

# Structure and Ambiguity

## Projects, Texts and Stories

Peter Stickland

My grateful thanks to

Runwu Fang (Ray)

Zhihong Hu, (Red)

Wu-Han Chou, (Nylas)

My ability to teach in China relies entirely  
on their friendship, enthusiasm, intellectual  
agility and skills in translation.



## Translators

I am truly impressed by my ex-students who have an extraordinary ability to translate my words into Chinese, both aurally and in written form.

The translators for this book were: -

### **Wu-Han Chou, (Nylas)**

Introduction

Dreaming the Plan as Theatre

The Reverse Process

Material Imagination

The Breath of Jīngshén

### **Feng Shao (Recy)**

The Nature of Things

Reflective Journal

### **Fang Xie (Frances)**

Chapters one, two and three

Some comments on drawing and research

Introduction to Sensitivity and Enchantment

This book is dedicated to all my Chinese students

My grateful thanks to

**Zhihong Hu, (Red)**

for the design and layout of this book and

**Fang Xie (Frances)**

for the final editing and layout.

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## Introduction

Part 1 Material Imagination - 2017

Part 2 The Breath of Jīngshén - 2018

# Introduction

This book started out to celebrate the work of first year students at CAA, but gradually the ambition grew. It would seem that there is an expectation that I introduce some of the ideas that have inspired my approach to teaching architectural design. It is by no means a traditional methodology, but it is interesting to note that it is inspired by the kind of thinking that has its roots in aspects of Oriental philosophy.

*“Whoever told people that ‘Mind’ means  
thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts?  
Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles and grasses.”*

Dogen - founder of the Soto school of Japanese Zen

I am very interested in this statement by Dogen. I can't tell you what it means exactly and yet I fully understand it. It hints at what material imagination, a chapter in this book, might mean. I hope you can read this book read with an open mind, for its subject will not be immediately apparent or easily grasped. The subject is, however, dear to my heart and important for my teaching, so I will try to explain why my processes of 'structure and ambiguity' played out with all the sensitivity implicit in possessing a 'material imagination' is a subject that Chinese architectural design students should know about. The attitude at the heart of it is close to the spirit of Taoism and the use of the I Ching and Feng Shui when decision making for garden design and other poetic installations in the environment are required. This should make it relevant and second nature to Chinese readers.

Certainly, my view is subjective, but I do have considerable experience and the form of this book highlights different periods in my life when this kind of philosophy has influenced my work. It starts in 1968 when I started studying Architecture and becomes

something concrete in 1972 when I carried out a project at the Architectural Association school of architecture.

I and a number of my contemporaries were profoundly interested in Taoism and Zen. I presumed that these two philosophies were close partners as far as decisions for spatial arrangement are concerned. I am still convinced that neither Taoist nor Zen practitioners would have any difficulty embracing my processes of 'structure and ambiguity' played out with all the sensitivity implicit in possessing a 'material imagination'.

I apologize if I appear impertinent when presuming to know about Zen and the Tao, but hopefully I will make my position clear as we progress. I will start with a conversation Nylas, Red and me had about creating a new project.

# 1. Structure and Ambiguity

On our last day in Hangzhou, May 2018, Nylas, Red and I had lunch with Professor Li Kaisheng, Vice Dean of the School of Architecture at China Academy of Art. We had just carried out a six-week programme with his MA environmental design students. At this lunch we continued the conversation that concluded the exhibition of our work the previous evening. Mr. Li asked us to run another design project next year and when I returned to London, I had a conversation with Nylas and Red to help clarify the subjects that Mr. Li wanted us to address.

*Peter* – Mr. Li wants to know (a) what my influences were in the nineteen sixties and seventies. (b) how I came to connect with China to such an important degree. (c) Can I turn this information into a design course that includes writing and research.

*Nylas* - Mr. Li also wants you to help his students write about the idea of narrative in architecture. He wants this to be the subject of next year's project and I think he wants the students to carry out some group research and write collectively about the uses and benefits of engaging narratives when making architecture. It's ambitious.

*Red* - Mr. Li wants to know about your influences from the sixties until now. He is interested in the period that you studied, how it influenced your philosophy and how it connects to your thinking today. He also wants to know about the historical background to your structural thinking and you must definitely describe how you developed such a strong connection with ancient China; specifically, Lao Tzu and using the I Ching. He would like you to do several lectures. He said his students are not good at writing a thesis or carrying out research, so he would like you to help them by making this part of the course. The subject of their writing could be the

project you run in the spring, but they could start writing and research this autumn. I think he would like you to deal with narrative, but it's up to you.

*Peter* – I've written previously about narrative and much of it is in the Material Imagination book. The students should read this over the summer. It is not an easy subject to describe – it needs demonstrating with photographs. I did a lecture on it at CAA three years ago and I could repeat this and also show the work my students did in London. The students could use this material in their research, but everyone should find their own sense of narrative; it's not a clear-cut subject. I could describe how I came to it and start with my influences in the sixties. I will write something. Maybe I will call it Structural Ambiguity. Does this phrase make sense in Chinese?

*Nylas* - I like the title; it arouses a sense of contradiction. If I'm going to put it into Chinese, it will be "結構性的模糊" for the time being. I think the two words means more than I can get immediately.

*Peter* - Your translation of Structural Ambiguity from the Chinese back into English is "The ambiguity of the structure," but this lacks the dynamic interplay of the two subjects. Caoxue suggested "结构歧义". I am completely fascinated with the way Chinese translation progresses through shared opinions.

*Nylas* - I'm very happy to include Caoxue's thoughts. I will carry on thinking about the translation further. I think the way Caoxue translates it reveals the fact that the word "ambiguity" suggests an unclear situation and a divergent interpretation. I was thinking about the situation while she was thinking about the many possibilities. So, I'm trying to revise the early translation into "結構的模糊狀態與歧義轉譯" to say it is a state offering more than one meaning to be translated.

*Peter* - This is good fun. Thank you Nylas. So, when I translate your words it gives me, "the vague state of the structure and the translation of the disambiguation," which is something truly

extraordinary and totally incomprehensible. I must say when I translated Caoxue's translation it gave me exactly Structural Ambiguity. Let me try to explain this with a book by Levi Strauss, called 'Structural Anthropology.' Anthropology is a known and certain thing and here the word 'structural' simply means that he is using a structural method to talk about it. In his case he is making a comparative structure so that he can identify the similarities and differences of the whole arena of anthropological research. In my case, I am using a structural method, but not a clear science like anthropology, I have a vague state of comprehension called ambiguity, but I am saying that ambiguity should not be passed off as a vague thing; it is, for example, a hugely important quality for poetry and in some of the invitations artists make. It would be satisfying to feel this is architecture.

In 1930, William Empson wrote a book called, 'Seven types of ambiguity.' It is concerned with ambiguity in literature and in each of the types, the presence of duality is paramount, such as when the author expresses two or more meanings that do not agree but combine to make clear a complicated state of mind. I want to do this structurally and that's what I meant about Structural Ambiguity. Such thinking would be good for architectural debate.

We did a very good lecture last year on performance architecture and we could repeat that for next year's group. I often started student's off on a narrative design project by showing them the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Italian painters Duccio and Fra Angelico and explaining how they invented the architecture in their paintings to frame the narrative. Narrative in architecture is inevitably ambiguous because buildings are abstract; they are also complex and multi layered, but they have nothing to do with words. Having said this, buildings can have a language, and ambiguity should be part of it -this language, should be used positively.



If ambiguity in poetry is something like a multiplicity of feelings that add up to more than a simple fact, it would be good to be able to read this structurally in an architectural language. For me ‘reading’ means ‘reading the structure.’

Caixue - I like the joint phrase “structure and ambiguity” and “structural ambiguity.” When you asked me to translate them, I did a little research and found that the original meaning concerns linguistics. I think it would be interesting to break the boundary of the two areas and explore something new, like using one area’s “proper name” to explain that of the other area.

*Peter* – Yes, we should learn about the intricacies of ambiguity's structure and something about the structures of ambiguity. Structure and ambiguity can be quantified and, if a story can be told by the architecture, then this narrative can also be quantified, and its quality discussed. I also like to use the word lyricism, because it comes with a connection to sound and dance, which is deeply engaging. Lyricism is difficult to quantify. In her article, ‘The Rhetorical Question,’ Judith Wolin takes lyricism into a quantifiable realm, by offering a series of architectural categories for rhetoric. (Architecture and Literature, VIA magazine, volume 8, 1986.) This is a very useful tool, but I have a great fondness for ambiguity. It is fresh and risky, it has surprises and it’s suggestive. These are

important features. So, we will call the new programme of study. Structure and Ambiguity.

I have no idea what all this means when using Chinese language, which seems to proceed by using a system of flat key words. each having multiple possibilities for meaning. Maybe we should say that we are using a structural method with the intention of being ambiguous. This process can only be developed with a workshop methodology. I have never made real architecture like this, but I used it for student projects and I still use it to write poetry and make performances and installations.

It is generally believed that in the space making process there are too many urgent issues to be addressed for ambiguous ambitions to warrant a place, but, given that we are surrounded by dead architecture, it is time we looked seriously into its inclusion. William Empson describes two attitudes to language - one that kills it by stripping it of all association, holding it to direct meanings only, and the other attitude, one that kills language by dissipating its sense in a multiplicity of associations. In architecture we must tread carefully between the two, but we need more associations if we are to have any chance or redressing the balance.

*Nylas* - When Mr. Li asked if you were a structuralist, you said yes. What I realise now is that structuralism is an artistic movement and you have been practising it for years. I think Mr. Li is keen to locate this movement and know where you are on the big theory map. He wants to know more about your view and what influenced you.

*Peter* – If you search Wikipedia for structuralism it will give you this - In sociology, anthropology, and linguistics, structuralism is the methodology that implies elements of human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to a larger, overarching system or structure. It works to uncover the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel. It is the belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through

their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure and the laws of abstract culture are constant.

Structuralism in Europe developed in the early 1900s, in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, an array of scholars in the humanities borrowed Saussure's concepts for use in their respective fields of study. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss was the first such scholar, sparking a widespread interest in structuralism, influencing many artists and architects. The 'ism's' of that period are many, but the main flow goes from structuralism, post-structuralism and then post-modernism. I was a structuralist and my structuralism concerned making rather than theory.

*Nylas* – I think we are going to hit problems of translation. The Chinese speaking world is full of 'isms' and these have nothing to do with making and everything to do with understanding the argument. That is why the tutors who visited us in the model-making studio were anxious, because they didn't know how to apply the right 'ism' to describe what we were doing. They paid no attention to the processes. My feeling is that there aren't any methodologies in Chinese architectural education that start the design process with playfulness and prioritise making over thinking. They do not feel confident about the importance of making in education and believe only in rational theory.

I think the use of language is so tricky that sometimes I suspect that those who turn up with ready-made Chinese words get their theories out of proportion. They want to wear theory like a flag and go straight to analysis rather than get close to a thing and sense what it is doing. They need to learn how to listen and be more sensitive. Maybe 'Structural Ambiguity' is a smart English term, but I agree about proceeding with the flat keywords. Maybe 'Structuralism and Ambiguity' would be suitable. It will be "結構主義與歧義" in Chinese. This would enable the 'ism' to be a methodology (方法論) and a

practice (實踐) which is important, because in Chinese these words don't really suggest these aspects of the idea.

Mr. Li also mentioned that he wants us to open up the student's minds and find a way for them to increase their 'Sensitivity'.

*Peter* – Sometimes, people are frightened by sensitivity.

*Caoxue* – I'm touched when I'm told to develop my sensitivity.

Some people say sensitivity is very important, but you are right, most are frightened by it: they believe purposeful, rational action is the only way to succeed. I think the reason people prefer the purposeful and rational action is because they prefer “visible” things. People pay too much attention to the visible things, they ignore and are frightened by the invisible. The thing you keep doing is bring us into the “invisible world” and help us walk step by step until we can feel something in that world. As a result, we have the courage to walk in the “dark.” Our fear of darkness is not because we lack the ability to see, but we lack the ability to feel.

*Peter* – Thank you Caoxue, very well put, and thank you Nylas. The point you make about the lack of methodologies in Chinese culture and practice is very important; it explodes inside me and is typical of the things that can be easily misinterpreted by the Chinese mind. If we can get this right, then we will be doing a very important job. I will start the writing with this issue.

So, if we say sensitivity is crucial, then the three important activities are, how learn to read structurally, how to enjoy ambiguity and how to become more sensitive. As a way of opening up the subject of sensitivity, I conclude this book with an essay called, ‘Material Imagination,’ and a story called ‘The Breath of Jinshen.’

The fourth important activity for students to learn is that everything we do, in our designing and our writing, relies on an appetite for editing. We can't do anything unless we love editing. Edit, edit, edit. Architects, artists, writers, film makers, designers - if they don't like editing, nothing happens. My Chinese students have always shown themselves to be a little frightened of editing - they think everything

should be directed by a concept and they should get it right from the very beginning. They don't appreciate the importance of sketching. All our games are just a way of creating a journey that requires endless editing. Anyone can write about their research interests if they grasp the notions of structure and editing. We will run an editing workshop.

*Nylas* - Surprises, suggestive and associative - these words in your text are very important to me. They remind me of the place I started from in design. It is what surprised me. Let's keep these words going. I think we showed some sensitivity when we were photographing the model, believing that it would be a film.

*Peter* – Yes, we imagined we were making a movie of the model in the same way that when we were in Taiwan, we imagined we were photographing a garden and not the landscape. It is very important to be able to fool yourself, trick yourself and make marvellous mistakes. We went to see the Taoist monk, in the belief that he would give us expansive connections; it was an ambition and probably a mistaken one. In reality he told us that he could not contribute because we did not have a brief from a client. This was the opposite to our quest. So, we made him our client and built him a new temple in the most minimal, rationalist manner, using western geometry as its starting point. The mistake turned out to be the right thing to do. This reminds me of the stories of the Mullah Nasrudin, a satirical Sufi who lived in Turkey in the 13th century. He is remembered for his witty and wise stories, that often describe him as a fool or the butt of a joke. They are the basis of his teaching. Here is a typical story.

*The Mulla had lost his ring in the living room. He searched for it for a while, but since he could not find it, so he went out into the yard and began to look there. His wife, who saw what he was doing, asked: "Mulla, you lost your ring in the room, why are you looking for it in the yard?" The Mulla stroked his beard and said: "The room*

*is too dark, and I can't see very well. I came out to the courtyard to look for my ring because it is lighter out here."*

There is ambiguity here, like there is ambiguity in building a mountain on some undesignated land. If someone doesn't understand why the mountain is there it is almost impossible to explain why. There is no point in explaining a joke either.

*Nylas* - In these Nasrudin stories, I sense there is always another distracting or distracted thought which reveals a straight forward hint of truth and gets you away from what you thought you should be looking at. It's just like our model making process. We were talking to the students about the stories taking place at different levels, with a little wish to blur the outline of our consciousness. I also like the quality of the imagination and the possibility that these stories could be verbally carried along, shared and spread by the caravans of camel. It should be short and give you various layers to ponder upon while riding your camel.

When we were looking for titles for our work we used the words Events, Instructions and Processes. In the book of the project, 'Elements of Performance Architecture,' we have much to say about the latter two activities, is there anything you would like to say about events and is this a useful topic to include in our next project?

*Peter* - Good question. Our model proposed a series of events, but I am most interested in the live events we engaged with. The performances were the most obvious events, but also important were events like visiting the site, performing in the architecture and sitting out one Sunday night in the dark to talk about the ancient stories and our connection with nature. Events are part of the process. Events like going to see the monk, searching for pots, finding the ceramicist and visiting her. The families turning up to watch the making performance and Red's niece contributing so nicely to the model, were also events. All the model making was an event, including the photographic work. Shopping, both physical and internet is event. I

didn't talk about shopping at all, so maybe your question about events is worth adding.

We called our activity shopping, but for me it was a continuous invitation to design according to "The Tao of hunting and gathering." The idea about finding things rather than designing things is crucial, because it employs chance in a very positive way and what we find is often more inspiring than the things a 'sit-down' design process would give us. We are probably the first designers to use mushrooms as trees and this is because we were deeply attuned to how the trees should feel and we saw their usefulness straight away. Being highly sensitised in this way and feeling a little mischievous, we could easily make the connections that suited our needs. The spirit of our activity, our engagement in this notion of event, was a lively affair which allowed marvellous accidents to occur and helped us make remarkable choices. This is designing outside, on the move, walking about, looking for trouble. By comparison, designing on a computer is dead, because you can only do what is in your head or copy something others have done. The event seen like this is daily life and the most useful evidence of the way the spirit of Tao can be used when designing.

## 2. Studying in the UK - the 60's and 70's.

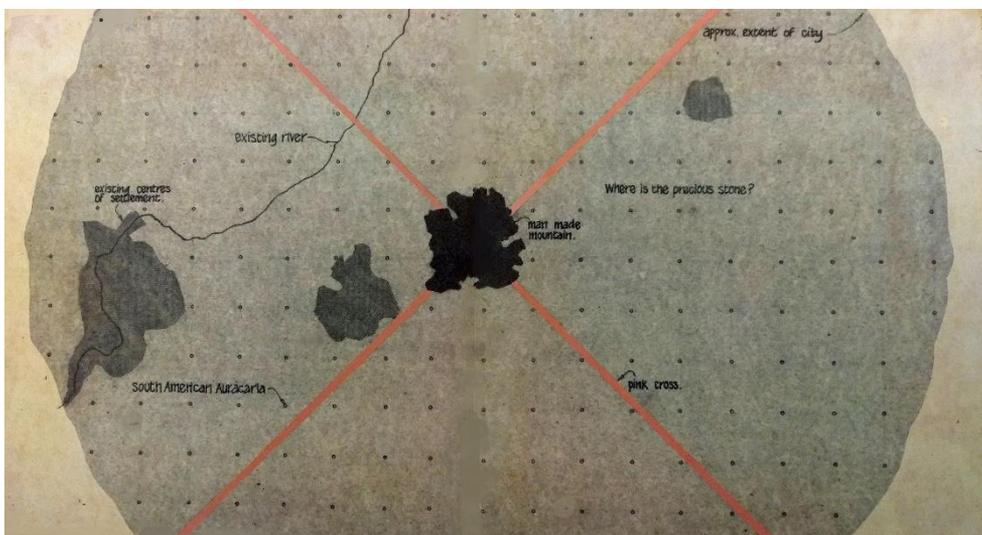
During the 50's, 60's and 70's, the younger generation developed a counterculture. The term "counterculture" was first used by Theodore Roszak in his book: -

*The Making of a Counter Culture, Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition.*"

We all read books like this and believed ourselves to be part of the counterculture. Rozak captured a huge audience from intellectuals and students to Vietnam War protesters, dropouts and rebels. The movement left a great many elders baffled. They did not understand why we needed to reject what Roszak called the technocracy - the regime of corporate business that dominated industrial society. The intellectual underpinnings of this group could be found in the writings of Herbert Marcuse Norman O. Brown, Allen Ginsberg and Paul Goodman. Another important book about our culture was 'The uses of disorder,' by Richard Sennett. Its subtitle was; 'personal identity and city life,' two issues that architects felt were of paramount importance. To make cities that help its inhabitants find their personal identity and enable them to have a good quality of life could be a big issue for China or it may not be something that is essential, but it drove our thinking in the 60's.

So, we had collective concerns for our social environment and collective concerns for our work environment, both equally broad minded. We did not wish to specialise, we wanted to be multi-disciplinary; we believed everything, related to everything else. We connected with music, dance, film, performance, poetry, literature and philosophy, including eastern philosophy. I wanted to study art but lost the argument with my father. I agreed to study architecture, but I insisted on going to an art school, so I could be close to all the other disciplines. I found making architectural propositions easy and pleasurable. I loved dreaming and drawing about how people used

space and I created interesting programmes of habitation. It was much later when I realised that many architects made their propositions by thinking about architecture as an object rather than imagining the actions of its inhabitants. Nothing much happened at the art school and all the interesting things were happening at the Architectural Association School in London, so I transferred. Peter Cook was head of school, the wonderful world of 'Archigram' with its beautiful drawings was inspiring. I soon became enchanted by the intellect of Cedric Price and I joined Bernard Tschumi's studio. Here is the first project I did in his Unit.



Here is how I described my book to myself.

