

## The Elements of Baja- Yuan Miao

I grew up in a farm-like environment, because the Agricultural Institute I lived in resembled a farming village. Later in life, I worked on two CCTV shows, "Elegance of the Divine Land" and "Humans and Nature." My job gave the opportunity to travel to see these beautiful sights. In Beijing and America, I have also lived in beautiful places. Even though I wasn't intentionally picky, these great places "picked" me so I could live a peaceful and calm life.

One time, I retreated to a place called Baja. Baja is peninsula in Mexico. It has volcanoes, a wide swath of desert, and many cactus-like plants. That place is one that many Americans enjoyed traveling to because it is very close to the US, and easy to reach either by car or private plane. The gulf there is very special. The warm waters of the Colorado River flows into the Pacific Ocean at this juncture and is blended into the sea water, so the marine life is very rich. It's a place where blue whales, humpback whales, dolphins, and sharks enjoy congregating. In addition to this, there are other notable sights to see such as Moon Valley and remains of indigenous villages. The hills in Moon Valley are mostly piles of fossilized shells or crushed shells. This proves that, a long time ago, this was once the bottom of the sea. At night, phosphorous lights blinked on and off, as if clusters of stars have fallen to Earth. Because there is no electricity, Baja has basically retained its original natural state. The only noise that appears comes from speedboats racing across the sea or from the whirring of helicopter blades.

Because of this kind of living conditions, there are few signs of human habitation in this area. I didn't have to speak; I could rest my mouth. I didn't need to discern sounds; I could rest my ears. But I had three pairs of eyes to observe everything. With my first pair of eyes I could see the traces left by snakes slithering across the land and the colorful patterns on giant lizards. I could see birds dancing through the sky, and see whales and pods of dolphins intermittently leap out of the sea. My second pair of eyes was my "telescope." I can bring the images of these creatures closer to me so I could observe them down to the smallest details. My third pair of eyes can see through the material level, and straight into my "ultimate home"; they are my mind's eyes.

In the days I spent in retreat on Baja, what did I ultimately see at my "ultimate home?" There are two scenes I remember like it was yesterday...

In one, I sat in a canoe steered by a woman in simple clothes. The river we were on winded into a place that looked like an ancient castle. After we came onto shore, she guided me through a pair of great doors and made a gesture for me to wait in the back. I leaned against the high walls, stretched my neck and peeked inside. I saw three old men sitting in lotus position; they formed a circle in the middle of a big open space. One of them had a round face and no facial hair. The other two were skinnier and bearded. They wore dark blue-gray robes, and had already entered Samadhi (a state of concentration). I tip-toed into this large empty space and then discovered that at the outer edges of this empty space stood many people

with their eyes closed and with their hands making mudras. As I became absorbed in the sight, the portly old man approached me and guided me into the center of the empty space to sit and face the other two old men. But the two old men remained in a state of deep meditative concentration. By the time I memorized their faces, I discovered that the portly old man had disappeared. I looked for him everywhere. When I lowered my eyes, I saw that I was standing on water, on golden water. When I raised my eyes again, I saw the portly old man covered in shimmering gold light, looking tall and dignified. He looked at me with a kind and compassionate smile ... I instantly fell to my knees and called out, "Master!" Then I cried. He patted me on the head and then said, "Go back." So I came back.

Another image was...I returned to that big open space. Again, I snuck in. I saw the three old men sitting in a circle. This time they were not in a meditative state, they were "playing around" with mudras. Their mudras were gorgeous and lights of all the colors of the rainbows shot out from between their fingers; and out from the rainbow light flew a phoenix. The phoenix wasn't very big, but its colors were unusually resplendent. It circled above them in the sky. The portly master turned his head toward me, as if to ask, "Do you understand what you're seeing?" In an instant, I returned to the land. I saw a giant phoenix descending from the sky, perching on the top of a mountain. Its long tail mingled with the colors of dusk. It extended its head toward me, stretching over the plains and rivers to come in front of me. Beautifully and serenely, he gazed at me...

For a long time I immersed myself in these images. Whether I was using my eyes to look at the light particles in the blue skies and white clouds or using my "telescope" to search for dolphins, the image of the phoenix constantly surfaced in my mind.

Ancient eastern civilizations such as India, China, Egypt, or modern western civilization, all share this same myth: that a phoenix will immolate itself every thousand years and then rise again from the ashes. The Buddhist concept of "Phoenix Nirvana" is along these same lines.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is the century when the phoenix will rise again. All kinds of religions are expressing different levels of "aging." Most people refer to this "aging" as the "day of reckoning" or the Era of "Dharma-degeneration." But the world will never actually end, and Dharma does not arise or cease. The so-called "day of reckoning" is "going to negative extremes" and the so-called "Dharma-degeneration" refers to the death of human hearts. Around the world you will hear the word, "busy." The Chinese character for "busy" is composed of the character for "heart" and for "death." Isn't the death of a heart a form of Dharma-degeneration? And the self-immolation of the human heart is caused by the Five Poisons. When we immolate ourselves and become dust, that is the "day of reckoning" and the "going to negative extremes." And rising again from the ashes is the "coming of blessings."

"Phoenix rising" means to pray for, believe, and manifest this "coming of blessings." For every individual, your loss, your pain, all the hardships you have suffered may set fire to your faith, to your love. Even though you may retain a little bit of "capital" that remains after the disaster, everything may have turned into ash. Therefore you may become hopeless, helpless, and angry beyond belief. You may instantly leave all worldly things behind. Because your hopes have turned into dust, you may no longer believe in anything, so you just want to die. You may do everything you can to seek sensual pleasures and end up living in a daze. You may

single-mindedly crave even more things, and may be jealous of those stronger than you, look down on those who may not be as good as you. Your minds may filled with fright; you are afraid of getting sick, of aging, of dying, of earthquakes, of poverty, of being abandoned, of the plane breaking down, of accidents on the highway...This is how you Buddha-mind is incinerated by a wildfire.

Allow the phoenix in your life to rise again from the ashes! That "coming of blessings" is gazing at you with beauty and serenity.

I returned to Baja earlier this year. I picked up the feathers shed by the seabirds in flight. Along with the shells by the sea, the plants in the desert, the iron Guanyin tea from China, the ink from Japan, the blend of colors from Korea, I entered a state of emptiness in Shakti and called forth that phoenix energy to manifest these paintings. Basically, I didn't use any brushes at all.

My friends, I hope when you see these pictures you can instantly sense the blessings of the phoenix.