and artists, educators, doctors, lawyers, business owners, and professionals lost everything. They were sent to work on farms or in factories, or to prison. The most common reform is known in the West as the Chinese Cultural Revolution. During this time, I was lucky to receive my education in hiding, and dream of one day finding freedom in American.

After the Cultural Revolution ended, I was finally blessed with a variety of opportunities to use my artistic talents and became the art director in Shenzhen. While still in China, in 1999 I was granted U.S. permanent residency under the "Alien of Extraordinary Abilities" category. At the age of forty-five I realized my American Dream when I came to America.

2. Tell us about your American dream.

My American dream is to have the freedom of speech to share my truth, and to be allowed to express my human rights and my personal power as a woman and a citizen of the world. As an artist, I consider having the freedom of self-expression to paint what I feel, think, and desire from my soul to be extremely important. In China I did not have this freedom. The Chinese government was very controlling about the art subjects that were allowed during the time I was there.

3. Tell us about your art and story.

My artwork is soulful, truthful, and inspiring. My paintings tell the stories of my family and my journey in China and coming to America. My story offers an honest look at the political, social, and cultural issues of China from the point of view of my family experience. I explore the relationships between my personal story, Chinese history, and fine art. It is not unusual for people to view my paintings and be moved to tears as they relate to the hardship and suffering that we endure as dreamers, immigrants, minorities, and women, and those of us who simply appear to be different. My artwork encourages people to share their family's story about coming to America. Almost everyone in America has a family member who came here with a dream for a better life. They were willing to endure many hardships and to work hard, and that is what makes America a symbol for hope and freedom around the world. My story is about the human spirit that is in every one of us.

4. Tell us about your book.

The book includes three series of artwork. "*Painting as a Window into Chinese History*" is about the five generations of women in my family who experienced abuse, neglect, and starvation. For me the hardest was the deaths of my father and my sister. I had to work as a welder at the age of fourteen. Soon I was assigned to a project in a wasteland where I lived in a morgue that was still surrounded by many graves and ghosts. Later I worked as a welder in a church that had been turned into a factory. During this dark period, all the schools were closed, and the books were destroyed. I had to study in secret while I received my education from my coworkers who were labeled "capitalist." They encouraged me to believe in myself and in my dream for freedom. "*Coming into Tibet*" is my attempt to capture the vastness of the landscapes and the beauty of the Tibetan people. The "*Return*" series is about the impact of war on women around the world. In this second edition I added the chapter "*My Life in America*," expanding the book to 254 pages, including 54 color pages accompanied by over 500 images. It available at the Amazon.com or www.bilanliao.com

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5. Why did you write this book?

I had to write this book to express my deep desire to share my journey. I knew in my heart of hearts that telling my story would help set me free from the hurt and pain my family and I had endured. I also had to write the book for the many people around the world who have experienced discrimination and injustice against their basic human rights.

My country suffered civil wars, invasions from other countries, and much unrest, resulting in fear and uncertainty throughout the land. My fellow citizens were hungry for a strong leader whom we could believe in. But too much power corrupts leaders, driving them to extreme measures to stay in power. This was true of Mao and Hitler, and even today in Russia and North Korea. It is difficult to estimate the millions of Chinese people who died under Mao's many political movements. During just one movement, the Great Leap Forward, at least 45 million people were sent to death in China in a four-year period. Much of this history is not yet available in China even today. I believe my country now has the courage to face what happened and that we can all learn from our mistakes. My greatest hope is that we will learn from history, and not repeat such a tragedy again.

I love both America and China because they have both come a long way to overcome dark periods in their history. I am so proud to see China is developing economically and socially. I do not have the answers for what is best. I only know that it takes time for people to find their freedom and it takes patience from the leaders in countries to find their way.

I desire to send my message of hope to people, especially students today, to always remind yourself during difficult times, never give up your dreams.