1. Existing settlement means history; physical and social complexity; it means not having a clean slate and accepting with good grace what we are given.
2. The mountain is nature at the centre; it is ambiguity at the centre; no religion or capitalist icon – not even a functional thing. The calm emptiness of Tao.

3. The pink flagstones are instant archaeology. They have no value, but their significance lies in what happens to them and how they gain significance,
4. The grid of monkey puzzle trees is structure to work with and around. They are a restriction, but they are also dynamic icons that invite reading.
5. The precious stone is a secret and an object of desire. It is myth, ambiguity and gathering up stories which point toward how the city was made.
6. Having poets and musicians on the planning authority means decisions are made by those who have nothing to gain; they care for culture and humanity.

For me, this was a Taoist project, but more importantly, it was both archaic and avant-garde, structural and ambiguous. Think of Lao-Tzu and being close to nature and you'll have a sense of what I mean by the archaic. As for the avant-garde, at this time it was mostly preoccupied with minimal structuralism. I liked bringing together the experimental, radical, or unorthodox approach and the belief that the ancient world could teach us something about authenticity. I thought about contemporary structuralism joined with ancient ambiguity and contemporary ambiguity joined with ancient structuralism.

The ancient methods of divination are both ambiguous and structural, but in the modern world we can't simply imitate the divination methods used by our ancestors. What the young in the West realised in the 60's was that the archaic sensibility had all the qualities that the avant-garde was looking for. To our minds, it was brave and connected; having an innate idiosyncrasy at its centre. We could use it to celebrate our unique qualities and embrace propositions that were seen as radical. We wanted to feel alive; have blood coursing through our veins. We wanted to allow chance into

the process and be as open-minded as possible. This was my beginning.

Everything I am interested in now came out in this first project. My perceptions seemed to burst out of me. I had found my position without receiving any tutoring on this project and no proper feedback. I didn't mind about this. I was ready to express whatever it was that pre-occupied me. I was ready to do my own research, but I never managed to develop it very far when I was at the AA. I spent ages trying to interpret the I Ching, trying to invent stages that helped translate and mutate its structure into a sketch for architecture. I got bogged down in accuracy, trying to be truthful, showing my connections, trying to make a clear methodology and got precisely nowhere. I learned most about this way of working when I joined a performance art group called The Theatre of Mistakes. I will describe this later. Suffice it to say that I learned how important the workshop method was and how useless the conceptual one was. I also learned how important speed was to this process of making. No-one teaches you that you must fly around in a carefree state without worrying about accuracy. It's a dance and the sound of it is more useful than anything else. It is simply a way of causing drawings to arrive in the world and learning how to read what they are saying. After that, I learned everything I know by teaching students. They taught me everything important and the whole process took forty years. I might just know what I am looking for, but this thing remains ambiguous.

I don't teach this method because I think design offices should practice it, but I definitely believe that it is something students should start to get the flavour of. They should know that this is a mature and intelligent activity and not worry if something of importance doesn't show in their research immediately. It's a journey and for me it started with the idea that deep structures

existed in all cultures and practices. For reasons unknown to me, I wanted to read everything structurally, to enjoy it and leave the exact nature of its content to be a mystery. I wanted to unite the east and west in me, the Ying and the Yang, the male and female. The eminent psychoanalyst Carl Jung inspired these thoughts in many of us. We wanted to join together the oppositions that the establishment's narrow scientific outlook insisted were mutually exclusive. We wanted sensibility and intellect, structure and ambiguity to reign together. We were an open society, broad minded and multi-disciplinary.

The psychoanalytic revolution typified by the work of Carl Jung was hugely important. Just reading the titles of these books of his will give you an idea of the subjects that inspired me. 'Memories, Dreams, Reflections' and 'Synchronicity; an Acausal Connecting Principle.' Through these I started to understand the nature of the collective unconscious and by reading Mircea Eliade's book 'Myths, dreams, and mysteries,' I came to appreciate the connections between contemporary faiths and archaic realities. Books on Zen Buddhism, many by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, were readily available and its spirit seemed to fill the air. Zen in the USA started in back the late 1940s and 1950s with writers of the Beat Generation, such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. There are many other authors and books I could mention, but if you link these with a reading of the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu and using the I Ching, you begin to get the picture. The copy I used was called, 'I Ching or book of changes,' the word changes being a very significant part of the process. It was translated from the Chinese by Richard Wilhelm and had an inspiring introduction by Carl Jung. During this time, I also read the poems of Jalāl udīn Rūmī, the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic, the stories of Mullah Nasrudin, the 13th-century satirical Sufi from Turkey, the Spanish poet Garcia Lorca, who was killed by

Spanish fascists thirty years earlier and many contemporary American poets, most notably, John Ashbery.

Going to the cinema was as important as any other activity in the 60's and 70's. New lightweight cameras made filmmaking a more democratic process and in France there was an explosion of new directors making revolutionary films. These 'new-wave,' movies were the essence of the 'avant garde.' We saw everything - Bresson, Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette and Renais from France, Antonioni and Fellini from Italy and Buñuel from Spain. A film close to my heart, and one that speaks entirely about structure and ambiguity was 'Celine and Julie go Boating,' by Jacques Rivette. He rarely used actors and all the action was improvised, based upon his instructions.

Music was also hugely important, for both relaxing and for its theoretical position. We had jazz, bringing new worlds of improvisation from black America, composers like Berio from Italy and Stockhausen from Germany and the structural composers, Steve Reich and Philip Glass from the US. I was particularly interested in John Cage who composed his music using the I Ching, as did Merce Cunningham, who composed the dances that shared the stage with Cage's music. Cage wrote a hugely important book called, 'Silence,' which was a collection of his lectures and writings.

Cage and Cunningham met at Black Mountain College, an experimental art school founded in 1933 in North Carolina. In 1933, the Nazis had shut down the Bauhaus in Germany, a similarly progressive arts-based educational institution. Many of the school's faculty left Europe for the US, and a number of them settled at Black Mountain, most notably, Josef Albers, who later ran the art programme. Like the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College was ideologically driven, giving an emphasis to holistic learning and

making art the centre of its liberal arts education. Many of the school's faculty and students became highly influential, such as Josef and Anni Albers, Ruth Asawa, Walter Gropius, Robert Motherwell, Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Allen Ginsberg, Buckminster Fuller and of course Merce Cunningham and John Cage. The school closed in 1957, but by then all the important events and happenings had moved to the lofts and bars of New York City.

Happenings were a performance, event, or situation that was considered to be art. Later, these activities were referred to as performance art. It became popular even though many had neither seen nor experienced these events. They were often minimal affairs, the artist carrying out a few simple instructions, but if an art critic, dealer or museum director were present, the event would become known. These kinds of activities grew into new art movements like Fluxus, which was a loose association of Dada-inspired artists, and this was followed by minimal art and conceptual art arrived. All these 'isms' included artists, composers, designers and architects, as well as economists, mathematicians, ballet dancers, chefs, and even theologians. Many artists shared an anti-commercial and anti-art sensibility and practitioners came from Asia, Europe, and North America. They produced events which included enactments of scores, noise music, time-based works, concrete poetry, visual art, urban planning, architecture, design, literature and publishing. Throughout this time the ideas and practices of John Cage were a big influence. It was his notion that we should embark on an artwork without any conception of its end. It was his understanding that the work should be a site of interaction between artist and audience. These notions inspired younger artists who were keen to privilege the process of creating over the finished product.

Many of these activities could be traced back to the beginning of the century, first to the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, a French artist who was active in Dada from 1916 to 1922 and then back to Picasso and Gertrude Stein, who along with Georges Braque, started the cubist revolution in the early part of the century. Gertrude Stein was an American writer living in Paris, and her writing still a huge influence on the way we were thinking in the 70's. I will finish this chapter with a quote from her called, 'Composition as Explanation.' It was delivered as a lecture at Cambridge and Oxford, and later published by the Hogarth Press in London in 1926.

*“There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it.”*

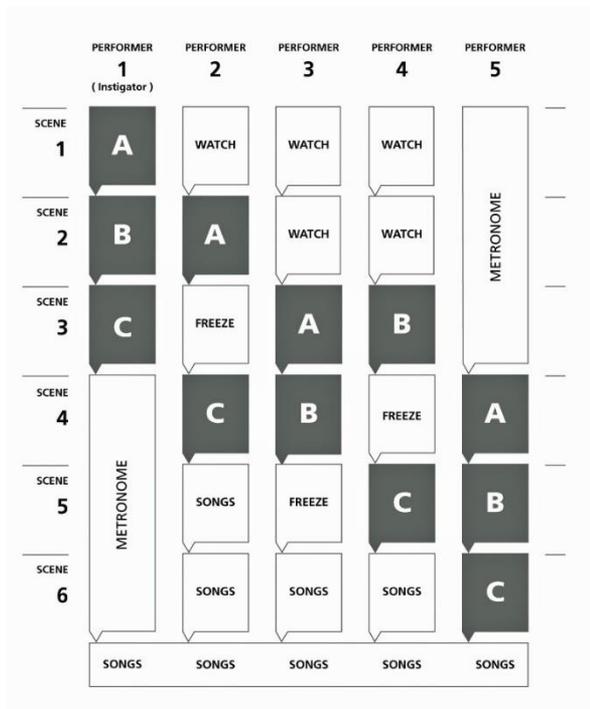
### 3. Performance Art in the 70's and 80's

What I have described so far happened thirty years before people could start using the internet. I have no idea how we gathered up so much information, but we were all connected verbally. There was a boom in magazines of every possible kind, we went to exhibitions and lectures and took part in workshops. One of the workshops I attended was with a group of performance artists who called themselves 'The Theatre of Mistakes.' They were open to anyone who agreed to bring along an instruction or an exercise for the group to perform and agreed to carry out the instructions that others offered to the best of their ability. There was no clear ambition; things were done 'in case there was a reason. The exercises were edited and published as 'Elements of Performance Art.'

I joined the company full-time. Rather than being frustrated in an architect's office, this decision enabled me to be creative everywhere. I was performing on the streets, in parks, on cricket pitches and any kind of common ground as well as in various studios. All the members of the company lived together in the country for much of the time, rehearsing and performing for ourselves. We once performed continually for 24 hours. Playing by chance was an important part of the ethos and once, having read 'The Dice Man,' a novel about a psychiatrist who makes life decisions based on the casting of dice, we decided to spend the weekend making all decisions by chance. We realised that the quality of our time relied on the quality of those things we selected to include in the dice throwing choices, just as our performances relied on the quality of the instructions, structural strategies and exercises we invented. Our skills in this area of activity increased enormously and we were soon invited by many venues. We performed at the Serpentine and Hayward Gallery's in London, the Stedelijk Museum and Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam, later touring both Belgium and Holland. We

performed at the Musee d'Art Moderne and Le Grand Palais in Paris, the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York and the State Penitentiary in Pittsburgh. We performed throughout the UK and Europe, including Berlin, Brescia, Belgrade, Ferrara and Innsbruck. There is plenty of information about us on the internet. <http://diffusion.org.uk/?p=1327> [https://artreview.com/reviews/ar\\_october\\_2017\\_review\\_theatre\\_of\\_mistakes/](https://artreview.com/reviews/ar_october_2017_review_theatre_of_mistakes/)

All the performances were built out of workshops, employing rigorous structures and elaborate notation and the resulting artwork was ambiguous and entertaining. I learned more from this activity than I can tell in this essay, but I will describe two performances. At the Serpentine Gallery in London we performed 'Homage to Pietro Longhi.' Pietro Longhi was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painter. We played with his scenes around a table, keeping his work in mind as we developed structures and strategies that would reflect our sense of his work.

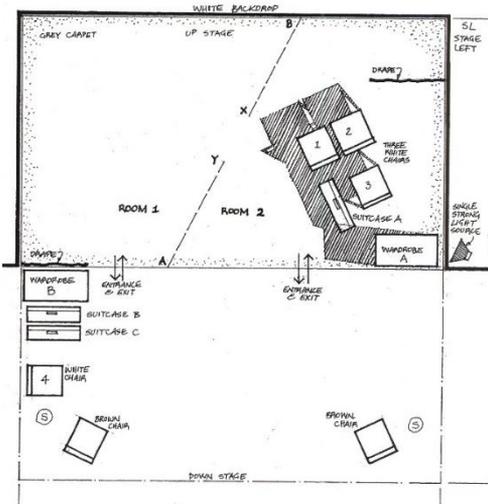


Here is a painting by Pietro Longhi, and a diagram of the structure describing what the five performers are doing during the first scene.



This is a picture of the performance in a tent on the green in front of the Serpentine Gallery.

We made another homage to an Italian painter, this time it a 20<sup>th</sup> century painter from Bologna, called Giorgio Morandi. In his pictures there are bottles, boxes and vases and we scaled up these components for our performance, using wardrobes, chairs and suitcases. Again, the structure was very elaborate. Our time was spent arranging the furniture in the space, just as Morandi's spent his time arranging his objects. We progressively lost our furniture and had to become the furniture in order to carry on with our arrangements. Here is a painting by Morandi, a diagram of the opening layout and a picture of the performance.



I made a solo performance which was also a homage to a painter, namely, the early Marcel Duchamp cubist paintings. It was called ‘The Ninth Method,’ because nine scenes. Each scene shifted the performance direction through 90 degrees, giving a place in performance for the cubist notion of viewing the subject from 360 degrees.

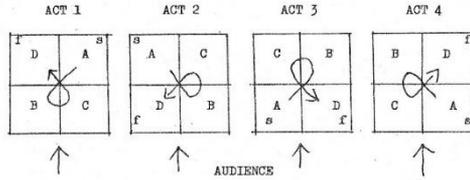
Here is a painting, a diagram and images of the performance.



THE NINTH METHOD

Concerning space as the object

Divide the performance space into four boxes.  
Move through the boxes in the following way.



The Ninth Method, requiring 9 acts, turns the action through 360° twice, plus a repeat of faces 1 & 5 at 9.

Concerning time as the object

In order to build through time, to add or subtract units over a period of 9 acts, the minimum number of units per box will be 45 - the sum of the numbers from 1 to 9. The method of building each box is as follows;

ACTS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		
Box A	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	} No. of units per act.	Additive
Box B	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1		Subtractive
Box C	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5		Static
Box D	2	5	8	4	1	7	3	9	6		Inconsistent

Let each unit equal 5 seconds.

Concerning action as the object

Taking this building method, the characteristic for each box is as follows;

- A - Divide: Consistent narrative } Repetitive and growing  
Build: Additively
- B - Divide: Inconsistent narrative } Non-repetitive and diminishing  
Build: Subtractively
- C - Divide: Consistent narrative } Repetitive and unchanging  
Build: Statically
- D - Divide: Inconsistent narrative } Non-repetitive and dfracted  
Build: Inconsistantly



I could go on at great length, but I think my readers will get the picture. In these works, we were building our propositions through open workshops and rehearsals, concentrating on the language of the subject, finding structures that could frame the activity and making, diagrams, notations and drawings. We remained in the ambiguous world long enough to discover an abstract narrative that resonated with our chosen artist. We never rushed to find a solution and never anticipated the outcome. We never accepted a storyline, we just worked in the hope that we would find a reason. This process is precisely how Nylas, Red and I approached the project at CAA.

The difference being - we converted the diagrams into three-dimensional objects so that we could build a model of the site we were working on. (See 'A Taoist Design Process.')

We described it as two Taoist temples flanking a children's playground, but this description is not the reality; we were describing the abstract narrative of these materials. The model had nothing to do with a proposition for functions, there was no intended social function or recommended brief, it was simply offering an abstract architectural language from which to start thinking about functionality. We were putting the language and the structure, with all its ambiguous qualities, in the primary position, at the beginning where it can genuinely operate effectively, and putting any discussion with the client in the secondary position, because this is the best place for function in architecture to be effective.

## 4. Dreaming the Plan as Theatre - 1992

### DREAMING THE PLAN AS THEATRE

#### THE WALK THROUGH INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE

*"The world is strewn with unrelated things, immobile and inert solids; objects foreign to our nature. The soul suffers from a deficiency of material imagination."*

Gaston Bachelard - "Water and Dreams".

#### INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to offer some thoughts to students who are embarking on the task of changing a space or a building from one programme of habitation to another. Given the importance of this subject, it has inevitably received much attention. Comprehensive design methodologies exist in great numbers to explain everything from the most practical to the most ideological approaches. This is not an analysis of the material that exists but a selection of design models, plus a few additional thoughts, which are offered in an attempt to move the concerns further towards what Gaston Bachelard would term "The Poetics of Space". (1)

I wish to confirm that the term 'plan', as used in this essay, does predominantly relate to the drawn floor plan, but it does not exclude other forms of expression, such as the model or the sectional or axonometric drawings which are needed to confirm the strategy. How one chooses to draw the plan is in itself a statement of intention, an idea at the very centre of your concern, and both the medium and the message must be chosen with great care.

This essay is an excuse to talk about '*dreaming into*' the plan, but it is also an attempt to see how far and with what relevance we can talk about '*going on the journey*' that is proposed by the plan's layout. I will be approaching the task of planning from a wide range of views and a wide range of focus. If there are central themes to the exercise, they exist concerning the relationships between spaces, the notion of sequence and the demand for specific qualities out of public and private space. There is also an attitude central to this thesis; most simply put it is '*to regard a problem as an ally*' and I hope that this will become clear as the argument progresses. I will tend to neglect '*looking at*' space, in favour of '*being in*' it and I may tend to be over sensitive towards its effects. I am exploring models that provide a potential for '*dramatic occasions*' as we, the inhabitants, walk through the architecture, and to discern whether such '*theatrical events*' can exist down at the most simple, mundane level of experience.

## SOME QUESTIONS

In his excellent book, 'Architecture: Form, Space and Order', (2) Francis Ching catalogues a wealth of essential morphological elements and principles that control the organisation of buildings. This is a book for architects and designers. It shows, through its many illustrations, how form and space can facilitate purpose and communicate meaning. Designers involve themselves with meaning at the outset, from their first thoughts about inventing the plan. Their drawings allow them to preconceive space and communicate their ideas. But meaning for the designer is not the same as meaning for the user. A user does not have access to the designer's schema and is probably unfamiliar with the notational method used to express either the concepts or the dreams. Visitors experience buildings by walking through them. But what can we say about the '*how*' of this experience? What can we say about interior spaces, the

work that they do and the relationships that exist between them? How would we know if one sequence of spaces is more fulfilling than another, or indeed if anything is '*going on*' concerning its arrangement? If buildings alienate the people who use them, at what level are they alienated and what are the remedies? Do we know of any common factors in architecture's language that we feel certain offer some delight in the use of the spaces we inhabit? What is communicated by architecture's primary elements; the wall, the door and the window for instance?

These questions are not easily answered. There are a great number of successful buildings, but for the most part the pleasure that we get seems to exist on the periphery of our knowing, from deep feelings and memories. Similarly, the buildings that cause us pain are likely to leave us as silent victims; we allow the feelings, but we rarely verbalise them. Once the formal relationships of a scheme have been established, designers work intuitively with their imagination. This is inevitable, but it doesn't help us to talk about it or communicate the ideas with non-designers. Do the general public want or need designers to be clear about the effects of their spaces? Is it possible for us to be clear? Can we talk to them about the interesting games and intriguing strategies that we play? I am not looking for specific answers, but rather for ways to be 'mindful' of the user at an engaging level. I will proceed on the basis that a visit to any building is an event and the quality of that event is what is in question.

## 1. BRIEF, FUNCTION, AND SOCIAL EVENT

The client contributes the main function and the primary event by determining the basic activity of the building - whether the building is to be used for attending a performance, eating a meal, a place for work or a place called home. The designer is then expected to advise the client on the size of spaces required and the sequence of activities that the primary event will require. For instance, if the client requires

a cinema the designer will look at how the users will enter the lobby, buy a ticket, sit in the auditorium and have a drink in the bar, etc. Organising these spaces requires us to consider the social events. But, there are many ways of organising the spaces and many possibilities for a successful result. What we require is a good brief, a challenging way of putting these things together, but clients are not generally good at inspiring this level of work. A good brief is the first most essential component of a notable place of habitation and the designer may have to inspire the client to develop their thoughts on this. Generally, their focus is more centred on budget than poetics and what they love tends to be on the surface of things. Other than contributing a casual requirement for a style, they may consider that an apartment is an apartment and an office is an office, the events simply defined by its accommodation.

