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Solo climber compares life to scaling peaks

An Austrian solo mountaineer draws parallels between climbing and life in a new book that targets a Chinese audience. Kerri Pang talks to the philosopher-climber.

For solo mountaineer, writer and motivational speaker Thomas Bubendorfer, “to not stand still is the meaning of life.” And for the Austrian extreme sportsman, linguist and reader of literature and philosophy every human action “must serve to help the human being grow and become better.”

Solo mountaineering is one of the world’s most challenging sports — the climber relies solely on himself and uses no ropes, elaborate equipment or oxygen.

“When I’m climbing, the only thing that’s on my mind is the quality of the next step,” 49-year-old Bubendorfer says. “In that state of total focus and concentration, I even end up forgetting about time.”

Bubendorfer was in Shanghai this week to promote his seventh book, “Life is Like Mountaineering,” written in Chinese for a Chinese audience. Richly illustrated, it describes his breathtaking expeditions around the world, his mental preparation and approach during a climb, his philosophy of life and his respect for nature.

“I hope the book can help people overcome anxiety, make better decisions under pressure, be self-reliant and most importantly achieve success, happiness and inner peace,” says Bubendorfer.

“When I was writing this book, I kept the Chinese reader in mind, along with the rich ancient history of China.”

In September, Bubendorfer and six highly experienced Chinese mountaineers will together take on the challenge of climbing the unconquered 6,500-meter-high Mt Dazi in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Four of the team are Tibetans. In 2012 the team aims to scale another unclimbed peak in Tibet, 7,500-meter-high Mt Cho-oyi.

“Solo climbing is the most dangerous thing you can do. If you take a wrong step, you’re dead,” Bubendorfer says. “But I know my limits, and the danger sharpens my mind and forces me to focus.”

Bubendorfer started solo climbing at a young age of 16 and became a professional climber at the age of 19. He has set many solo ascent records, including that of the biggest challenge in the Alps, the Eiger North Face. According to his website, he made the ascent in four hours and 50 minutes, passing two well-equipped English teams that took three days to reach the summit.

He has accomplished 70 first ascents, with solo climbs in Europe, the Andes and the Himalayas. This is not Bubendorfer’s first trip to China. In



Thomas Bubendorfer (right) is congratulated by Dr Axel C Heitmann, chairman of the board of management of LANXESS AG, at the launch of his book “Life is Like Mountaineering” in Shanghai.

1987, he visited Kunming in Yunnan Province to climb in the Stone Forest.

Bubendorfer speaks German, Italian, French and English and reads extensively in philosophy.

Despite his skills and experience, Bubendorfer does not credit primarily his physical training, but his motivation and state of mind.

“What I execute on the mountains, I execute in life also. This is why I climb and write — because I want to, and not because I have to,” Bubendorfer says. “Success, money and fame are only possible because I give my best in what I do and love.”

He says his philosophy is distinct from that of many business people, for whom money and status are both motivators and indicators of success.

For Bubendorfer, success does not necessarily mean reaching the summit of every mountain and failure is not necessarily not reaching the summit.

“Failure is when you don’t try for the dream you have for yourself,” Bubendorfer says. “Although I don’t reach the summit of some mountains I climb, I know I didn’t fail, because I tried and gave all that I had to give.”

Given the high risks of solo climbing, Bubendorfer is often asked the reasons for his continual search for unclimbed mountains to scale. To answer, he compares life to the process of creating a sculpture.

“Everyone is born as a raw block of talent. I was born with a talent for mountaineering and writing,” Bubendorfer says. “So for every mountain I climb, and every book I write — I’m sculpted even further into that sculpture I was meant to be.”

Ink-wash paintings of urban faces

Wang Jie

INFUSING Chinese ink-wash paintings with a new look while preserving tradition is easier said than done. Not many artists achieve a satisfactory fusion, but a new exhibition showcases the significant work of Shanghai pioneers.

Ink-wash paintings by Zhang Guimin, Wang Jieyin, Zhang Peicheng, He Xi, Cai Guangbin and Lu Chuntao are exhibited at Huafu Art Center at M50 through August 15.

Titled “Contemporary Spiritual Realm,” the show features 40 new paintings by these representative members of the Shanghai Ink School.

The works are varied in subject,

angle and use of color but all reflect a modern spirit.

“Many people say that my paintings are reminiscent of Miro in the West — I don’t know whether that’s a compliment or a criticism,” says Zhang Guimin, the former director of the Liu Haisu Art Museum. “Unlike many of my peers, I explored possibilities in the application of color.”

Zhang uses vibrant colors, very different from traditional ink wash, and conjures up tableau with Western feeling.

“It’s not easy to achieve these effects,” says Zhang. “I experimented for a long time on rice paper.”

Artist He Xi tends to use metaphor and present a narrative through his

depiction of fish, glass and vases.

Among the six, only Zhang Peicheng features human figures and these are exaggerated with a feeling of primitive folk art.

“If you look closely, you will see that I also use multiple perspective,” says Zhang. “I prefer to depict the ordinary people around me on rice paper. It’s more meaningful to depict urban people than familiar ancient ladies whom I have never seen.”

Date: Through August 15, 10am-5pm
Address: Rm 217, Bldg 4, 50 Moganshan Rd
Tel: 3208-0681

“Women” by Zhang Peicheng