6. What was your inspiration for writing this book?

My inspiration for writing this book came from both inside of me and from the many people around me who kept encouraging me to never give up my dream. From deep within me, I had to paint and to write about my journey to know that facing the truth would set me free. It has been very therapeutic and cathartic, though painful at times, getting through the darkness into a bright light and a peaceful place. Painting, playing the piano, and writing my story have helped me feel whole again and helped me overcome most of the nightmares.

7. Is it a topic that a lot of people can easily relate to?

Yes, many people relate to my journey for different reasons. Most all Americans can remember a family story about their forefathers and mothers enduring hardships to come to American in search of their dreams. My Jewish friends can especially relate to the Chinese Holocaust, and they are surprised by the millions for Chinese who died. My African American sisters and brothers can relate to my story because in China we were discriminated against by the Red Guard and many others called us "Black." Everyone had a work status stamped on his or her official documents that determined what job he or she could hold regardless of qualifications. My status was a "Worker," and I could not have a professional job. I was turned down many times even though everyone knew I was qualified.

Perhaps most of all, women can relate to my story because of the "Me Too" movement. My first husband tried many times to hold me back with his verbal abuse and harsh treatment toward me and our baby. When she was born, he tried to get the doctor to sign a paper stating that she was seriously ill. If this had happened, she could have died, and my husband knew that we could then try to have a baby boy instead of a girl. This was the way things were during the "One Child Policy." This is one of many events that inspired me to tell my story to release the pain inside.

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Opening up your heart to tell the truth is what the “Me Too” movement is about. Finally, more women are getting support to come forward to tell their truth and set themselves free.

Here are just few comments from readers about the relevance of my book.

“Her life in the U.S. which is especially relevant today — during a time when many immigrants are being viewed with such negativity. . . .” — Vance Farrow

“Her journey is heroic, and her telling is educational and inspirational. Her paintings require one to ask more questions. . . .” — Sue Ann Taylor,

“*Diary of the Dragon’s Daughter* has inspired me to stay true to my own dreams and to seek ever greater goals in my own life.”— Leslie Safford

8. People compare you to Anne Frank hiding from the Nazis during WWII. How do you feel about your book *Diary of the Dragon’s Daughter* being compared to *The Diary of Anne Frank*?

Yes, people have compared me to Anne Frank. Let me say first say that I am not political. I am honored to be compared to someone like Anne Frank who shared her personal story about the Jewish Holocaust. Her writings greatly helped people around the world to better understand and relate to the human side of this dark period. My greatest hope is that my story about the Chinese Holocaust may also help people find the courage and the support necessary to stand up against discrimination, persecution, and hatred, and to always remember to ever give up your dreams.

9. Did you feel there was a gap in the market for this type of story?

Yes, I believe there is definitely a gap in the market for a compelling way to tell the story of the worst holocaust in human history. Otherwise, more people would know about it, and more countries would be doing more to prevent history from repeating itself. Many people in China today are afraid to speak openly about such events as Tiananmen Square. I’m proud of my country because China is only now showing signs of having the courage to face this dark period in their history. And though there are many books about Chinese Modern history, there has never been a book about a family’s personal journey told with paintings, photographs, and sculptures all in one book.

There is also a market for using many varieties of artwork in which one artist shares personal stories that make the story a richer experience and deeper impression for everyone. There is also a market for my story because this is an important time in our history when we need a beacon of hope to keep our dreams alive and the courage to stand up for the freedom to express them. My paintings, combined with writing, provide a kaleidoscope of emotions, meanings, and at times catharsis and closure. The combined modes of visual and verbal expression are the most effective ways for me to tell my story, speak my truth, and encourage other to be true to themselves.

10. Does the book shed new light on a common issue?

Yes, there are common issues. For example, immigration is an important common issue that needs new attention. However, behind those headlines a new light needs to shine forth on the truth about how it is being used to demonize many innocent people to shift our attention away from more important issues. Mao used the same tactics that are used today by Russia, North Korea, Syria, and other countries in an attempt to control their people. Fortunately, technology and social media make it more difficult, though not impossible, for such leaders to control millions of people. The stories and artwork in my book help make these tactics more obvious and real to the reader.