Those who make buildings know that certain social functions and groups of activity provide a better opportunity for a successful event than others. A building that is to provide large areas of speculative office space does not have the same possibilities as one that requires a complex mix and hierarchy of very personal space. Surprisingly, design briefs are rarely discussed in public and there is a lack of critical thought on the issue. Magazines readily print finished photographs of schemes but they rarely, if ever, publish the brief. What constitutes a good brief? How do we achieve it? Who is responsible for it? Designers of Interior Space generally inherit the building in which they are expected to work. It can be old or modern, a basic shell or fully inhabited. Whatever the scenario, much has already been determined before the designer arrives to consider the possibilities. A brief needs answers and rational space must be created while considering the external envelope and the structural, technical and servicing requirements. There are many demands and fighting for space that can carry meaning and respond to ordering principles from a more expansive viewpoint is difficult. It is the first consideration to be dropped.

## 2. FORM, SPACE AND ORDER.

Architecture has always proceeded by organising its thoughts around existing models, or basic types, common to the function. For example, the Georgian terraced house has been a very fruitful model for more than two centuries. When architects and designers choose a pre-existing model on which to base the general configuration of a plan they are also selecting a social model and giving credence to a set of values. There is a presumption that these values rest easily in the collective memory and quickly touch upon meaning. To what extent they are culturally important depends upon the culture; they could remain in the realm of private language if the culture doesn't care enough and they could remain shallow and meaningless if the designer doesn't care enough. When a designer activates this area of concern they leave behind the reductionist theory of functionalism in favour of a process that can potentially renew our awareness of the meanings that can be carried by forms.

It is common to think of models as relating to the distant past, and particularly to a language as coherent as classicism, but the use of models is by no means a historicist game. In his book 'Architecture: Form, Space and Order', Francis Ching illustrates a comprehensive list of '*types*' that includes a great many cultures and periods up to the present day. The book is a clear and accessible dictionary of principles organised according to formal types rather than functional types. For example, a list of types under one heading reads as follows. "Subtractive Forms and Additive Forms, Centralised, Linear, Radial, Clustered and Grid Forms". Each title gives us an organising principle. The material works as a designer's source book and communicates almost entirely by drawings.

One of the most instructive texts on the subject is Alan Colquhoun's "Typology and Design Method". (3) This article has prompted more than twenty years discussion on the theory of typological modelling. As its title suggests, the author, inextricably and fundamentally, links

the notion of the typological model with the activity of design and argues that it is a process that enables us to see the potentiality of forms quickly and effectively. It is a method of making clear analogies of type that can help to solve problems of function and meaning simultaneously. It can also act as a spur to inventiveness, especially when the model requires a transformation. There are models of formal types and functional types, but there are also models of stylistic types. To ask how Adolf Loos, le Corbusier or Frank Gehry would deal with an issue is to ask a question about typological modelling. Obviously, the more one uses the system the better one gets at operating it. Practice is certainly recommended. Colquhoun concludes his article as follows. "The bare bones of our culture must become visible to us. For this to happen a certain scientific detachment toward our problems is essential and with it the application of the mathematical tools proper to our culture. But these tools are unable to give us a ready-made solution to our problems. They only provide the framework, the context within which we operate." (4) There are times when the search for a typological model may appear to go against the odds and to add more problems to the design process than it solves, but the activity should not be rejected on this count. Just surrender. It is more important to state the model and accept it's loose, and maybe in terms of the brief, inappropriate fit, than not to enjoy the ordering principle and expansiveness that a good comparative analogy provides.

### 3. SITE, CONTEXT AND ORIENTATION

For the sake of the journey one should recognise where it begins and where it leads. Even in Interior Design we must be aware of the site, its context and its orientation. Whatever the context of a scheme, there is always morphology, a form and a structure at work, in and around the immediate environment. There are predominant formal

characteristics that we can play with or against. Consider the re-orientation that takes place on the long walk to the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens. Compare this to the quickstep manoeuvre required when entering an urban church, the doors of which are placed directly on the street. A street with buildings set hard against the pavement may need a different type and sequence of spaces immediately on the inside to those buildings that have space between them and public realm. A street that is shaded by trees differs from a street that enjoys large front gardens and different again from a street with numerous alleyways. They each promote their own narrative possibilities. It should be possible to describe the morphology of the area, the immediate street or square and the journey from the public realm of pavement through its semi-public and semi-private zones to the door.

We never arrive from '*outer space*' and what we pass through becomes part of us. We arrive with a certain amount of baggage gathered up from the immediate environment and there are very few decisions that one could make that would, by necessity, be free of these constraints. We rarely, if ever, work in a box concealed from the world. Thoughts about converting a small flat, for example, could begin with its place in the city. There is a difference between the centre of the city and the edge. If one is at the edge, there is a difference between a place that looks back to the city and one that looks on, out and into the country. The story is different, the results are different, the surprises are different, and the design should recognise this.

It is in the realm of site and context that one begins the narrative that is confirmed by the interior and where, unwittingly, one could set up the feelings of discord and confrontation. The notion of a place being introvert or extrovert is potentially set up by the designer's interventions at a very sensitive level. The term alienation itself is founded upon the '*outside / inside*' dichotomy, upon the public and private senses and the open and closed scenarios. The dialogue that

we can establish is rich with pitfalls and possibilities. You do not have to invent the site, its context and its orientation, but you should accept them gratefully. Our task is to know them and enliven their narrative.

#### 4. MATERIALS, COLOUR AND LIGHT.

These categories do not generally form part of the discussion in the realm of planning strategy but there is no reason why not. Usually they are brought into play to support and confirm the major events of social function, typological model, narrative sequence and contextual concerns. For example, if one has for a typological model the notion of a heavy podium base upon which sits a lighter structure, this can be immediately confirmed by the materials; a thick stone wall topped by light framed structure would certainly support the idea. It may prove equally inspirational, however, to start with a material that begs the form of the overall structure. Consider the choice of materials as a conceptual model, as a strategy to initiate a narrative event. It may throw something into the equation that liberates the thinking. We should not be afraid to play and reverse usual ways of thinking. Make the last concern come first and see what happens.

Colour suffers more than any other category from the malaise of being considered last and being applied to the surface of the main idea. "In architecture colour is used to emphasise the character of a building, to accentuate its form and material and to elucidate its divisions." (5) It is given a pragmatic role. Generally, it is too personal, too symbolic and too full of the meanings and identifications that we ascribe to it, for designers to feel confident about playing it as a strategy. In his book "Experiencing Architecture", Steen Eiler Rasmussen argues that we might use colour to 'characterise' a room or a space rather than use it to emphasise the materials and structures. First determine what the

character is and then determine its colour. This is a reasonable strategy. Alternatively, select a colour and determine what the character of the room has become.

Daylight and light in interior architecture is such a huge and primary concern, that any comment here could be no more than a mere drop in the ocean. Suffice it to say that if you are '*dreaming into*' the plan, going on the journey that is proposed by the plans layout, then it would truly be remiss of you not to take that walk in the mind's eye, at least once, with the question of light foremost in your thoughts To dedicate one drawing which expresses a strategy for light and lighting would seem to be the minimum requirement of any scheme.

## 5. METAPHOR, ALLEGORY AND RHETORIC

Think of your space metaphorically. Anything can be a metaphor: a door, a structural grid and even a shadow. It all depends on how you think about it. In its simplest form, a metaphor in architectural language is simply saying that a particular room or building looks like another or is reminiscent of it. Making comparisons and naming spaces can be a very fruitful exercise, providing it can establish some level of meaning. You must avoid the obvious, however. To design a hotel foyer in the style of an ocean liner may be metaphorical, but it is too casual and figurative to create any form of resonance that lasts longer than a minute. Can you think figuratively while remaining with the abstract concerns of architecture? Can your installations be seen as a family of objects that talk to each other?

Allegories are generally used in poetry or painting as a means of making the meaning apparent. For the purposes of our architectural exercise, the allegorical exists when an object, or a collection of objects are devised and used in such a way that an observer may shift focus from an apparent meaning to a different or significant one. We can talk of personifying something, fictionalising it or even representing it, but we should not imagine that we are symbolising

something. If you think of your design as a story and the abstract elements of wall, door, window and staircase are the protagonists, then you might be taking them on a kind of adventure. You might be engaged in breaking, enlarging or hiding them and in some measure the architectural elements will become allegorical figures.

To engage these concepts in the realm of architecture is to engage in the activity of Rhetoric. Rhetoric is the study of the technique of using language effectively. By implying that the concept of rhetoric is a design model, by activating it as a design tool, we are giving credence to the notion that we are engaged in the language of artifice. Judith Wolin, in her excellent article "The Rhetorical Question" (6) discusses this. "Architectural 'rhetoric' is the proposition of architectural 'expression'. I prefer rhetoric to expression; the latter term suggests some sort of juice squeezed from the architect's psyche, while the former tacitly accepts a premise of disciplined artifice and implies the existence of both speaker and listener." We are looking for a discreet, meditative concern, a refined and controlled activity that can give more shape and substance to an architectural element or a set of existing conditions. Judith Wolin forewarns the reader to proceed in this area of concern with scepticism, but she understands it well and offers an intriguing list of categories that can initiate the rhetorical gesture. "1. Figures of repetition and regularity. 2. Figures of resemblance or relationship. 3. Figures of emphasis or understatement. 4. Figures of overlay, displacement or disruption. 5. Intentional errors." (7) They are worth considering, but she insists that "not every metaphor is a memorable or artful one; likewise, the employment of rhetorical operations in architecture is no guarantee of art." Most of the concerns in this essay fall within the notion of rhetoric in some measure, and if the concern is a difficult one to get hold of and focus on specifically, then let it remain difficult. The model that is most fraught with danger maybe the best reason you have for considering it.

## 6. ACCIDENT, RUPTURE AND MISTAKE

An *'idea'* in a scheme can work on many levels. It is not necessarily something you can *'design'* and it could work independently of the social framework or any other formal requirement. It could be present for its own sake, a non-specialised, non-functional installation that exists to be liberating in its effect. It could have occurred by pure chance or even by playing sabotage and yet speak entirely of meaning. If an ordinary event becomes marvellous then it may arise out of the innocent or naive question as easily as it comes from rational concerns. To work in this area you may have to trust chaos and start with something that is fishy, provocative or risky. It is the unknown waiting to be discovered and you have to put yourself in the way of marvellous accidents if you want them to occur. A certain detachment in the working method is required. If you are going to grab the accident as it flies past and call it your own before the moment passes, then you must practice your *'sharp eye'* and your *'quick hand'*.

One can of course head into 'chance' knowingly and much of what we recognise as thinking in 'deconstruction' does exactly this. "The importance of chance lies in its breaking of a conceptual closure. 'Disassociation' takes place - yet it takes place in the 'space of reassembly'. Maintained, it could be argued, within a logic of paradox." (8) Form is most dramatically confirmed at the point of rupture or the place where it breaks. It is as if one never recognised what the structure was, what work it was doing, until you recognised the interruption. The interruption might operate at the threshold of recognition and it may be seen as an obvious mistake, but either way we should view it in a negative sense, but rather confirm it as the place where the structure is positively affirmed. What is the best mistake you can make and where is the best place for it? One could become very deliberate about it and very *'knowing'* about the effects it promotes. Here are some types of mistake that may be useful.

There is a preconceiving of mistakes through process, where the break is inevitable but unplanned, where the mistake is on the surface of our perceptions and a clear result of the type of action undertaken.

There is a fully rehearsed mistake requiring a formal structure - its rupture planned for deliberate effect. Such a strategy moves back from the surface of cause and effect by its use of a declared and specific intentionality.

There is the delightfully nihilistic mistake that is engaged by simply allowing a mistake in the thinking of it - that is, before you have hardly begun - without preconceptions about meaning.

In many ways, the latter example goes further, lasts longer, and retreats from the arena of recognition most directly, but before we throw up our hands in horror at such anarchistic notions let me say that such movements and eruptions and the consequent struggles to stay on course, set a very particular quality of intentionality in the design process. Maybe we read this struggle as '*real*' and maybe, in the final analysis, it holds more scope for '*meaning*' than other, more focused, methodologies.

## 7. NARRATIVE, SEQUENCE AND MEMORY.

"If one were to give an account of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one's entire life." (9)

In this section, we will take up the narrative from the point where the concerns of site and context left us at the door. We will return to making the user of our building the focus of our attention and regard their walk through interior architecture as an event, a subtle engaging journey of change and celebration. If a narrative carries an event it is not essential for the designer to declare what that narrative is. It could be formal or fanciful, it could describe the function of the building or be descriptive of a social reasoning. We do not need to

choose a scenario on the basis that it can be decoded by the visitor, for it is converted into the material of the architecture, which in turn picks up and carries the narrative. This idea works in a similar way to the method Alfred Hitchcock used to think about films. He called his device the '*MacGuffin*' and it was responsible for starting his narratives and in some manner containing them. The '*MacGuffin*' was Hitchcock's 'narrative excuse', the excuse he needed to direct his gaze at the various apartments in 'Rear Window' or the heads of the presidents in 'North by North West'. They are surprising locations and gain great power from being unusual. They embody the notion of event and give us a new way to look at a place.

In terms of architecture's language there are many formal elements that can contain the notion of change and event. The gates, the archways, the views, the doors, the lobbies, the corridors and the walls are all great vehicles for 'theatre'. In our daily life, we perform our narrative walks unconsciously - they are a theme that goes on underneath the surface of seemingly routine life. A walk through interior architecture can activate or concretise our feelings; it can be engaging and meaningful and even act as a metaphor of our inner processes. The role of these spaces is to 'place' the imagination, to provide discrete and differentiated places for our dreams and narratives to unfold and deepen.

Giving shape and form to the world via the architectural analogy has been in evidence from the beginning of building. An interesting example of architecture giving shape to thoughts can be found in a book by Frances Yates called "The Art of Memory". In this book, she describes antique study of Rhetoric, where sequences of interior space were committed to memory in order to remember a sequence of thoughts and talk about them. In this method, the details of a long speech are "placed in imagination on the places which have been memorised in an invented building. This done, as soon as the memory of the facts needs to be revived, all these places are visited in turn and the various deposits demanded of their custodians. We have

to think of the ancient orator as moving in imagination through his memory building whilst he is making his speech; drawing from the memorised places the images he has placed on them. The method ensures that the points are remembered in the right order, since the order is fixed by the sequence of places in the building." (10)

Architecture sits nicely in the imagination and does not prevent us thinking while it does so. The naming of a space, its clarity and its orderly arrangement were an important requirement and any speech could be invented, using the same sequence of spaces. Memory was regarded as the mother of the Muses and it may prove useful to walk through your plan and identify the spaces and the sequence that you would memorise should a long speech be required.

A narrative walk may be very short - from the pavement, two or three steps into the main body of the building. It may be very long, including a great number of rooms in its process. If we only have one door with which to play this function, then it has a lot of work to do. We are beyond the realm of planning strategy; the narrative must be held by the detail design. The material of the path, the step, the mat and the main floor could play a crucial role as well as the door itself. If the walk through interior architecture is very long, then a coherent form, or constant theme may be required to tie together the wealth of observations and emotions that it may elicit. The length of a walk through concentrated interior space may be difficult to reconcile with the journey in memory, so many places having been visited in so short a distance. In some measure, we have extended the time and maybe we have also increased the space. The experience could be more akin to discovering the architectural morphology and narratives of a city than visiting a series of rooms.

I will give a very British example of a long architectural walk and I hope that you will find similar examples from your own culture. I am visiting a church in a country village. I catch a glimpse of the spire and lose it again on my passage through the streets. I discover the church, find the entrance and pass through the covered Wych Gate,

which provides the first break with public space. By passing the Yew tree next to the path that winds its way through the cemetery I am passing the life of the evergreen tree and the death of the buried. I enter the porch and confront the large heavy door with its elaborate surrounds filled with messages and symbols for the initiated. The protectors of the doorway will demand a sacrifice and, metaphorically, I will die here before being reborn on the inside. I sit on the bench in the porch to collect my thoughts before entering the Narthex. Once inside, the font where baptism takes place greets me. From here I turn eastwards down the Nave into the main body of the church. From this space filled with stories a further series of domains can be seen. Only a chosen few make this journey, most of us travel in our imagination. The Rood Screen that we glimpse through separates the observers from the performers. Once past this I move finally into the Chancel, through the Choir, up to the Main Altar and through the doors of the tabernacle, into the inner sanctum. Notice how each zone is named and how each provides a specific function on the journey. All of this is achieved with the architecture. When discussing the interiors of Adolf Loos, Beatriz Colomina talks of a similar level of concern for psychological space. "Upon entering a Loos interior, one is continually turning around to face the space that one has just moved through, rather than the space ahead or the space outside. With each turn, each look back, our progress is halted." Comfort in the Moller house sitting area "is more than just sensual, for there is also a psychological dimension. The position of the sofa, and of its occupant against the light, produces a sense of security. Any intruder ascending the stairs from the entrance (itself a rather dark passage) and entering the living room would take a few moments to recognise anyone sitting in the sofa. Conversely, any intrusion would soon be detected by a person occupying this area, just as an actor entering the stage is immediately seen by a spectator in a theatre box." "In the Muller house, there is an increasing sense of privacy in the sequence of spaces articulated around the staircase,

from the drawing room, to the dining room and study, to the Ladies Room with its raised sitting area, which occupies the centre or 'heart' of the house. But this space has a window that looks onto the living space. Here, too, the most intimate room resembles a theatre box, and overlooks the entrance to the communal area of the house." (12)

The wealth of advances and retreats, conflicts, initiations and celebrations summon the visitor to another world and yet seemingly very little is out of the ordinary. As the invitation must be carried by the architecture and its details, then the degree of emotional content makes the requirement for designing these spaces a very different one to the common practice. You would have to '*dream the plan as theatre*' to achieve it.

## CONCLUSION

In many ways, I have been arguing for the presence of stories that are evoked solely by the sheer materiality of architectural elements. The argument is a subjective one and presupposes that "the imagination is pre-eminently in things, out there, not inside us." (13)

In "The Soul of the Bridge", Peter Bishop states that "anything can be a vessel for soul, whether it be a part of the world out there such as a chair or a tree, or part of the world inside such as an idea or a fantasy. Matter is not just a convenient filling for supposedly harmonious, but empty forms. Similarly, places are not just geographical locations. Like matter, they are vessels for soul. Both places and matter are filled with imaginative resonances and a lack of beauty occurs when the materiality of a thing is ignored. There is then a kind of imaginal hollowness and insubstantiality. It seems crucial to listen to the things of the world as they tell their stories." (14)

From the point of view of the designer, it would seem equally important to regard the drawn plan as an object, as a '*thing of the world*'. "The perception of space is produced by its representations;

in this sense, built space has no more authority than do drawings, photographs or descriptions." (14) The ability to '*dream into*' the plan is the essential factor. Such dreaming must flow between a focused and a wide angled view, between scientific and artistic considerations, between the rational and the untamed and between the social and the personal concerns. The plan can be both functional and liberating and a room can be both a container and a '*theatre box*'. We need to shift constantly between all of these models if we are to create places that have an entirely separate identity and yet evoke a pulse in common with the world. We need to develop a rigorous open mindedness towards the process if we are to create individual, separate objects that are capable of being joined to the heart of things. It is in this state of fusion, between object '*otherness*' and our shared sense of meaning, where ideas are interchangeable, that the poetic identifications flow.

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## 5. The Reverse Process – 2010

During the 1980's, I worked in practices of every kind, was a partner in a firm that specialised in museum and exhibition design and ran my own business, refurbishing and extending houses in London. This activity taught me many things, but I learned most from teaching. For a long while I was a course director, managing many staff and students, but in 2003 I gave this up to run a small course I could teach on. This was the Graduate Diploma. It coincided with a great influx of Chinese students coming to London. Having started with Lao Tzu, I ended with Lao Tzu. I became an expert in teaching Chinese interior design students - a very demanding job, but it taught me a great deal and it remains my most treasured activity.

The first teaching project I created in the late 80's was called 'The Reverse Process' and I revived this again for the Chinese students, who were looking to develop an understanding of design research activity and thereby gain a place on an MA programme. I think it is useful to give you a clear description of the project by showing you the work of Feng Shao, (Recy) a graduate of CAA and one of my Graduate Diploma students in London in 2010.

I started this project by asking students to make models of a space they would like to have in their project. Recy made these models. She had no idea why.



I then asked her to follow her intuition and make more models.

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Then I asked her to continue making models and enjoy the notion that she'd no idea how they would function. I asked her to play innocently and let the models teach her.



Recy wasn't upset that she had no idea what she was doing. She didn't feel vulnerable because she was not given a site or a function. When I asked her to continue, she became interested in the shadows that her architectural places created.



When she was confident about her models, I invited her to find a place where they could live and design a functional installation in that place. Recy found a neglected courtyard that was the entrance to an architectural office and she redesigned that courtyard as an eventful threshold place that welcomed visitors to the offices.



This project reverses the process. All the practical work is carried out at the end. I wanted my students to start by giving the poetic imagination enough space to grow and to make sure that too many functional decisions didn't overwhelm the poetic decisions. I wanted them to play with chance, practice being free and not be driven by a concept or a focussed ambition. I wanted them to be surprised. When Recy became an expert in the kind of place she wanted to inhabit she found the place for its realisation. I hope you agree that there is something of Taoism here.

It is important to give students projects that help them grow. This game is not something we can practice in the commercial world, but all the more reason for creating it. Tutors need to become expert in the kind of things students need to learn in order to be creative. This

project gives a student confidence and teaches them to trust their intuition.

All students should be writing alongside the development of their project, so I include here the Reflective Journal that Recy did for her project. It is a short journal not a thesis.

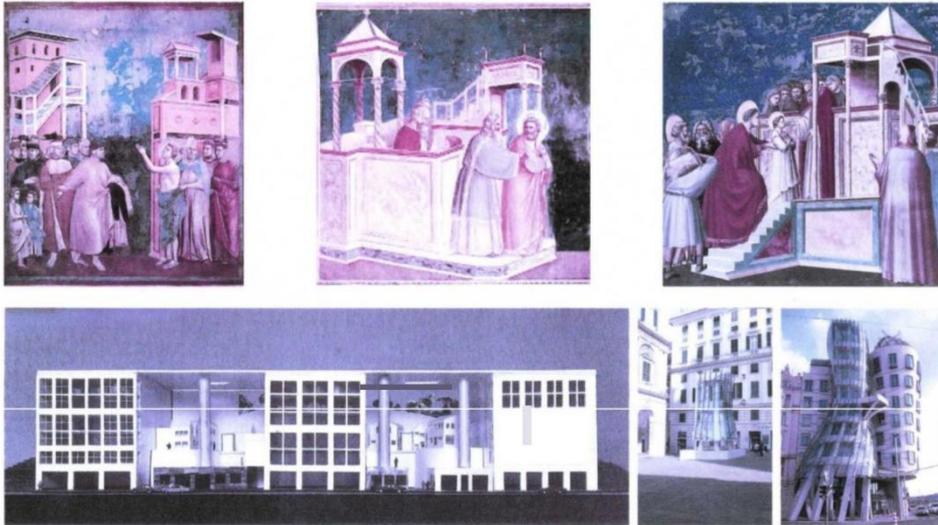
## RECY SHAO - REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

### THE WEEK BEFORE THE BEGINNING

We are told that we would experience a very different design process this term. We will start without a client, a brief and even a site, it means that I will totally have no idea about what the project is at the start. I do not really agree with this kind of opposite order at first. I mean, if we do not have a client, is it still a design process? In my opinion, huge differences exist between art works and design works, and the biggest one is that an art work normally represents the artist's personal feelings about society, culture and humanity while a design work is usually created for specific clients and has special requirements. If I start with a model to present my personal feelings and thoughts, it becomes too much like an art work.

However, it is a fresh and interesting challenge for me. While I am searching some masters' works as reference resources, I realize that this kind of process might work. For instance, Zaha Hadid: her projects are amazing and crazy. I don't think there is any client give a brief or requirement which would allow her works to look so crazy. What I am interested in is the way she works: she first creates a design which responds to her personal feeling, then when she meets a suitable site or client, she puts the preconceived idea in that context and persuades the client. To accepted it, Frank O Gehry has a similar approach, because the buildings he produced are just so

extraordinary. Therefore, I am looking forward this new process and I am happy to see where it will lead me.



## THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING

I am used to start with a site and a brief. It is a truly hard beginning, so I decide to continue my previous project: a combinative architecture furniture. In a way, it gives me a starting point for research and reference. I am not be bothered by the size, orientations and environment of a site, I feel more free compared to the beginning of the last project. I can really ask myself what do I like and deeply hear what I want to do. In the previous project, the tutor made decisions for me, but now is my turn!

I am really interested in Giotto's drawings which describe some strange objects which are neither architecture nor furniture. Because of the wrong scale and perspective, buildings become more like objects and they are just amazingly perfect and constantly telling stories to the audience. They lead me to think about making some simple objects together and playing with shapes and scales.

The first model I made looks like a stone hill which often appears in the classic Chinese gardens. This kind of huge object is made from lots of small nature stones and the designer put them together with order, and at the same time, it looks organic and irregular. Therefore, both the space between stones and between group of stones are varied and dramatic, especially with light and shadow.



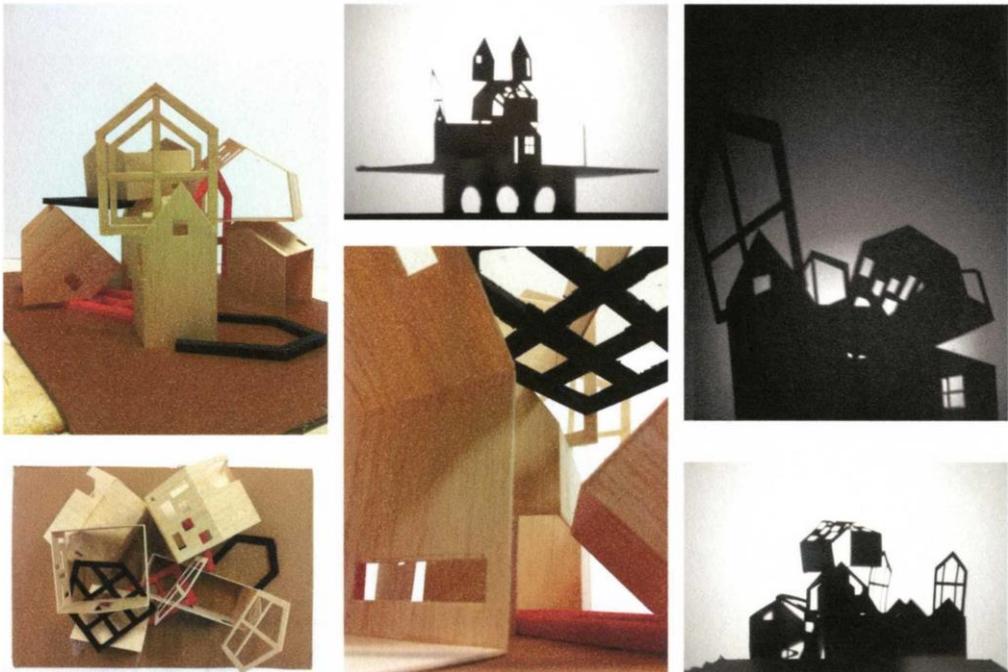
## THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Model making is the biggest deal in this stage and photographing the model has a equal importance: It is like a re-birth of the actual model. When I photograph my model, I carefully choose the view, deeply think about what kind of space I want to present, and I repeatedly take apart the model and stick them together again and again. On the other hands, Sam's work impressed me a lot. I saw the model he made but it was not as surprising as the 20 image he showed. Therefore, I believe that photography is another way to make or improve the model, and it is another language to describe a model.

I have made different models this week: I was surprised when I took the covers off, they became a new model. It looks far better than the

previous one and I can see more spatial potential from this model. There are various layers of space both inside and outside of the objects, and the relation between these spaces interested me.

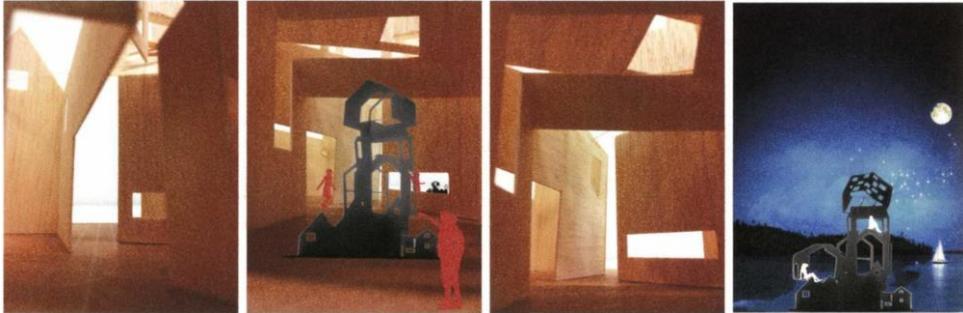
I had another surprise when I added a spot light on my model: the shadow. The space seems to have another character. I cannot really define the space, but I can see how light go through the space.



## THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE

I could not stop doing models and forgot to look of what I have done already. Making a book is all about searching good images and telling good stories. However, I just ignored the images I have done. I tried different combinations, but I realized that people cannot believe in those pictures because all of them look like from a god's view and they do not contain stories.

So, sometimes, the best quality of a designer is not to finish many projects or to familiarise with different materials or to achieve a higher degree. It is about having a good eye which has the ability of searching beauties and catching good images.



## THE END OF THE MIDDLE

I have never noticed before that to give a scale is so hard. I am always waiting for tutors to give me a scale in the beginning of a project. I created the model without a scale. How can I re-arrange all the space on scale? If the walls are not just a piece of cardboard, if the walls are made from wood or concrete, how can I structure them together? Where and how can I add stairs? how do I design the journey of the space? What is the sequence of my design? Playing with objects is easy and fun while adding human activities in a space is tough.



## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

I need a site to develop my project and to translate the model to a real project, otherwise I cannot go to anywhere. Obviously, finding a site is another new and hard experience. This kind of upside- down process forces me to think clearly about what I want to achieve. I want to create a journey where the audiences can not define where is the inside and where is the outside, on the other hand, I try to use the simplest spatial components to build up a dramatic journey. Therefore, when I am looking for sites, I have a sketch map in my mind already: I need a big empty interior space with an exterior area.

There are three types of site which might be suitable for me:

1. A commercial space with a little square in front of it, which is quite easy to find, but It might limit the functions of my project.
2. A roof of a big building, which might give me good views as elements of my design, while it is a distinctive language of design.
3. An abandoned factory, which normally has a truly free interior space then I can do anything I want without destroy the original structure, but it is too huge to my project.





## THE END OF THE END

I finally found a fantastic site which is a small architecture studio with a front yard. The yard gives a destination between the studio and the street. Therefore, I now got a nice space to insert my model. The front yard of the site is boring, and there is no any attraction from the street. The main idea I have now is how to deal with both the street and the studio. I intend to make a connection which allows more people to notice this little studio and invite audiences to experience the little dramatic journey that I added in this court yard.

I made a change after I got the site, I think it is a improvement which happened during the translation: from the model to the real project. My thought became more reality. I start to considerate about the materials, arrangements, functions and structures



## THE CONTINUING OF THE PROJECT

To learn to design chaos became an interesting subject. For me, design always means precise, ordered and functional. However, chaos brings more potentials and dramatics. Therefore, how to design chaos and manage it is very important.

Now the rules of my game are:

1. Use the simplest spatial components, such as sheds.
2. To play around and design a chaotic space that looks like a place of cyclone.
3. To organize the chaos with reasonable functions and make them work.

The whole process of this term offered me a method to catch flash ideas and a practice about keeping and growing little ideas until a suitable site comes out. It is not a normal design process in the real world, but it was an excellent pattern to improve my creative thinking. Now I know the possibility of producing diverse projects at the same time before I got any site or client.

## 6. The Nature of Things - 2012

### A Novel

#### Starting to break free

During the heat-wave many retreated into the shade. Chi Ling passed her lone days strolling through Battersea Park. She was waiting to graduate in design and had time on her hands. The only entry in her diary was the imminent degree ceremony. The thought of it excited her, but she was edgy. She ambled beneath the giant trees avoiding the glare of the sun while attempting to expose a niggling emotion that was obstinately elusive. In those benevolent shadows she was nursing the vague sensation that something profound in her needed to be brought into the light.

Chi Ling was intelligent, but she had not managed to make a connection between reasoned judgements and basic instincts. Her mind made no reference to her body and her dreams had no place in her waking life. She'd no idea that these detached states needed interaction or that she was leaving the possibility of their mutual enrichment to chance. She argued that her feelings of vulnerability were the result of studying abroad and clearly it was tricky, this valiant bid to span different cultures. She could never have guessed how much would be demanded of her or how intricate communication would be. Even little things could be bewilderingly complex. The Chinese equivalent for the word *order*, for example, is a four-word sequence; select; organise; explore; connect. How could she have expected to engage with elaborate theories when a single word defied clear definition?

Chi Ling's liberation started on the day her parents arrived from China; with startling ease her disconnected feelings conjoined, and

her confident voice began to break free. She woke from a dream she couldn't remember, declaring it to be both remarkable and peculiar. Without resolving to understand its meaning, she gently coaxed this dream out of its comfortable unconscious state and caused it to resurface.

*I am lying on my bed hoping that a breeze will get up to animate the atmosphere. I am back in China. A strange stillness is upon me. It is very quiet. For reasons I cannot understand, I feel relieved that I am not in trouble. I lie motionless, conscious of breathing evenly, trying not to draw attention to myself.*

*Suddenly, a dominating authority is present in the room. I wonder why I am not scared. It lifts me off the bed and takes me to see a painting hanging on the wall. A clear, educated voice describes how the remarkable light and dramatic tonal qualities brings enchantment to the architecture. Transfixed, immobile, fascinated, I agree with the strange presence.*

*"The artist has achieved an impressive and delicate sense of balance," I say, "but architecture is at its best when it invites its users to delight in the way it can be used."*

*I wonder how I can possibly contradict this dominating will. I am no longer the woman who can't offer her opinion.*

Chi Ling rubbed her eyes to feel the physical presence of her body and returned to her conscious world. Gradually, and a little reluctantly, she cajoled her consciousness out of its liberating submission. She felt re-energized, confident and delighted with this newfound ability to express herself. The desire to speak out had long been locked deep inside her.

After a meditative breakfast, Chi Ling phoned her mother. Mrs Lao, weary from the long flight to London, revived when she heard her daughter's voice. A gentle, softly-spoken woman, she rarely became animated, either in speech or action. She felt assured when Chi Ling spoke of her happiness, but she did not articulate this. She invited her daughter to visit their hotel at two o'clock, after she and her

husband had taken a rest.

Her parents thought of their daughter as a beautiful flower, a sweet dreamer who was impossible to predict. They hoped she had grown stronger since living and studying in London.

Chi Ling returned to her bed, thinking she would reconsider her dream, reinforce her belief in herself and remember how proficiently she had spoken her mind; instead, she read a few pages of verse that her tutor had distributed at the beginning of the year. The title for these pages was, *Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment*. They were from the pen of a thirteenth century Persian poet called Jalal Uddin Rumi.

## That Journeys Are Good

If a pine tree had a foot or two like a turtle, or a wing,  
do you think it would just wait for the saw to enter?  
You know the sun journeys all night toward the east,  
if it didn't, how could it throw up its flood of light at dawn?  
And the salt water climbs with such marvellous swiftness to the sky,  
if it didn't, how could the vegetables be fed with the rain?  
And the grain of sand separated from its father, the boulder,  
and only then was it introduced to the oyster and became a pearl.  
Do you remember Joseph? Didn't he leave his father in tears  
and then later learned how to understand dreams and give away  
grain?  
And that man with the long nose, wasn't he forced to leave his  
country?  
Only then could he travel through the three worlds.  
As for you, I suggest you leave your country, go into yourself,  
become a ruby mine, open to the gifts of the sun.  
This journey could be from your manhood to your inner man,  
from your womanhood to your inner woman.  
By a journey of this sort, earth became a place where you find gold.

Leave behind your many complaints, your self-pity and this yearning for death.

Don't you realise how many fruits have already escaped out of bitterness into sweetness?

## A breath of fresh air

On her way to the hotel Chi Ling delighted in the possibility that she was beginning to find her confidence. She never wanted to consider the subject of her vulnerability again, or hear her voice utter the thin, crackling sound it made when someone was putting her under pressure to respond. It was a question from her father that focussed their discussion for the remainder of the day. While taking tea in the hotel lounge Mr. Lao had asked Chi Ling to explain the difference between British and Chinese designers and his daughter told him that in London they knew how to proceed without concepts.

"What's wrong with concepts?" Mr. Lao enquired.

"A concept is a static thing; it isn't inevitable that it will mature. At the start of a project we generally communicate a concept or an idea to ourselves, but it would be more profitable if we went in search of strategies that could open up a path of development. Evolution is at the heart of the matter."

"So, a concept is only a seed," her father observed.

"Yes, growth should change it. It's better not to have a clear idea. Knowing how to nurture material is the important issue. Early in the process we must not expect too much. Ideas grow in strength gradually. When they finally take root in an object it will have a life of its own; only then can it be assigned a role. This role is more than its function; it should provide the object with a clear voice. Function, style or economic viability don't inevitably contribute something meaningful to architecture."

"Are these the rules for inventing interiors?" Mr. Lao asked.

"Yes, but the term invention in interior design is complex. We need

several models to interact simultaneously; we bring them together and make the installation the unifying form.

“Is this like the different components of a collage?”

“Yes, it’s a multifaceted unity and this complexity is ideal territory for creating a sense of place. Without playing the game, it would be difficult to imagine the risks and mysteries encountered in the process. We must discover its secrets without controlling how it matures. Often, we work intuitively and automatically. We cooperate with chance. We interrogate every situation and question all our strategies; you wouldn’t believe the number of questions we have to ask.”

“Sounds like the search for truth,” Mr. Lao suggested.

“I doubt that architectural truth is truth in the way you mean it, father. At the end of a project we want it to be true; we want it to have an authentic identity. If people recognise that a place has life, that it has a sensual resonance, then this place is a success. We don’t necessarily have to describe how it works.”

“But surely your tutors talked about the way it works.”

“Oh yes, but they also talked about the possibility that it is the pen that does the dreaming, not us. I was once advised to gaze at my drawings first thing every morning and then to listen to them. These people know how to get themselves out of the way and invite the greater imagination to come into play.”

“Is the greater imagination beyond the personal then?”

“Yes, it’s our ability to be receptive. Spatial designers deal with the material world, we have to connect with the objects of the world. Is this too esoteric and complex father?”

Mr. Lao smiled, Mrs. Lao nodded wisely, and Chi Ling blushed, delighted at the words flying past her lips. She had the feeling that an army of half-remembered phrases were rising up in her throat, queuing up for their turn to be spoken. She saw great sequences of them scattered about a large house and she saw herself walking through, retrieving each thought as she passed by. She was also

making strange new connections. There was no doubt about it; the time had come for her to speak.

“You make objects sound like sentient things,” said Mr. Lao.

“Objects aren’t just empty matter waiting to be used; we can transform their role by being open to them, by facilitating their growth. Once they have an identity and a social function they can be named; then they become part of a language and we can craft them into a story. This is how designers create narratives.”

“What kind of narratives?” Mr. Lao asked.

“They’re concise, like a synopsis and they work when the materials we use and the installations we make have a voice. Silence reigns if an object’s true nature is ignored. We must make ourselves available to them; let them teach us how they might express their identity. I’m learning how to nurture these things, how concepts grow and how objects gain meaning.”

“Do some objects have more meaning than others?”

“When an object has a role in the place that is carrying the story, then it has meaning. Anything can be a vessel for this; it depends upon the story we want to tell. If a door or a window inspires feelings or conjures memories, then it has resonance.”

“So,” Mr. Lao replied, “you have been learning something about the way our ancient forebears thought about the world. Our world only began when we began to imagine a place to be more than a physical location. Did you realise this?”

“No,” said Chi Ling, thoughtfully.

“Think about it, it must be true; the graves of our ancestors were never located in an empty, insubstantial place. Our forebears never created harmonious but empty forms to celebrate the life of a family member; what they made had meaning. This is the place where hope resides; where virtue thrives. Listening and being submissive was the way they achieved their aims. You should read what the old Feng Shui masters had to say about it. You should also read Lao Tzu too.”