There is also the common issue of the “Me Too” movement, as more women have the courage and support to come forward and share what is true.

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11. Is the story set in a place or time that is quite significant?

Again, I am not political. But yes, my story is very significant because what is happening today is a repeat of what happened in China from 1949 to 1976. Look at America, Britain, France, Germany, and other countries where democracy was once the standard, and now the ultra-conservative groups are moving the agenda to more centralized power and control. The parallels are undeniable and must be addressed. My sculpture of Mao symbolizes what happens to dictators when they have only one eye on maintaining power through intimidation and media control while their other eye is missing the tragedies that are happening to their people.

It is very understandable that people today are concerned about the largest migration of people in the history of the world. People are fleeing from the wars in the Middle East, where there is much devastation, and from poor countries in South America, where there are economic upheavals, crime, and corruption. Americans and many other people around the world are concerned about the influx of these people on their economy. However, these issues can be addressed without using this situation to create fear and hate in the hearts of people against the many innocent men, women, and children seeking safety and willing to work hard for a better life.

12. Why do you feel your story should be shared on TV?

I hope my story will be on TV because my artwork and narratives greatly help people to find the courage within themselves to always keep trying and to keep their dreams alive. Stories of overcoming adversity help us to stand up for what is right, and to find a better way. Working together we can avoid repeating the past mistakes that countries have made. We must all tell our stories and support one another to bring an end to these arbitrary divisions and find the union of our overall purpose and freedom. We need to remember Anne Frank's personal story during World War II under Hitler. Also, millions more people died in China and my family had many difficult times. Democracy is a precious thing, and people must protect it by standing up for what is right and helping one another. We are all in this together. It is also my wish to encourage people be true to their own journeys and to never give up their dreams.

13. Do you have a unique background different from most other authors?

Yes, my background is unique because I overcame many obstacles with the support of my family, friends, teachers, and coworkers. I'm told that most people would not have endured such hardship and would have given up their dream for a better life. I was also blessed with a variety of artistic talents to help tell my story: painting, sculpture, photography, fashion design, journalism, teaching, and graphic design. My passion to paint my story and write it has been described as different from that of other authors. Also, some people have compared my willingness to keep trying in the face of adversity to the movie "Rocky" because Sylvester Stallone always kept getting up after being knocked down.

14. Who are your own favorite writers?

I love to read nonfiction book and watch documentary movies about history. When I was an art professor, I taught art appreciation and my students enjoyed the movie about Vincent Gogh played by Kirk Douglas. There are many wonderful stories about John Singer Sargent, Rembrandt, and many others.

Frank Dottie is my favorite author now writing about Chinese history. He is a professor and chair of the History Department, University of Hong Kong. Also, some people find my book with so much artwork even more compelling than the bestselling book by Jung Chang, *The Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*.

In addition to my favorite books, my favorite movie is the movie *Frida* about the artist Frida Kahlo played by Selma Hayek. Frida paints to express her truth and her pain.

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15. What are some of your biggest achievements or accomplishments?

Not knowing how to speak English, I started as a child would, learning a new language and customs. In nine years, I earned two master's degrees in art (MA and MFA), studied art in Italy, and became an art college professor in Kentucky, where I built the BiLan Liao Gallery.

I painted my journey in China and wrote my stories in English, now in my book, *Diary of the Dragon's Daughter*. I also painted two other series of paintings: "Coming into Tibet" and the "Return" series about the impact of war.

Finally, I educated my daughter. She is a very successful professor at a college in America with two master's degrees and a doctorate degree.

16. What are your future projects?

I will always continue to paint and write about my life in China. I also look forward to working with maestro Juan Ramirez as we present motivational programs showing my art and sharing my journey with the music he has composed specifically for my stories. We are scheduled to present to a middle school in Georgia where students and their parents will be invited to remember their family stories about coming to America. I also hope my artwork will be exhibited in museums and galleries in America and around the world. My greatest desire is to send my message of hope to people, especially students today, to always remind yourself during difficult times, "Never give up your dreams."