Chi Ling praised him. “You’re a breath of fresh air, father.”

## Merge with the dust

The little trio made their way along the Thames embankment to Parliament Square. After photographing Big Ben they entered Westminster Abbey by the North Transept where the sonorous sounds of the choir greeted them. They followed the crowd of tourists and stopped to sit in the Lady Chapel. Here they gazed up at the magnificent ceiling, watched the light play upon the exotic stained-glass windows and allowed the splendour of the harmonised voices to wash over them. Mr. Lao was proud that Chi Ling could talk about her subject. He hadn't been certain that she would succeed so well, but on this day, the eve of her graduation, he realised that she could express the ideas used by interior designers and, more importantly, that these ideas were also hers; she owned them when she used them.

After a tour of the Abbey, the Lao family strolled across Westminster Bridge, rode on the London Eye and admired the Festival Hall; this was the place where the graduation ceremony was to take place the following day. They gazed at the Thames, taking in the delights of the twilight; at first a vibrant orange, it changed gradually to a curious blue-green colour before finally fading to a gentle grey. The vision of it had comforted them. The air was soft, the trees had darkened, and birds whirled around the rooftops as though looking for a place to sleep. Mr. and Mrs. Lao were surprised that such peace could exist in the centre of a city as big as London. They walked along the river to Gabriel's Wharf and ate supper in the Riviera Restaurant. Everything was to their liking.

Back at the hotel they ordered some tea and Mr. Lao asked Chi Ling what she would change about the world if she had the power to influence it.

"You don't want me to answer that, do you father? I can't think about it. I'd have to name millions of things and even then I couldn't list all the things I'd like to change. Imagine all the eternal matters I would

have to include, not to mention those that are a mystery. And what about those subjects that need the light and those that need the dark? The request is quite impossible.”

“The task is to try,” Mr. Lao exclaimed.

“Wisdom suggests otherwise; in the end, such a quest will turn out to be folly. We all want to achieve something good, but none of us has any idea how this might be realised.”

“Chi Ling, my daughter, you sound like Lao Tzu. He said that we only know goodness as goodness because there is evil.”

“Exactly, and knowing this means we can no longer enjoy our innocence. What else did Lao Tzu say?”

“He said many things. He knew that having and not having must occur together, that the difficult and the easy will always appear at the same time and those things that are long and short will often occupy the same place.”

Chi Ling Laughed, “You’ve answered your own question.”

“But even if high and low rest on each other, even if front and back follow one another, it doesn’t mean you can go about the world doing nothing. If this design course taught you how to connect with things without possessing them, how to work without taking the credit, then you must know how to engage with change. Please don’t imagine you must decline to act because you are without the ability to affect the rise and fall of ten thousand things. You must be braver than that.”

Mrs. Lao had her eyes closed; she was smiling peacefully.

“Not exalting the gifted prevents quarrelling,” she declared in a voice designed to sound like an ancient philosopher. “Not collecting treasures prevents stealing. Not seeing desirable things prevents confusion for the heart.”

“Mother,” Chi Ling exclaimed. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. These are ancient sayings. I recalled them because you two were talking in such a strange manner; you sounded like antiquarian academics disputing theories.”

In the old days Mrs. Lao’s grandmother had taught her to recite

these phrases, but she had since forgotten them. The old woman would use phrases like, “Blunt the sharpness, untangle the knot, soften the glare or merge with the dust.” Mrs. Lao never asked how a young girl was supposed to do these things. Her school friends were given a similar store of words. Children loved unravelling these phrases and repeated those that they easily understood. Parents used their popularity to describe the nature of things. *Empty vessels are used, but never filled. Important things lie hidden and are always present. The more it moves, the more it yields. More words count less than you think.*

Many of Mrs. Lao’s generation have phrases like these in their memories still. For Chi Ling it was vague territory, but she was intrigued. She asked her mother to recite more sayings and Mrs. Lao stroked her brow while considering the request.

“Wise people rule by emptying their hearts and filling their bellies, by weakening ambitions and strengthening their bones. If politicians lack the knowledge and desire to rule, then the clever people will not interfere with them. If nothing is done, all will be well.”

“Mother,” Chi Ling cried, “what are you saying?”

Mrs. Lao shook her head and pointed her nose in the direction of her husband. It was her way of saying, “Ask him.”

“Taking no action means taking no action that is contrary to nature,” Mr. Lao affirmed.

“But how can we do this?” Chi Ling asked.

“You must now cease my daughter. That’s enough of this clever stuff. It’s time for sleep. Tomorrow is an important day.

## Try something different, surrender

Chi Ling didn't want to sleep and she didn't want to ignore an interesting old saying because it was difficult to understand; it meant more to her on account of it being obscure. She again asked her father to explain the meaning of her mother's words. She had to wait awhile while he searched for the answer.

"Chi Ling, your mother's statement was important to those in the ancient world who were keen to teach the practice of impartiality. In the old system they needed to believe that heaven and earth were impartial, that they never killed living things out of cruelty or gave birth to them out of kindness. We also act like this. When we use paper to decorate a room, for instance, we don't use it because we love paper, we use it because paper is right for the job. Then, when the celebration is over, we throw the paper into a bin, not because we hate the paper, but because it's job is done and we are impartial to it."

"The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows," Mrs. Lao asserted, without any particular reason for saying it.

"Sometimes it seems that this heaven and earth business will last forever," Mr. Lao declared. "Maybe they are always about to begin. Either way, we must accept contradiction if we are to get to the truth of things." Then it was his turn to mimic the voice of an ancient philosopher. "To gain we must yield. To grasp we must let go. To win we must lose. If you are wise you will stay behind; in this way you will keep ahead."

The Lao family laughed and clapped their hands. Chi Ling felt she had drunk far too much wine and was no longer capable of thinking sensibly. She decided to treat herself to a taxi ride home and the family parted with tomorrow's celebrations uppermost in their thoughts.

Once back at her apartment, an endless stream of questions filled Chi Ling's head. The evening's discussion had greatly stimulated her and

she needed to read something soothing before sleeping. She picked up Jalal Uddin Rumi and read.

The following morning Chi Ling woke early. She had had another dream and she desperately wanted to remember it. Compelling her unconscious to return it, she wrote these words.

*All the members of my family are celebrating my return and as the entertainers have not turned up, I offer to sing for them. I stand on the stage and as the first shaky tremors from my vocal chords arise, I am close to collapse. Suddenly, like a bird taking flight, my voice sings out as sweet as a silver bell. I can tell from their smiles that the audience are transfixed by the wondrous sound coming from me. With each song I grow in confidence; charging every new phrase with ever deeper feeling, bringing new meaning and delight to the old songs. The look on my father's face is beatific. I picture myself travelling through space, past the transient stars, in a Universe that is mine.*

*I bathe in new winds issuing from the mountains, clearing the mists that have been mustering in the streets. Water that has long stagnated in secret wells is flowing again, washing the land and filling the air with fresh scent. The birds perch in the trees and accompany me as they do the golden sunsets that fill the western sky. Suddenly, the old ways have returned to this ancient empire and poetry is once again on the lips of all and the folly of love is behind every action.*

*I see my mother, gazing at me, amazed by my powerful presence. I hear my voice and presume it is being carried on a breeze brought in from the sea. I look out to the great expanse of bright, blue ocean and smell perfume on the air. Flowers are everywhere, and a garland of red roses sits proudly on my head. I am not singing in a hall, I am in a sunlit garden, bathing in its beauty. I have grown miraculously tall. Unexpectedly a shadow crosses before me and I know this shadow is doubt. With this shadow, my ecstatic voice*

*leaves me. I tell the assembled guests that my recital is at an end and once the sound of applause dies down, my mother rushes to me. "We were surprised by the brightness and warmth of your songs, just as the first day of spring surprises us. How could you have a voice that can reverberate across mountains?" "I don't know mother. All I did was surrender."*

Chi Ling ceased her writing with the word surrender resonating in her head. Jalal Uddin Rumi had used it in a poem she had read the previous evening. She found the verses.

You and I have spoken all these words, but as for the way we have to go they have not been a preparation.

There is no getting ready other than Grace.

My faults have stayed hidden; one might call that a preparation! I have only one small drop of knowing in my soul; let it dissolve in your ocean.

There are so many threats to it.

Inside each of us, there is the continual dying.

In the autumn our leaves fall and are blown out over the water.

A crow sits in our blackened limbs and talks about what's gone.

Then generosity returns; it comes with spring, moisture and intelligence, accompanied by the scents of hyacinth, rose and cypress. Weep and then smile.

Don't pretend to know something you haven't experienced. There's a dying that's necessary and then our breath returns. Very little grows on jagged rock.

Be like soft ground; be crumbled.

In this way wild flowers will come up where you are.

You've been stony for too many years.

Try something different, surrender.

## Things never happen in isolation

The award ceremony opened with a speech from the Rector and closed with a speech from one of the students. The invited graduate was Chinese, but Chi Ling had not met her at the College. The student talked about the support she had received from her teachers and how they had encouraged her to make work out of the things that were important to her.

“I discovered that being a woman is important to my art,” she affirmed, smiling and certain that her words had value. “This, after all, is how I give birth to things and nourish them. I cherish delicacy and softness, I am open to chance and I welcome happy accidents. I try to find out what my work wants to become; I’ve no intention of pre-determining its meaning.”

After a few words about how exciting the life of an art student had been, she offered some traditional Chinese advice to her fellow students.

“Water gives life to everything and does not strive. Often it flows in places we can easily reject. When meditating we should go deep into our heart. When dealing with others we should be kind and gentle. When speaking we must be true. When leading we must be just. It is better to stop short than to fill life to the brim. Over sharpen the blade and the edge will soon blunt. Amass a store of wealth and no one can protect it. Desire to own too much and it is certain that disaster will follow. Retire content when your work is done.”

There was considerable applause for the student. Afterwards Chi Ling explained to her parents what the young woman had said. Mr Lao expressed his surprise and then declared that the student was echoing a spirit similar to the one that had accompanied their thoughts on the previous evening.

“These things never happen in isolation it seems. Now enough of this ancient business, Chi Ling, we must prepare to celebrate your

success; we are going to China Town remember? Have you invited your friends? How many are honouring us with their presence?" Of course, it was not the end of the ancient talk because after dinner Chi Ling asked her friends if they could remember any of the ancient proverbs. Sure enough, the little group sat for some time trying to summon up phrases from memories that were too young to have gathered up any great number of them.

"You can also invent sayings if you wish," Chi Ling added, after silence had reigned for some time. "This will bring us a very particular kind of good luck."

"Help me out," Ting Xu requested. "Do you remember those phrases that are used to describe the usefulness of absent things; you know the ones where the material itself is unimportant?"

It was Mrs. Lao who proudly provided the answer.

"Thirty spokes make the wheel's hub, but it is the centre hole that makes it useful. We shape clay to make a vessel, but it is the space within that gives it its function. We construct doors and windows for a room, but it is the holes in these walls that are have the real value."

"Colours blind the eye," Zhu Lin offered, nervously. "Tones deafen the ear. Flavours dull the taste."

She was not certain she had remembered correctly and admitted she could not explain their meaning. When the group called out for more, she offered two further phrases.

"Precious things lead one astray. The sage is guided by what he feels, not what he sees."

All the guests clapped enthusiastically. They repeated their applause after each recital, even when the saying was only half, or mistakenly remembered.

Chi Ling wrote down all the sayings she considered worth keeping. She liked, "accept being unimportant" and "surrender humbly." She disliked, "tolerate misfortune." She wrote "don't be concerned with loss or gain," because she valued it and "love the world as you love yourself," because it confused her.

“Look at it, it cannot be seen; listen to it, it cannot be heard; take it in your hand, it cannot be held.”

These came from Pei Lin who claimed she had invented them, but everyone insisted they had heard them before. Before long the group became adept at mimicking ancient philosophy; caring little for how abstract or nonsensical it sounded. Their laughter was infectious and other guests sitting nearby joined in the merriment. One, an old man from Sichuan, offered these.

“The form of the formless is indefinable. The image of the imageless is beyond imagination. If you stand before it you will not see the beginning. If you follow it, you will not catch a glimpse of the end.”

Chi Ling regarded her final days in London as a series of gifts. Once back in China she tried talking to her friends about the exciting processes she had learned, but she never managed to regain the sense of connection and meaning that accompanied these magical days. She discussed ideas with people from all walks of life, not just designers, and some were sympathetic, but she never got the sense that they fully appreciated the kind of connections she was trying to make. Talking with her father was different, he knew more, but she suspected he was over indulgent towards her. She decided that if she could not gather up meaning out of the things that intrigued her, then they were either a fantasy or she was ill equipped to put her finger on the matter. She could not avoid the obvious conclusion; Chi Ling, the designer, did not know what she was talking about.

## Nursing fantasies

The time came when her memories of London felt far away. Chi Ling decided she must stop worrying about vague student ambitions and cease her yearning for a closer understanding of abstract, poetic processes; all it achieved was anxiety. She told herself that if this kind of creative activity was never called upon in the commercial

world of design then it was clearly redundant. She wanted to be sensible and popular. She didn't need frustrated aspirations fermenting inside her, poisoning her attitudes and she didn't want to foster ambitions that required her to swim against the prevailing current.

Ironically, during this time, swimming became a recurring theme in her dreams, but instead of moving through water she swam through crowds of people. Her consciousness surfaced during these dreams, for she was vaguely aware of shouting at the crowds to move aside. It didn't help her; she simply sank down, ending up at their feet, where shoes carelessly kicked against her body as she tried to move forward.

More than anything, Chi Ling wanted to balance her thinking, settle her misgivings and accept the world as she found it. Trying to be sensible was fine, she told herself, but if dreams of drowning came as a consequence of reasonable goals then maybe the price she was paying was too high. She wondered where the fault lay. Was her job in a design office the cause of it? Was it her friends who never said anything to inspire her? She hated it when her colleagues spent long hours describing how their designs won the approval of the client. She hated it when they chatted endlessly about impossible romances that never came to fruition. If most workers found themselves in similar predicaments and learned how to cope, why couldn't she? She vowed to remain buoyant and optimistic.

Despite her best efforts, Chi Ling could not suppress her unwelcome misgivings or hide from the uncomfortable insights that brought disappointed evenings. The facts were clear. She had ceased to play open-ended games and the days no longer ran at the speed of light; they were painfully closed, detached and slow. That her life had become an overcrowded struggle where everything was predetermined, lacking any promise of change, was a horrible distortion of all she had dreamed of. She envisaged an enormous canyon between her dreams and the place she wanted to be and it

was obvious she had no idea how to construct a bridge to cross over into another kind of reality.

She wondered if her early aspirations were like diversions invented for children, fine at the time, but leading nowhere. She had become over cautious again when answering questions and her voice took on a thin, cracked quality when talking to those who made her feel uncomfortable. What finally made her take action was hearing the words she used when describing her work in the design office. She had called it 'stupid' too often and it shamed her. This, she decided, was a habit that had to cease; describing her life in this way would eventually ruin her.

Her first resolution was to take the office projects home. She sat up at night re-inventing the design brief and re-orienting the site conditions. She drew while remembering her tutor, who insisted that drawings should arouse a sense of beauty. The words resonated in her head as she gazed upon the stunning results. Having re-worked the drawings until they pleased her eye, having laboured to create pages that aroused her emotional response, she was content, but then she questioned her effortless ability to draw beautifully. She didn't want to use this facility to fool herself, to convince her false nature that she was doing something important. She longed to be certain that drawings of beauty were worth the effort.

Despite her doubts Chi Ling continued with her night work. She laboured with the belief that those who longed for success achieved their goal if they worked conscientiously. She had to become that person who accomplished what they set their heart upon. She was determined to remain busy whether she experienced optimistic times or melancholy times. In this way her drawing activity never faltered. The nagging sense that she was still far from the place she wanted to be never left her, but she was grateful to be active.

To help with the despondent days, Chi Ling nursed a fantasy that slept deep in her heart. It was a sentiment she remembered from childhood and when it rose up into the light she smiled. She knew it

was simply a naive daydream, but she had no intention of ignoring it. She imagined that the Fates had issued a decree, directing Destiny to bestow fame and fortune upon her. Occasionally the fantasy arrived like an exaggerated vision; it overwhelmed her and afterwards she wondered how she could truly imagine she was destined to become a renowned inventor, a genius architect and designer who created astounding spaces and fabulous installations. Nevertheless, the fantasy never left her; she would create wonderfully inspiring places that were the marvel of the world and change people's lives for the better.

When these fantasies held her attention Chi Ling thought of herself as a conjuror, a maker of spaces that played tricks and created illusions for her visitors to marvel at. She imagined groups of people walking through her world, never certain where the spaces began or ended. In this dream world she pictured herself seducing her visitors ever onward to explore deeper and deeper into the rooms and vistas she had devised. Chi Ling, the magician, created a great wealth of marvels, more than anyone could count or comprehend. The spaces were not legible as such, but they moved the visitors. She imagined them sitting quietly, shedding a tear or two for the beautiful yet invisible relationships she had fashioned for them.

## The whole world is music

Fantasy stimulated Chi Ling's much needed optimism in life, but music gave it a more profound kind of buoyancy. It helped to deepen her spirit and broaden her understanding. There were times when music made her sad and times when it exhilarated her, but when sounds had the ability to sadden and exhilarate her at the same time, then the world became a magical place. When she was sensitised by emotions such as these, Chi Ling invented descriptions to reflect the mood of the music.

*Bright spring blue after roaring thunder; tiny summer clouds,  
feathery still; red autumn leaves entertaining the wind.*

Phrases like these charmed her. She loved the connection between words and music. Songs had a very particularly place in her heart. She often woke with the words to songs that had been running through her head. The name she had for them was ‘wake-up songs’ and they gave her an insight into how she was feeling. She marvelled at their ability to present a mirror to unnamed feelings and desires that had been sleeping inside her.

Music encouraged ideas to spring up in Chi Ling - giving her the impression that her consciousness was expanding - and listening to music in the open air had an even greater, more dramatic effect upon her sensitivity. Outside, where she walked freely and gazed up at the sky, profound thoughts accompanied the sounds; she travelled then to realms that were beyond her description. Secretly, she imagined she could pick up information that was too sensitive for others to hear. She once described this extraordinary ability to her father, who felt it was his solemn duty to seek further clarification. A deliberate puzzle of furrows lined his brow and his enquiry was tentative.

“Do you really see yourself as a radio receiver, Chi Ling? You walk to the rhythm of music and imagine you are picking up data on a wave length that is inaccessible to the rest of us?”

“Yes,” Chi Ling replied, happily. “It sounds a bit odd, but it’s not unusual. Do you think it’s too exotic or radical?”

Mr. Lao reflected. “Maybe we all attempt this kind of thing; inventing another universe so we can distance ourselves from our existing one. I probably did it in my youth. I once tried to read a friend’s mind, but it made me feel hot and giddy.”

“Sometimes music heats me up,” Chi Ling declared. “If I’m feeling particularly receptive it freezes my muscles and then it heats them up, all of them, from head to toe. During these times the music becomes very clear and I know exactly what the following sequence

of chords will be. Even if I have never heard the music before, I can hum the melody.”

“You could always recall a tune without the least effort.”

“For me, the whole world is music. I only wish I could listen more intently. I suspect that if we could listen well enough we would hear the planet breathing and drinking.”

“That is truly an intense form of listening,” Mr. Lao agreed. “It would be very nice to hear all the different parts of life working together; hearing those things that cause nature to grow. These musical fantasies are entirely real to you, my daughter; music defines you better than anything else.”

That summer, while struggling to overcome the misery of being rejected by a boyfriend, a striking and profound sequence of chords echoed deep inside Chi Ling’s heart. She stood still, imagining there was not enough of her to listen to these chords as intensely as she should. This was the hardest hurt she could imagine and tears sprang to her eyes. For weeks afterwards, she admonished herself for not composing music, for not initiating something important, for not struggling to get something right or for not making things in the way she truly wanted them made. She was frustrated with her lack of skill, with her gross inability. She admonished herself for having no thoughts or feelings of her own. It left her feeling empty and isolated. Chi Ling experienced this emptiness in the form of hunger; it had nothing to do with food or actually feeling hungry. The words resounding in her head were, ‘I want...’ but they never connected with a subject that defined what it was that she actually wanted. All she knew was that she didn’t have it and nothing would be right until she did.

During these weeks and months, she saw stinginess and dishonesty wherever she looked. Everything she owned, even the food in her fridge was part of a system that profited some people and victimised

others. She hated the idea of lending her support, albeit tacitly, to a world that had this kind of meanness as its foundation.

Mr. Lao worried about his daughter and visited her often. He always brought flowers and talked for hours; sometimes they read poetry. Chi Ling loved hearing her father read. She was delighted when she found the long forgotten poems of Jalal Uddin Rumi in a neglected drawer.

Those who don't feel this Love pulling them like a river,  
Those who don't drink dawn like a cup of spring water  
Or take in sunset like supper,  
Those who don't want to change let them sleep.  
This Love is beyond the study of theology;  
That old trickery and hypocrisy,  
If you want to improve your mind that way, sleep on.  
I've given up on my brain;  
I've torn it to shreds and thrown it away.  
If you're not completely naked,  
Wrap your beautiful robe of words around you and sleep.

Chi Ling decided she must learn how to become completely naked. She knew she would have to teach herself this lesson.

## A sudden flowering

As the weeks passed, Mr Lao became increasingly despondent about his daughter's future. He told her that if she was not careful she would end up living the life of a hermit on some distant mountain and counselled against such an option. He invited her to speak her mind more frequently and to accept with certainty that nothing was too complex to resolve.

"Allow me to help you give form to the intricacies of your half-formed notions," he beseeched her. "Let us study your thinking and

determine how to express it in the simplest terms. Your ideas might yet be self-evident propositions.”

“But father,” Chi Ling exclaimed, “you must not regard my struggles as some kind of game or mathematical problem. I know that when you want to solve an equation you break it down into its component parts, but this isn’t the way you will understand how I put my world together.”

“But I want you to see how your philosophy changes when you’re confident,” he said. “We can attend to your impractical propositions no matter how paradoxical they are. We don’t have to worry about verifying them, only about enjoying them.”

“Thank you, father; you, yourself, are quite a paradox. I will also welcome your oddities and help with your challenges.”

It was conversations like this that kept Chi Ling tuned to those possibilities that were on the threshold of flowering.

That autumn Chi Ling gazed from the office window and spied a flock of geese flying south. Wanting to fly with them, she felt saddened by their departure, Realising she must find a way to lift her spirits she decided to reconnect with old friends who lived far away. She asked them to tell her what they would do if they were in her shoes and described her predicament like this.

“Imagine yourself climbing a hill and once at the top you feel the sudden urge to fly. You allow the wild sense of freedom to take over and open your arms wide to let out a great yell, a shout for the whole world to hear. Now imagine you are back down from the hill and you have a sudden desire to sing. All the songs you know are moving up towards your throat, but no sound is coming out. What should you do?”

“Employ a singing teacher,” Ting Xu suggested.

“Be brave and toughen yourself up,” said Rachel, reminding her of a directive their tutor had used.

“Find a gallery and exhibit your beautiful drawings,” Feng Li told

her. “Everyone is sure to enjoy them.”

“You must write poetry,” Zhu Lin said. “Poetry is the best medium for finding your voice; it celebrates ambiguity and shies away from certainty. This is surely what your spirit needs to feel free and start to sing again.”

“Visit the old gardens of Suzhou,” Antonietta suggested, “and once you have absorbed them you can adopt the methods of the gardeners.”

Chi Ling entreated her vulnerable spirit to be brave and took every opportunity to make fearless decisions. By springtime she had met a singing teacher who recommended that she join a choir rather than sing by herself. The China Academy of Art in Hangzhou had agreed to exhibit her drawings and later they invited her to teach drawing. Chi Ling did not write poetry, but she wrote lyrical notes in her diary.

We sang together and joined hearts.

Try laughter; diligent work you know too well.

Today, with daring and resilience, I avoided fear.

Tomorrow I will be awarded an accolade for bravery.

Act with conviction. Trust and be trusted.

Without needless speech my work progresses calmly.

Chi Ling travelled to Suzhou. She visited the Humble Administrator's Garden, The Lingering Garden, The Great Wave Pavilion, The Lion Grove Garden, The Master of Nets Garden, The Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty, The Couple's Retreat Garden, The Garden of Cultivation and finally, The Retreat and Reflection Garden. While she was sitting in The Lingering Garden a tour guide passed by speaking English to a group of tourists. She joined them, and his learned words affected her as much as the garden itself.

“The ancient master gardeners were subtle, mysterious, profound and responsive. The depth of their knowledge was unfathomable. All we can do is describe the results without knowing how they achieved

them. They were watchful, like men crossing a winter stream; alert, like men aware of danger; courteous, like visiting guests. They were yielding, like ice about to melt; simple, like blocks of wood not yet carved. They were hollow, like caves and opaque like muddy pools. Which of us is prepared to wait quietly while mud settles? Who can remain still until the moment for action comes? The old gardeners were not seeking fulfilment; they were not swayed by a desire for change, they emptied themselves of everything and let their mind become still.

While they were still, ten thousand things rose and fell and the gardens in their charge waited patiently. The ten thousand things grew and flourished and then returned to the source. Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature. The way of nature is unchanging. Knowing constancy is insight. Not knowing constancy leads towards disaster.

It is only in this way that we can keep the mind open. With an open mind, we can be openhearted. Being openhearted is the finest way to make a fine garden. Though the body dies, the garden will never pass away.”

## A garden in the sky

Chi Ling gave up working in the office. She asked her father if he had any land she could use to construct a garden.

“How much land and what kind?” he asked.

“Any kind of land, providing it is in the city. Something you can’t use for your usual developments.”

“I own nothing with this description,” Mr. Lao exclaimed. “Land in the city is far too expensive, but I will give your request some serious thought. Something always turns up if you think about it often enough.”

Mr. Lao owned a small chain of supermarkets, so Chi Ling’s request was not a complete fantasy. One morning, some months later, he

phoned his daughter, asking if she would accompany him to Zhenhai New Town, a district to the east of Ningbo. Within the hour, he and his daughter were driving westwards.

“I have made a deal with the Ming Tao Garden Centre,” Mr. Lao explained. “We have agreed that I will sell their products in my stores. I need you to tell me how I can make an installation to display them. I’ve no idea how to sell plants; what kind of spectacle they need and where to situate them in the store.”

Chi Ling was delighted. First they travelled to the Garden Centre. She was impressed by its size. More than fifty hectares were dedicated to growing bamboo, acers, magnolias, bonsai, rattan, palm and sedge. She never imagined so many reeds existed. Beside the open fields were a series of sheds where gardening tools and other nursery products were on sale. She was surprised by the quantity of cut bamboo, matting and reeds and she was delighted that it could be woven in so many interesting ways. The fencing materials fascinated her. She wanted to buy great quantities of them.

After lunch Mr. Lao drove his daughter to the supermarket in Zhenhai New Town. It was a large industrial building with a large car park. Chi Ling walked around the building with her father. Soon they were joined by Mr Li, the store manager. Mr. Lao asked his daughter to give them her thoughts. Chi Ling suggested they move the trolley park away from the door to provide room for the display of planting under the canopy. Then she explained how the front section of the store could be re-arranged to make room for the plants. She suggested they purchase display shelves from the same supplier the garden centre used and recommended that bamboo and reed fencing be constructed as a backdrop to the planting.

“You should create the feeling of a garden,” she told them.

Mr. Lao applauded his daughter’s vision. “You can design the installation as you wish, but I should like you to allow a designer from the company’s firm of architects to assist in the process. They must understand the rules of your prototype. Later they will design

similar installations in all the stores.”

Chi Ling took a series of photographs while her father and the manager went to the office to find drawings she could use to develop her design and produce a proposed layout.

The project took six months to complete and during this time Chi Ling enjoyed many happy hours. While the store was being prepared for her installation, she practically lived in a workshop at the garden centre where sheds, fencing and floor matting were fabricated. She was given a small place to work and Chi Fen, her design assistant, expressed amazement at Chi Ling’s continual experimentation with the materials. She explored weaving techniques, joined components together in unexpected ways and made installations out of rattan, palm and sedge. Chi Ling also made a little bridge in this fabrication workshop and later she used it as the entrance to the store’s plant section.

During the installation Chi Ling made a discovery that had dramatic consequences. There was only one place where the sink could be installed because the supply pipe had to come from the ladies washroom abutting the planting area. This wasn’t a problem, but the waste pipe was; it had to run along a wall and leave the building in the exact place where an external staircase started to rise up to the roof. Until this discovery, Chi Ling had no reason to mistrust the plans she had been given and on these the stair was shown further along the wall.

Chi Ling studied the staircase to determine if she might alter the base section to prevent the waste pipe from colliding with it. It wasn’t a difficult task, but while she considered the options she decided to view the roof. The outlook delighted her. To the east the city was in full view, to the west the countryside panorama provided a fine setting, just as one might expect a landscape garden to display a villa to best effect. She walked over the expanse of asphalt, lost in thought. She sat on a low parapet wall and entered a timber-clad

construction, to discover it was the housing for a water tank. It occurred to Chi Ling that she could build a garden up here and slowly she grasped the meaning and the implications of this wild inspiration. She smiled; telling herself in strict terms that the idea was impossible, but in seconds she substituted the word 'impossible' for 'difficult'. Shortly after this she phoned her father in an optimistic mood and told him she wanted to build a garden on the roof of his store. He declared his love of roof gardens, but not on his supermarket. He told Chi Ling she must find a place capable of enchantment. Despite these initial words Mr. Lao and Mr. Li were discussing Chi Ling's dream for the supermarket roof before the day was over. Within days she had named it *The Garden in the Sky* and she was drawing plans, making models and dreaming all day about the plateau on the edge of Ningbo that was hers to dream about.

## A wealth of advances and retreats

Chi Ling had questions; she had so many questions she even wondered if it was possible to retain any kind of appetite for action after such rigorous interrogation.

How do traditional gardens delight their visitors? How do their wealth of features and spatial experiences work together? Do they communicate anything that touches upon meaning? If I described a walk through a garden would it be like telling a story? If I accidentally introduced an unrelated object, an immobile and inert thing foreign to the nature of my garden, how would I recognise this? Do I really know how to trigger the material imagination? We experience gardens while walking through them, but how exactly do we experience them? What can I say about it? What do we see? What work do the plants and architecture do together? What relationships do they enjoy? How would I know if one sequence of spaces is more fulfilling than another? How could I tell if one thing was inspiring other things? Is arrangement the most important aspect? Is it

possible for a garden to alienate visitors? What are the remedies? What is communicated by a path, a view, the planting, a bench, a wall, the stones or a pavilion? If they work together, might they constitute a story? How should I name the characters of this story? Are there common themes that might inspire connections between the diverse elements? Could I identify them in a walk and create a sequence of spaces to improve the qualities of this narrative? Will it stay in the memory? Could it grow into other stories? Could my garden have some of the qualities of theatre?

Chi Ling never wrote poetry, but she continued writing notes in her diary. These words confirmed her preoccupation with process. She wrote these phrases as entreaties to herself.

The beginning is fraught with danger.

There is nothing to do but get tough.

Regard all problems as your ally.

Allow a garden to speak to you.

A gardener is a speaker and a listener.

Trust chaos. Start with what is fishy, provocative and risky. Welcome the unknown waiting to be discovered.

Subject yourself to marvellous accidents.

Chance occurrences can break outworn connections.

What we know too well causes drowsiness.

Structure is affirmed when repetition is broken.

Look for the threshold of new recognitions.

Associations take place where reassembly occurs.

Mistakes will guide you; disruption is inevitable.

Make decisions with your eyes closed.

Confirm it only if it strikes the eye.

Establish a close affinity with the heart.

Delight in the relationship between order and chaos.

Proceed quickly without preconceptions.

Forget your desire for recognition.

Banish understanding and trust your spirit.

Imagine a garden that sits at the heart of the world.  
Let your artefacts enjoy shared meanings.  
Find activities where everything is interchangeable.  
Find processes where poetic identifications flow.  
Meaningful walks occur unconsciously in daily life.  
Connect with themes that thrive beneath everyday life.  
Make walks that concretise your feelings.  
Create spaces that welcome the imagination.  
Make discrete places where dreams arise.  
Narratives unfold and deepen in detached places.

It was clear to Chi Ling that a narrative walk was full of life whether it is two or three steps through a doorway or whether it is a long walk of many different events. It was her ambition that visitors walking through her garden would continually turn around to face the space they had just moved through, always anticipating the spaces that lay ahead. With each turn, each look back their progress would be halted and they would reflect.

She wanted to create an increasing sense of privacy and to clearly articulate the sequence of spaces that established this seclusion. She wanted the architecture clearly defined; an entrance area, a meeting room, a courtyard and a pavilion. She wanted the pavilion to occupy the heart of the garden and have it visible from the meeting room. The pavilion would have a window that resembled a theatre box and from this place she would look out over the courtyard as if it were a stage.

Chi Ling's dream was to create a wealth of advances and retreats, a treasure house of visual initiations and celebrations that would summon a visitor to another world. She wanted to entertain them, to feed them, and yet also to invite perplexity. Her invitation to dream had to come from emotional content that was not entirely obvious. She wanted her visitors to ask themselves what it was that made this garden extraordinary. All this was unlike any design work she had

undertaken before. She wrote a list of things to keep her focussed on the task ahead.

Create stories that are evoked solely by the materiality of the objects. Trust that the imagination of the place resides in the objects of the garden, not inside me. Have the conviction that anything properly arranged will act as a spur for dreaming. Never accept forms that lack vibrancy or those that spurn lively interaction. Make a garden that is the centre of a world, not some vague geographical location. Fill the garden with a resonance that inspires visitors to listen as it tells its stories.

## The rhetorical landscape

Chi Ling settled down to draw plans; she drew so many there was no possible way of counting them. Some were layouts to clarify the function and others were diagrams to explore where social interaction might take place. In a morning she might direct her attention to the location of habitable spaces, move on to explore their internal layout and then switch her attention to consider aspects of the garden walk. In the afternoon she might make numerous sketches to explore architectural forms and the qualities of space, invent notations to evaluate the use of materials, make illustrations to show the possibilities of colour and create diagrams to analyse the play of light. Alternatively, she might edit the entire set of drawings she had produced that morning only to re-edit them again the following day.

The formal conditions that instigated her drawn material were the site, its context and orientation, but by putting herself in the way of marvellous accidents, she found other reasons to draw. Being well practised in this art, she was grateful for any surprises, mishaps or mistakes. Equally, if a metaphor or rhetorical theme suggested itself, Chi Ling would visualise it and rearrange her design to bring it into the picture. These tricks helped her to create striking visual effects

which would in time help to dramatize the narrative sequences of her walks.

When Chi Ling mentioned the project to her singing teacher, Qing Ge, she asked to visit the site. Qing Ge is renowned for composing while walking. Sometimes she walks in a straight line and sometimes she takes a circuitous route. It matters greatly what the musical theme is, for this affects the time it takes. A musical walk to a celebratory dance tune progresses at half the speed of a normal walk and a walk to a melancholy tune will be so slow, it is possible that the activity might not even qualify for the term walking.

Chi Ling watched Qing Ge walking across the supermarket roof; the movement of her feet, arms and hands erratic, turning her into a picture comic eccentricity.

“Are you composing again?” Chi Ling asked.

“Yes. I get to know a place by composing in it.”

“But how can you compose music in your head?”

“My limbs allow me to work on different orchestral parts at the same time. I keep the tempo with my legs and the melody with my right arm. I move my left arm to follow the sounds of the bass, while my left hand expresses the sustained notes. The movement of my right arm is more complex than the left because the melody is more expressive than the chords I improvise around the bass line.”

“You are joking,” Chi Ling, exclaimed, incredulous.

“No,” Qing Ge laughed and launched into a song, her voice echoing her melodic movements, her legs punctuating the rhythm; each action a riot of exaggerated speed changes.

“I denote punctuation like this,” she called out and, standing still, she pointed her toe in front of her and then dug her heel into the ground. Chi Ling was astonished.

Chi Ling, eager to learn about the words of songs in musical composition, asked how she managed to align the individual word accents to the tune of the music she was creating.

“I’ve no idea,” Qing Ge replied, “it seems to me that the words join with the music of their own accord.”

Chi Ling laughed. “You’re teasing me. You may possess particular qualities or even genius, but words can’t possibly exhibit independence on your behalf; it’s beyond belief.”

Despite her scepticism, she had the feeling that Qing Ge’s eloquent talent for coupling music with language was similar to her own talent for coupling architecture with language.

They talked then of artfulness, how it stimulated decisions, inspired ideas and created theoretical propositions. Artifice was at play behind every musical line and every drawn line they created. They spoke about sounds, where they came from and how they placed themselves inside the projects they worked on.

They discussed lyricism, talked of those things that best carried a generous invitation and how their vision of the end product had to be born in emotion. Chi Ling stated that she had to be in the space she was designing not looking at it and that she could walk through architecture in her mind’s eye and feel its dramatic occasions. Such a walk corroborated the viability of her spatial events and instigated the language she needed to form narratives. She said it was crucial to dream the plan as a theatrical event before the space was built, adding that living in an installation before it exists enabled her to test those dramatic gestures that operate down at the ordinary level of experience.

Qing Ge agreed that she inhabited her music in a similar manner, dreaming sounds as visual material which in turn instigated a series of rhetorical themes.

“This is how my spatial language emerges,” Chi Ling said.

“Remind me what this spatial language is?” Qing Ge asked.

“Any memorable, concise account of a place can be a spatial language,” Chi Ling offered. It’s the structure that underpins its resolutions; it is the engine that drives decision making. My tutor

claimed that designers become exhausted by the hundreds of decisions they must make, so a language is needed to make the connections. The spatial language is probably the quality that is read by the visitor, the thing that makes it readable and worthy of description.”

This conversation with Qing Ge stayed with Chi Ling while she drew and while she slept. She wanted more of her company, but their worlds rarely coincided; she invented argumentative monologues as a substitute. Other than that, students at The China Academy of Art were her most stimulating companions.

## A roof to revolutionise beauty

Chi Ling inhabited the supermarket roof as though it was her country estate, covering every millimetre of the asphalt terrain to dream her garden. When she came into view from below, the shoppers pointed her out. They couldn't imagine why she concentrated so deeply or why she waved her hands about as though she were talking to someone. She imagined she was talking to her music teacher, Qing Ge, but she was nowhere nearby. If the shoppers asked about her activity, she told them she had to continually walk over the roof to dream the spaces that would become her garden landscape. Most were happy to remain none the wiser for this information, but a few were keen to ask further questions. Chi Ling was always generous with her replies and sometimes the ensuing dialogue confirmed matters that had, until then, only existed as vague thoughts at the back of her mind.

In all weathers and at every time of day and night, Chi Ling photographed the surrounding scenery. She created strips of photographs joined together to make continuous panoramas and exhibited these at The China Academy of Art. Later they were exhibited by The Photographer's Gallery, who easily sold the work and commissioned her to produce other panoramas.

When Chi Ling had eventually drawn everything that was possible to draw, she decided that material concerns should now take over from the intellectual ones. Most of her research was carried out at the garden centre. Here she made models with fine woven materials that looked similar in small scale to the rattan, palm and sedge materials she would use in the real landscape. She met a gardener who told her about the best trees and shrubs to use and what kind of pots she needed. She also met a service engineer who helped her resolve the issue of watering the vegetation and draining the great expanse of roof.

Her most dramatic chance encounter was with Chuan Di, a specialist in peat-free growing material. Chi Ling's roof garden was the kind of project he had often dreamed of. Being keen to show his interest, he constructed a growing bed for her. He had long experimented with a variety of compost mixtures and he made up a mixture that would suit this location and climate. It comprised mainly of bark, coconut fibre, wood fibre and green compost, but he also added small amounts of inorganic materials such as grit, sharp sand and rock wool. Chi Ling regarded Chuan Di as a genius. He taught her about the wonderful qualities of bark and before long she was using it in every conceivable way. She placed it around the edge of her growing bed, constructed prototype rock formations with it and used it as the structure to form mounds of peat-free soil. With the influence of Chuan Di she was beginning to envision the supermarket roof as a landscape of trees in gently rolling hills.

Mr. Lao was delighted to see a model of the garden, but he was concerned when his daughter talked of a small lake and running water. She explained that it was not real water, but neither was clear about what it would be. He then became concerned about a small construction next to the water tank.

"And this?" he asked, pointing, "is it the penthouse suite?"

"Not exactly," Chi Ling offered, "but I am going to live here. Why make a place of great beauty and only visit it on rare occasions? The

garden will need constant care and attention and I can't afford to pay someone to do this. It makes sense and it's only a little larger than the meeting room I had planned."

Mr Lao became silent. He didn't have a licence to construct an apartment here and he suspected that the authorities would refuse permission even if he applied for it. He said nothing about this situation, preferring instead to praise her efforts.

"This roof will revolutionise beauty," he declared. "There is only one thing more important than inviting people to a place of beauty and that is to invite them to a place of radical beauty."

This was the best thing he could have said to Chi Ling; the highest compliment she could have wished to receive.

Later that day Chi Ling received a call from her mother.

"I have bad news." Her speech was slow, her voice dejected. "Your grandmother has just died. Please come home quickly."

Chi Ling stood immobile as the words exploded inside her. The pain was unimaginable, and it caused a sudden outcrop of goose bumps to emerge. She stood frozen still for a long time.

"We have lost Grandma," she said slowly, as though uttering the words might help her adjust to their meaning. "She was perfect for this world." Tears gently trickled from her eyes, her body gave an involuntary jerk and a sob leaped out. "I was with her just three days ago, full of life. She was beautiful."

Mrs Lao and Chi Ling cried and hugged each other all night. They talked of everything, but the subject that most easily settled their grief concerned the building of a monument to honour the memory of this fine woman. She had been through so many changing times in her life and as she moved into each new era she kept her graceful optimism alive. She was a model for Chi Ling, a signpost that declared that it was always possible to weather a storm; any kind of storm. As the sun began to rise, Chi Ling declared that she would build a monument to her grandmother on the roof garden.

“No, that’s too much,” Mrs. Lao insisted. “Just construct the garden in her honour; that will bring you good luck.”

“Are you sure,” Chi Ling exclaimed, “because if you are, I will call it *Grandmother’s Garden in the Sky*. This is a fine name for a landscape. I like to think of Grandmother in the sky. It also suggests that we are referring to a utopian place, a dream place as well as a real garden.”

“On second thoughts,” Mrs. Lao added thoughtfully, “you might construct a tiny mound. A simple bank of earth will be a perfect monument. This alone would speak eloquently of the presence that was once ours and the sorrow we now live with.”

## In the spirit of spring

When anyone asked Mrs. Lao to say when her daughter might start thinking about a husband, her reply was always, “any day now.” None of those inquiring was fooled by this dexterous attempt to deceive them, but the phrase did make incessant probing a fruitless activity. Mr Lao, like most men, was bound to feel that it was no urgent matter, but it was extraordinary that Mrs. Lao joined him in this relaxed approach. A casual attitude towards marriage had never been the preference of Chi Ling’s relatives though and the subject of finding a husband was bound to be a major talking point during the funeral ceremonies.

“It is as if death required another birth to balance the family account,” Chi Ling thought to herself. She could not reply to her relatives as her mother had done, for they would demand further details and it was certain they would have no interest in hearing about chance encounters with a man who inspired love, they would want proof that he was a good match; meaning that his material wealth had to be worth talking about.

The thought of endless interrogation terrified Chi Ling, but she was adamant she would not allow shame to be transferred to her by those

who loved interfering in her life. She had to invent a strategy to protect her from embarrassment and the first course of action that occurred to her was deception; she would invent a false husband. She wondered if Chuan Di, her soil expert, would take on this surrogate role, but quickly cast the deceit from her mind. She could not ask him to perform a sham engagement and keep up the fabrication throughout the coming weeks of rituals. She would also have to declare that he came from a wealthy family and as far as she knew this was untrue. Chi Ling also recognised a further flaw in her strategy; she suspected Chuan Di was already attracted to her in a romantic way and she did not wish to confuse or upset his feelings. Before all this worry made her anxious and she became too overwhelmed to act upon any kind of notion, Chi Ling sent Chuan Di a text message to say that her grandmother had died and work on the garden would have to cease for several weeks. She had no idea how to end the text and asked him to meet her in Yuehu Park.

“I’ll be there in an hour,” was Chuan Di’s reply. “Meet me on the long bridge opposite the pavilion.”

Within forty minutes Chi Ling was strolling in her very own garden of happiness. She had by now moved beyond the nervousness that had threatened to overwhelm her, but the feeling of peace that was her companion, surprised her. She gazed into the water and felt purified. All the old heaviness had left her, and she half imagined she was floating above the ground. She did not think about what she was going to say or about anything else; time stood still. Everything she gazed upon prompted her curiosity; even a floating leaf had the potential to absorb and delight her. She looked into the faces of passing visitors, not with the doubt or shyness that was often hers, but with calm assurance.

When Chuan Di entered the park Chi Ling was sauntering to and fro, swaying her featherweight body. She stopped on the bridge and hummed a song in a sentimental mood. Sunlight warmly lit her neck, her ears and her mouth, but her brow was high in shadow. Chuan Di

fell into an ethereal fervour the second he saw her. It seemed to him that Chi Ling's body hung in the air. Her white cotton dress coiled around her like a sea-shell. Rising in a ripple from her ankles, it swelled in circling waves up to her shoulders. It revealed her to him in glimpses; she was like an apparition born of the sea. For Chuan Di, Chi Ling was an aspiration realised, a happy morning thought, a vapour with the scent of perfumed flowers. She lived in the spirit of spring. He had been waiting for her since childhood. He had seen her in pictures and heard of her in songs. She was his rapturous joy and his reverie. She was his purpose in life.

Chi Ling gazed at the surface of the lake, her body swaying gently to the music in her head. On seeing Chuan Di, her face suddenly flushed with delight. She displayed a smile, so sweet, so beautiful and so true to the glory of those moments that anyone who happened by chance to gaze in her direction would have been filled with the desire to know everything about her charms. It was Chuan Di's eyes that held Chi Ling's gaze and at that moment he sent a loving kiss from his fingertips in her direction. Chi Ling tossed her hair from her temples, just as the sun burst through the clouds. She beamed brightly and merrily, returning his kiss with a daring charm.

They came together on the crooked bridge and shared a look that could only mean one thing. Neither tried a second time to engage the tender encounter, but the taste of it lingered while they talked. Every word they spoke captivated their hearts. They were mundane words, but they were also magical refrains that made apparent the possibility of the sweetest kind of communication. These words flowed past lips that displayed a smile of the wonder and pleasure of this new connection.

As soon as Chi Ling had conveyed all news of a practical nature, the tumultuous feelings she had experienced began to die away. She could say nothing about her plan. Together, she and Chuan Di walked towards the exit. Chi Ling's nervousness returned, but then a voice from deep inside her declared that everything that had

happened in her life had been preparing her for this moment. She knew this was an ageless longing, a thing shared by all, yet she knew it was truly hers. She could hear constant rhythms of sweet music in her heart.

“Oh, one more thing,” she exclaimed, and stopped.

“Yes,” Chuan Di replied. It was a clear, confident yes, nothing at all like a question; it was an answer. “Yes, I will.”

Chi Ling was happy beyond imagining. They kissed. For a while the euphoric couple were not in need of words.

## Ancient choirs

The funeral rites lasted three weeks and our new-born gardener, like a fish out of water, couldn't wait to dive back into her work. Chi Ling rented an apartment close to the supermarket and, with Chuan Di at her side, she launched into day one of her construction phase. That day she had a call from an Italian friend, Antonietta, who was in Shanghai and wanted to come to Ningbo to meet her. It was Antonietta who had suggested she visit the old gardens of Suzhou, which in turn inspired her love of landscape design.

Two days later the old college friends met, Antonietta introducing Chi Ling to Lorenzo, her new husband, and Chi Ling introducing them to Chuan Di. On their way to see the supermarket roof, Chi Ling learned that Lorenzo was a composer who had created music for a number of gardens. He and Antonietta had come to Shanghai to promote their company, ‘Sonic Gardens.’ Once they were standing in the site of Chi Ling's garden on the supermarket roof, her guests gazed in astonishment at the setting.

“No garden under the sun has scenery to match this,” Chi Ling told them. “The spirit which guides the entertainment here, the dance and interplay between foliage and architecture, will be as profound as any that the ancient gardeners made for us. Imagine this roof, a

bed of sweet and fragrant flowers; a riot of dynamic forms sitting among the luscious greens of grass, shrubs and trees.”

“And can you imagine,” Lorenzo asked, “sounds issuing out of this nature sweet enough to refresh any visitor’s tired senses after a working day? I could immerse this space in crystal sounds of flowing streams, the finest bird song and wind rustling through the trees. I could even conjure majestic wooded groves by a calm lake mirroring distant mountain peaks. I could fill this little world with the sound of all kinds of stringed, wind and percussion instruments and invite you to wander in the direction of ancient choirs singing in the distance. I could enchant and restore your visitor’s over-busy lives.”

“And we could also bring the light of heaven down to you,”

Antonietta added with a brimming smile. “Just imagine, as the day’s brightness dims, we could adjust your vision of the dwindling light with a subtle illumination that infuses the trees. After the sun has set we could bath visitors in a luminescent glory that slowly lightened the darkness. We could reflect a gentle radiance off a sea of silver trunks to set you dreaming and together with the sound of Chinese harps you’d imagine yourself in a land of ethereal timelessness.” Chi Ling, astonished, hadn’t considered the benefits of light and sound. As her friends spoke, the music they conjured for her was flowing through every fibre in her body. She stood entranced as Lorenzo spoke of how she might walk over this roof top sensing numerous harmonies that issued from harps as they wove joyful tunes together like a collective breath of love breathing through the landscape. She wanted only to dance to the delicious melodies they invented for her, to surrender herself in grateful thanks for her delivery from a life of fear and bewilderment.

From that moment on the four worked together to put into action the production of their garden. The Ningbo Municipal Council, The China Academy of Art, the Ming Tao Garden Centre, Mr. Lao and the manufacturers of equipment for both sound and light all agreed to help with financing the technology. As the weeks rolled by Chi Ling

completely changed her ideas about the garden. She resolved not to build habitable buildings, only boundary walls. She wanted the natural elements of her landscape to be solely responsible for the sense of intimacy she dreamt of. She had imagined that architecture, with its potential for clearly articulating a sequence of spaces, would take responsibility here, but now the flora and a few stones were going to establish her sense of seclusion. She and Chuan Di wanted to play only with contours, planting and natural materials now. The planning, designing and intentionality that had preoccupied Chi Ling for months was left behind in favour of an organic form of growth that is nature's manner of operation. The mounds, plants and trees were positioned by chance and stones sat on the landscape as if they were waiting to be moved to their final destination. Her spaces were still clearly defined – there was still an entrance area, a meeting room, a courtyard and a pavilion, but these existed now only as names in the landscape. Some names described memorable events during construction, some were metaphors, some landscape features and others were of mythological origin. There wasn't a space bigger than six square metres that did not have a name. The pavilion still occupied the heart of the garden, it was still visible from the meeting room and it still had a space that resembled a theatre box where visitors could look out over the courtyard as if it were a stage, but in her scheme, imagination had a greater role to play. Lorenzo and Antonietta were intimately part of the design team and created a sound and light installation that reinforced Chi Ling's vision. They all shared the conviction that the spaces they created were true to their names.

Nothing specific had to be achieved, but a growing was necessary. The four accepted that they had to listen to the rhythm of growth and submit to the assumption that we hear through our bones as well as our ears. Having first learned how to delight in generous instincts it became acutely obvious to them that the old way of judging had

proven itself worthless. New loves were being born, but they did not need to eschew the old loves. Fear was being slowly elbowed out. This work expanded their magnanimous attention. Nothing of the old ways were missed, they simply attended wholeheartedly to the unlearning that was necessary. Every decision allowed them to connect with each other and each new day felt like a life-span. The changes were not without hiccups and stumbling, or some sudden awareness of self-consciousness that intimidated vulnerability, but gradually, as the habit of using fear to predict risk was replaced by a benign casualness in decision making, so the carefree buzz more assuredly hummed. Their mischievous process confirmed their rich enjoyment of pleasure and affirmed the collective certainty that anything is only worth the candle if playfulness is its starting point.

## How the world fills its heart

While all this was in progress, Mr Lao informed Chi Ling that the garden centres in his supermarkets were now complete and he asked if she would come up with a small landscape installation to advertise them. Chi Ling discovered that her father wanted her to design a 'plant feature' to sit outside the stores, so she, enthusiastic as ever, set about visiting the various sites and making designs for a series of small gardens. They each had a timber podium, a protecting wall and roof of bamboo, planted foliage and a bench made of reeds for visitors to sit on. To attract attention, she had banners made that rose up out of the garden. She did not want to advertise the store directly, so she had phrases by Lao Tzu printed upon the banners. *Knowing when to stop averts trouble. You don't have to fear what others fear.* These were typical of the phrases she used.

One evening, as she and her father studied the first installation, she saw a mother and daughter begging outside the store. They sat without hope of receiving anything from the shoppers. Chi Ling talked with them and learned that they had no place to live and no

income to live on. She bought them food and invited them to sleep at her apartment. Mr. Lao offered the mother, Jia Ying, a job at the supermarket and her daughter, Mei Xu, spent her days helping Chi Ling. After a few weeks she and Chuan Di found a place for mother and daughter. They continued to see each other most days. One evening Chi Ling asked Mei Xu what she thought of the little gardens she had helped to build.

“There’s not enough colour in them,” the little girl replied.

“And what should I do about this?” Chi Ling asked.

“You could paint the walls bright colours,” she said.

Jia Ying shook her head disapprovingly, Chuan Di laughed, and Chi Ling smiled. She was certain that Mei Xu had been considering this for some time and the girl’s insight intrigued her.

“Would you do the painting for me?” she asked Mei Xu.

The young girl consented and asked if she could also choose the colours. Chi Ling agreed and the next day, she, together with Jia Ying and Mei Xu went to buy paints and brushes. As the days passed, Mei Xu and her helpers painted the all the walls that surrounded the garden. Chi Ling and her father were delighted. No bird under the sun had plumage to match the colourful scenery they painted; it looked like a wall of sweet and fragrant flowers, it was a riot of colourful blooms. Chi Ling could never have made such a bold decision, nor could she have gone about it in the carefree manner that Mei Xu did.

The evening came when the sound and light installation was to be turned on for the first time. Chi Ling had been too busy to attend the days of testing that preceded the launch, so she was hearing it for the first time. Suddenly, like a bird taking flight, sounds rang out as sweet as a silver bell. The look on Chi Ling’s face was beatific. Sounds came from nowhere; not faint sounds, but a music that filled the garden, making it a solid space of resonant vibrations which seemed to absorb her. It came out of the air, it came up through the ground and it came out of her body. She could only imagine that she was in a

movie, a movie that enjoyed the most enchanting sound track. Each step she took was a performance for the world to see, so totally was she immersed in the occasion.

Chi Ling told Chuan Di that she could see herself travelling through space, past the transient stars. She was certain that new winds issued from the mountains, winds that were clearing the mists that had been mustering in the streets for decades. She said that she imagined water, which had long stagnated in secret wells, had started flowing again, washing the landscape and filling the air with fresh scent. The speakers in the trees led her to believe that birds were perched there, their singing accompanying the golden sunset that filled the western sky. Poetry was on her lips and the folly of love inspired every step she took. She could smell perfume on the air and her flowers, resting for the night, enjoyed a new light. She was inhabiting a soothing moonlit garden, bathing in its beauty, nourishing herself on the invitation to revitalise her senses. It was the timeless message of bird and flower, of wave and wind that she heard and, after feeding on the scenic harmonies of Lorenzo's sound track, she immersed herself in the certain knowledge that this must surely have been how the world has filled its heart from the beginning of time.

It was something like a sob that Chuan Di heard first, a faint sound, but it was enough to wake him from his own enchantment. He turned to Chi Ling and seeing tears in her eyes his heart went out to her. They were the kind of tears shed by those who are sensitive when sensing that beauty is brief. He wanted only to hold her. "Your tears come quickly on this happy occasion," he said, not knowing what else he might say. "Please say you are not sad." "Sad? No," she replied. "My tears know nothing of sadness after such sounds, but ..." and she stopped briefly, "but it's just possible that I should admit to feeling, well ... that the sounds could have made me feel just a little bit lonely."

"Lonely," said Chuan Di passionate. "Whoever can be moved by days and scenes like these can never be lonely for long." He saw the curve

of her neck, the throb of her bosom, the conviction that the world without her would be desolate and suddenly he was filled with the notion that he must ask her to marry him.

“Is it possible,” he enquired, “that we could simply decide to be together for as long as the stars continue to shine?”

His words surprised him, but Chi Ling understood completely and, looking up to him as though the stars were hidden in his face, she placed her hand in his and nodded her head. The truth of her love was in her arteries and her heart shivered with joy at being so close to him. Together they swayed, guided by the same spirit.

“The essence of the ancient days is directing our movement,” she told him and for a short while they felt the world that surrounded them had disappeared in a haze of light.

Antonietta and Lorenzo gazed happily upon their ecstatic moments and reaffirmed their love for each other.

## Havens of inner strength

Mr. Lao had started a TV advertising campaign to promote his stores. The videos featured Chi Ling’s series of miniature gardens outside the supermarkets and he showed a short clip of her roof garden. Within weeks, and for reasons no one could explain, the miniature gardens with their poetic banners were being reproduced everywhere. They had captured the public’s imagination, and everyone wanted to make one. Any piece of neglected land was turned into a little oasis or *Haven of Inner Strength*; as everyone was now calling them. People arranged to meet friends in these havens or they stopped by for a rest on their way home. Web sites were dedicated to recording their charms, offering images of the best examples and giving advice on how best to construct them. Great efforts were made to use remarkable phrases and the variety was endless. *Drift like the waves of the sea*, *High winds do not last all morning*, and *Come together to feel the gentle rain*, were Chi Ling’s

favourite expressions. The authorities soon recognised the power of these small gardens, but they saw no threat in them and some even encouraged their construction.

On the day Chi Ling celebrated the opening of her garden, some unknown visitors had built a *Haven of Inner Strength* at the base of the steps leading up to her roof top garden. The phrase on the banner was - *The Nature of Things*.

The mayor of Ningbo had agreed to perform the opening ceremony and he, together with his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Lao and a great number of other guests bathed almost in disbelief at the graceful sights and sounds of the natural habitat they wandered through. The press and a TV crew were recording everything so that everyone in the Ningbo region could enjoy the celebration and launch. It was agreed that anyone could visit the garden for free, but numbers were restricted. Chi Ling was told that it was fully booked for the next three months. The time came for the Mayor to deliver his speech. The sounds gently faded out and all the guests gathered around the 'courtyard.' The Mayor's voice came to them from every direction.

"No one is waiting around now for things to change," he said. "With this beautiful garden the new transformation has started, and we are all beginning to feel the warm glow that accompanies our new-found enthusiasm for branching out. The conditions prevalent in the ancient days of empire, those times of disenchanting bureaucracy have disappeared, along with its advocates, and it has become clear that with every expelled breath a new healing is now occurring. The early years of our rapid development gave us the fractured debris of over consumption, but now our spirits are being settled and remoulded to accompany a new optimism. With this garden, spontaneity has been fertilised and we have been offered silver linings where none could have been imagined before. It was the mass of contradictions in our culture that held us all frozen for so long, but now I feel we have broken through; a little light is just visible. Young and old alike are beginning to sense their way through the confusion

of past decades and I would like the citizens of Ningbo to celebrate this new era by visiting this garden in the heart of our city. I congratulate all who have worked so hard to achieve this remarkable landscape and I say to Chi Ling, whose vision this is, you have made us all very proud to be citizens of this city.”

The sound of applause filled the garden and many of the thousands who were watching on their televisions shed a little tear of joy. All seemed to let out a sigh of relief.

A woman journalist appeared at Chi Ling’s side asking if she could interview her, but Chi Ling refused; she was far too overwhelmed to speak even one word. But the journalist was a skilled practitioner and she kept up a monologue with the young designer until she was eventually drawn into a conversation.

“Could you explain how your little havens of inner strength have become so remarkably popular?”

“I’ve no idea,” Chi Ling replied. “Maybe these things simply rise up naturally, as osmosis does. Maybe they are carried like pollen on the breeze. Some may have contracted it by the sneezing of others and never know how it happened.”

“But this garden you designed was no accident. You must have taken great pains to design it.”

“I can assure you that no pain was attached to the making of this garden. The pain I suffered accompanied the many years of doubt and struggling growth that were mine before I learnt how to respect myself and grow in skill and confidence.”

“Did you study design?”

“No, I was taught how to listen.”

“How can you design something by listening?”

“You can’t; you also have to know what you have.”

“So what do you have?”

“I have what comes to me. I think that whatever it’s called, it arrives in much the same way that we collect burrs on our socks when walking across a field of grass. They attach themselves without our

consent or choosing. We just have to remember to stop now and then to see what we have gathered.”

“Are you proud of your success?”

“I don’t have any success.”

“But you are famous.”

“I am only famous if you invent that fame. All I did was design a garden and a series of little installations to advertise plants for sale in my father’s chain of supermarkets. I did it to please him, to say thank you for all the years of support he offered me.”

“Can anyone design in the way you do?”

“Of course, they can.”

“Will you teach me?”

“Certainly, would you like to start now?”

## Making the invisible visible

Within days of Chi Ling’s momentous reception, she received a phone call asking if she would attend a meeting with the Ningbo Botanical Garden committee. This large new garden, after many years of rigorous design work, was soon to be opened to the public. At the committee meeting Chi Ling learned that some areas of the garden still needed design attention and, given their ambitious visitor numbers, they expressed concerns about its potential popularity. She was asked if she would come up with some concepts to help make this garden a major success, and better still, a global success if this was possible. Chi Ling had an aversion to concepts. With her friends she could make a sound garden as she had done on the roof of her father’s supermarket, but the botanical garden needed something spectacular if it was going to achieve international distinction. She had never started a design programme with a concept - it went against everything she knew - but she could not explain that they were making an impossible request. Not wishing to be a disappointment to them, she agreed to return with a

presentation the following week.

When Chi Ling left the office, all the doubts she had ever known came flooding back to her. The very concept of a concept would never help a garden resonate with the kind of loving significance that resided in her heart. She returned home, talked endlessly with her friends and meditated deeply whenever she had the opportunity. She drew nothing. Chi Ling entered the committee room to present her design concept without a single drawing. The chairman asked if she had prepared something to show them and Chi Ling said she had not. They were a little surprised. Chi Ling told the committee that she would narrate a story and when she had finished they could ask questions. The chairman consented to her request and Chi Ling commenced her story.

*Once upon a time there was a beautiful young girl called Ai Jun. Ai Jun lived mostly in her dreams. One day, when she was wandering by herself, she came upon a door in the old town wall that she had not noticed before. She tried the handle and was intrigued that she could open the door and pass through. Suddenly she was in a small secluded wooded dell with a beautiful stream running through it. She wandered for hours, meeting no one. At last Ai Jun sat down on a giant stone that bridged the stream and sang of the day when she would meet the man of her dreams. Ai Jun visited her secret dell as often as she could and one day, while she was singing on the giant stone over the stream, she thought she heard a whisper on the air followed by the sound of footsteps. She turned towards the unexpected sound and imagined that her eyes saw a young man disappearing into the trees. Ai Jun followed after him, past old ruins and long forgotten walls, to the bottom of the dell and the topmost groves until she was exhausted. Laying down to rest on a grassy bank by the stream, she fell into a deep sleep. Ai Jun repeated her restless search each time she visited the dell and each time she fell asleep on the grassy bank. She continued her*

*search in her dreams, following the sound of magical notes, longing to have their secret revealed to her. Ai Jun never knew if the sounds came from a young man, a young gazelle passing by, or a bird fluttering off to sing in the trees.*

*Then, on the day of her birthday, she woke to see a young man kneeling next to her. He spoke soft words to Ai Jun and although she could not understand his speech she understood his feelings for her. He led her by the hand to a thin finger of land surrounded by the stream and sat with her on a stone bench. He started speaking again and, as his words became clear to Ai Jun, the stream lit up, revealing millions of tiny crystals sparkling in its bed.*

*The young man told Ai Jun that his name was Bing Wen. He spoke of the wooded dell and of the deer and birds that filled it. He spoke of secret pathways that lay forgotten, of the shrubs that bloomed in every season and of the thick, soft grass by the stream. After his eulogy, Bing Wen talked of his family.*

*“My mother is an enchanted being,” he explained. “She visited this place long ago when it was a garden. In those days my father was the gardener. Defying the laws that ruled their different worlds, my mother and father fell in love and instantly the garden transformed into a wooded dell. They are destined to remain here until a young woman passes through the wall with the intention of marrying me.”*  
*“Am I to be your wife?” Ai Jun asked.*

*“Yes if you consent,” said Bing Wen, “but first my parents must give their blessing. If they agree I will come to live in your world and my mother and father will return to the enchanted world that is my mother’s birthplace.”*

*Ai Jun went with Bing Wen to his home. His mother, a kind looking woman, smiled when they entered, but she did not stop sewing the cloth she was weaving. The thread she was sewing with was the thread of Bing Wen’s life. His mother was well aware that her son was about to leave home and start his journey through life. Then Bing Wen’s father entered their dwelling. He greeted Ai Jun and*

*handed his son a ring, informing him that he had made it for Ai Jun at the place of fire. As Bing Wen was placing the ring upon his bride's finger, his mother cut the thread with her teeth and henceforth Bing Wen's life was his own. The young man kissed his mother on the cheek and at that very moment, deep wrinkles appeared on her dark forehead. She spoke gently to her son. "My dear Bing Wen, the love in our hearts is mixed with the pain of our parting, for on this day you and Ai Jun must return through the door in the wall to start your life together. We pray that you will find happiness together. You must take great care of your wife, but for now you must follow her, for only Ai Jun knows where the door to the other world can be found. This door will only open for her." And with that the young couple set off to begin their life together.*

When Chi Ling had finished reciting the story she was asked to explain how this story would help to make a garden and in replying to them she was surprised by the confidence with which she spoke. "In this story, all the various components of the landscape have a name. No place in nature should exist without a name. This is the most compassionate motive we can adopt for making anything. Every little feature in our garden should form part of the narrative and they must all be connected to each other. In a place of great beauty, we do not see a piece of stone here, a dip in the landscape there, we know each place for the part it plays in revealing itself. We will call this place *The Crystal Dell*, a place where nature itself relates the narrative that tells of the advances and retreats it has lived through. Where Ai Jun goes in this wooded dell, we will follow; she invites us to re-live her journey. Is Ai Jun dreaming when she hears whispers and footsteps, when she sees her vision of the young man? Is it perception or hallucination she experiences? Ai Jun makes the invisible visible and when we are in her garden we too will make the invisible visible; we will, by reading and understanding its features, relive her story."

## Starting with surrender

The questions from the committee were many. Chi Ling helped them through their incomprehension and encouraged their delight when she had a sense of it. Having started out with the expectation that modern ideas would bring honour and fame to their garden, Chi Ling felt that she had to coax them into the world of mythology and ancient artefacts that she envisaged. She reiterated that she was only suggesting a strategy for the start and insisted that the most important quality of any beginning was an act of surrender. “By accepting this simple story,” she said, “we can know how to mould the landscape and where to place the stones. It is very important to accept the stones that arrive here by chance. There will be plenty of opportunities for radical interventions and flights of the imagination. The celebrity aspect of this wooded dell will be the sound. You have visited my roof garden, so you know how magical the sound will be.”

The firing of questions continued unabated until the chairman called a halt and asked Chi Ling if she intended to construct a garden. “No,” was Chi Ling’s reply, “it’s a wooded dell with a stream. All I know is that we must keep the story of this place firmly in our minds while we are making decisions. If you will allow me to go with the graceful beginning I propose, I will take you and the design team on a spectacular adventure. First I need you to help me find some old stones that I can place in the landscape. If you can offer me an old ruin of a dwelling, no more than the lower stones that once were walls, we will transport these to the garden and place them where Bing Wen’s mother and father lived. If you know where to find a stone that might act as a bridge and fragments of old walls that we are allowed to adapt and extend, then we will find a place for them to live.”

The committee wanted to know how visitors were going to read the story, imagining that she would place captions next to the stones.

Not all were certain that stones built for different purposes, coming from different places would work together.

“There will be no reading of words,” Chi Ling insisted. “We will read the stones in the same way that we read archaeology. In some archaeological sites new stones are added to the old stones to make the function more readable. So we need not fear difference. If there isn’t a gap in a stone wall which looks like the door Ai Jun entered, we will make it. If the bridge isn’t convincing, then the stone mason will add the stonework to complete the picture. We will build something to represent ‘the place of fire’ and something to mark the beginning and end of the stream. These sculptures do not have to define anything specifically. It is important that our perception remains on the edge of imagination; ambiguity is crucial to the spirit of this place. It is not a landscape where things are complete. We will not use stones that already have significance. I have no wish to upset historians.”

“So there is no landscape design as such,” the chairman asked.

“Once we have a diagram of how the stones sit in relation to each other, we will mould the landscape. We will do this before placing the stones. We must form dips and hills and plant trees and shrubs in such a way that they reflect the wooded dell in the story. We will decide where to place Ai Jun’s bed on the grassy bank and where the stream will take its winding course. There will be a bench on a finger of land where Ai Jun finally understood Bing Wen’s words. We can add more stones than the story describes; natural stones and dressed stones. Visitors can sit on them and invent new events that may have occurred in the original story. We also need stones for the stream.”

“Do you intend to build a stream?”

“Yes, a real stream with a bed of a million tiny crystals, sparkling in the light. We will invite visitors to buy a bag of these crystals they can drop into the stream. Perhaps they will make a wish. It would be fitting if children, on their birthday, were allowed to take up a handful of crystals and take them home. Rituals are very important.”

The committee liked the stream, but they were not certain about the stones - would they inspire many thousands of visitors, they asked. "We can make many different sound installations in the garden," Chi Ling told them. "Not all of them need to tell a story. Imagine a bed of roses with sounds rising up through the ground. Imagine the noises of the city disappearing, because they have been masked at the entrances with other sounds. We could make an audible feast for visitors wherever they roamed. They will see stones on the ground, they will see bird like forms in the trees, but they will never know where the sounds that fill the air originate from. The speakers will be lost in the ancient fragments and the sounds will be woven into such a complex quilt, there is no telling how they have been composed."

"But are we selling this to potential visitors as a magical place?"

"Yes. Exotic flowering shrubs and the singing of birds is already magical. We will add stories and the most moving music you have ever heard to this. It will be magical. Visitors will forget there is a train overhead. We will not even attempt to mask the architecture that supports the railway. It will disappear in the dreams we are dreaming."

"But what will they hear?"

"They will hear music that sounds like nature and nature that sounds like music. Imagine walking along one of the old forgotten paths. You hear the sound of hoofs in the nearby turf. A dainty bird scuttles by. You imagine an animal stirring in the thicket. The sound of a flute and the sound of the steam intermingle. A deer nibbles leaves in the clearing, wood doves murmur in the tree and birds in the bushes fill the air with song. All of it music to delight the ear and all of it accompanied by orchestral sounds from a wealth of instruments. This is a place where people in love will want to roam."

"It all sounds very romantic."

"Yes, and it could also be a place of great comedy. Visitors will walk in a landscape packed with incident, alive with places of intimacy and spectacle. We can construct amphitheatres in the landscape and

make platforms where people can gather; places of performance and places to view performance. Some will want to enact scenes and others will want to watch and listen. Some will recount the old story and others will invent new stories. It's just a beginning. Here is a photograph of a wooded dell; that's all I can imagine.



Chi Ling reiterated that the beginning is fraught with danger. “It is the most difficult thing to get right. The rest follows.” The chairman agreed with her, saying that her beginning gave them a strong foundation. “Let us give it a trajectory directed towards stardom.” “I’m not sure about stardom,” Chi Ling replied, “but I’m sure about The Nature of Things and I know how important it is for China to construct places that have the power to nourish hearts.”

## 7. Sensitivity and Enchantment

### Introduction

Dear Students, I have been asked to help you develop your sensitivity, but I am not certain that it is possible for me to do this. I could simply insist that sensitivity is very important for creative people, that designers of objects must tune their loving connections to the things of this world if they are to give them any form of beauty, but you know this. I could also insist that you find ways to practise sensitivity and suggest ways to do this. For example, the Taoist Design Process we employed this year for the MA project, is the kind of practice that will help you tune your sensitivity and make important and surprising connections, but is my job complete once I've made this statement? If you make up processes like this for your design work, will you actually be practising sensitivity? I think we should talk about it more, and for this reason I give you, in the final chapter, some additional ammunition to assist you. I refer to it as ammunition because it is a battle and you will need help if you are to keep your world sensitised. You will be bombarded with every kind of persuasion to ignore these ideas, keep your head down, earn more money and buy more things.

Even without the daily attacks that are part of our consumer society, many people you meet will lightly throw off the quest for sensitivity, calling it a pointless ambition with nebulous qualities that lacks any form of verification or rigorous practice. Sensitivity, they might argue, is an insubstantial and elusive dream, not something that can help you solve the tough and complex problems of architecture. I want to inspire you to think otherwise.

You have just read the story of Chi Ling, the main character in 'The Nature of Things.' She is a vulnerable and isolated young woman

who does not fit easily into society because her intense sensitivity and inclination to daydream causes those around her to worry. People are frightened about sensitivity; they believe that purposeful, rational action is the only way to succeed. They don't want you to wander off into an enchanted world and lose sight of this one, but many creative thinkers believe that children learn their most important lessons from stories about enchantment. Maybe enchantment and sensitivity are partners and, like it or not, some of us need these qualities just to keep ourselves alive. Chi Ling definitely needs both to help her make her way through the dynamic and concentrated development that precedes her arrival into womanhood. By the end she is strong, independent and self-motivated. So, maybe there are times when sensitivity is the tough option and rationality the weak one. It depends who you are and what you want.

In Part Two of this chapter, there is another story of a young woman's journey into womanhood. It is perhaps the greatest story ever told. It is an ancient Greek myth about a young woman called Psyche and I have converted it into a modern Chinese myth about a young woman called Jīngshén. Jīngshén is over sensitive, but she doesn't know how to use her sensitivity in the right way and she tends to hand it out to anyone she meets. It's a powerful thing sensitivity, and we must know how to look after it. Jīngshén's life is in danger and in order to stay alive she is required to tune herself to every single thing in the world - whether it be rock, plant, bird or animal. She must also overcome fear and trust in herself. This is the kind of story your great, great, great grandmother might have told her grandchildren, along with tales about how the world began and the adventures of the clan heroes, about living with danger, the importance of intuition and tales about their initiation.

This story comes from a time when people had developed a sophisticated culture and yet they continued to keep close to the ways of nature because the messages they gathered from it contained

important lessons for survival. Jingshén possesses great beauty, but she doesn't know how to let the world touch her - neither the natural world, the material world or the animal world. She has to learn to listen to nature or she will die. By the end her listening is so great she could engage in a dialogue with a lazy breeze resounding through an old ruin and find her way to the underworld. This is sensitivity.

Jingshén has to learn that matter is not the filling inside an empty form and places aren't just geographical locations. Both matter and place might help her remember who she is and where she must go. Everyone rejects Jingshén, but everything in the natural world, the material world and the animal world welcomes her. She learns that they are vessels for a certain caring spirit and this spirit has the wisdom to help her overcome her trials. I suppose the point I am trying to make is this - everything in the world is filled with imaginative resonance and, even for one as beautiful as Jingshén, a lack of beauty occurs when she ignores this resonance.

I write of Jingshén as an architect because I think architects should attempt to re-enchant the world, not just attend to its commercial viability. This is not a sentimental enterprise, a soft-eyed Disney fiction. It is a remembering of the beauty of things and here beauty is something disturbingly paradoxical and evocatively substantial; a beauty that both gathers up everything in the world and shakes it apart. This kind of quality is a complex unity, it is the possibility that individual things have come together on their own terms; a beauty of bewildering particularity.

By attending to our industrial world as closely as we attend to the things of nature, by listening and allowing ourselves to be imaginatively taught by everything, we can begin to enliven our heartless surroundings. It is your job to begin to repair some of the damage we have inflicted on our urban environments - who knows how to do this? Who knows how to create objects of identity that are capable of being joined to the heart of things? Only by developing your sensitivity and adopting a rigorous open mindedness towards

your intuition can you begin. You will need to learn how to combine the distinctiveness of objects while optimising their shared sense of meaning and how to develop processes that allow concepts become interchangeable ideas, for this is where poetic identifications flow. Surely none of us want to live in an insubstantial world that lacks powerful images, where paradox is pushed out of sight into the corners, hidden behind and beneath things. None of us want a life surrounded by objects that are dead, superficial, inanimate and soulless; a life without any form of enchantment.

Could you imagine attending to the imagination that exists in objects and places? Could you imagine creating a set of sensitive skills that would enable you to do this? In Part One of this chapter, called 'Material Imagination,' I am inviting you to start engaging with such a view. We're not alone. Carl Gustav Jung, an eminent psychoanalyst introduced these ideas early in the twentieth century. He sensed that the greater part of the imagination, or soul, lay outside the body and warned us that if our world stopped pulsing with our blood and breathing with our breath, then we would become isolated centres of awareness.

He was certain that anything could be a vessel for soul, whether it be part of the world out there, such as a rock or a tree, or part of the world inside, such as an idea or a fantasy. Such a perception is close to Taoist thinking, a philosophy that was developed at roughly the same time as the story about Psyche was written. It is interesting to note that during this time, about 2400 years ago, the Chinese developed a series of sophisticated and imaginative processes, such as the I Ching, the book of changes, to help widen their perception and help them make decisions about important affairs of state. If you can free your mind and gain a sense of this book, you might find that the I Ching is simply an excellent process to engage sensitivity. In the 1970's, John Cage and Merce Cunningham used it to great effect to compose their music and dance.

Please do not imagine I am suggesting we return to a world where objects and actions are mystified, where life is ruled by superstition. I am not saying that things or objects feel, that they are inhabited by spirits, I am inviting you to see sensitivity as a major issue in our lives, one that might help you fulfil the ambitions of your practice better than any other hypothesis does. It is a battle, but these days, we all have a responsibility to engage in it. Read the following texts, take a longer look at the idea of the imagination and see if it might be useful to the way you approach design and architecture.

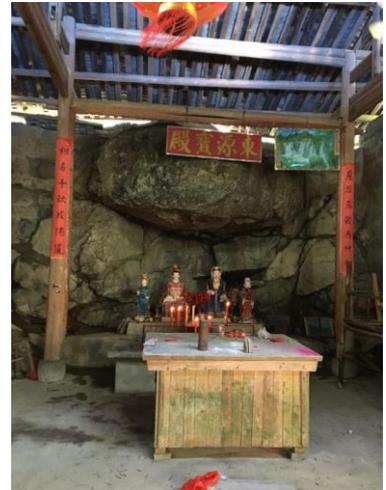
## Part One - Material Imagination - 2017

While I was teaching at CAA in 2017, I visited the final year studio of the Environmental Design course. The students were engaged in large planning proposals for groups of small hillside villages in rural parts of China. Having magnificently and hurriedly turned all their cities into consumer visions of modern metropolitan life, China is now attending to the development and survival of their rural communities. The cities lack life and the task of planners and designers is now to ensure that the rural communities do not suffer the same fate. They must become more than a series of sites for developers. Currently, there are many proposals being made to restore and build pastiche versions of the ancient buildings, but this kind of strategy will not make environments that in any way compare to the original dynamic villages.

It is good to see the CAA students attempting to consider these concerns, but in my opinion not enough play is undertaken to help them connect with the original spirit. They need to revitalise villages not adapt them to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How should we go about this task? What kind of skills do we need? How do we teach the process of playful design? We need to ask many questions and be open to a great variety of answers. We need to know about the good practices that have proved successful in the past, as well as the experiments that are being undertaken in our current time.



Another studio visit I made while at CAA was to see Zhenhang Hu's wonderful project for a village in the Fujian province. Next to the village is a very ancient and completely amazing bridge. I marvelled at its complex construction, admired its many programmes of habitation and listened to stories about the bell, altar and ancestral tomb that are located on the bridge. I was deeply impressed that the villagers still held dreams in high regard and always acted upon the signs and instructions their dreams presented.



The students made a study of this bridge and incorporated its story into a play they performed in the village. They also translated the story of the bell into a 'high tech' structure for the stage. Their ambition is that the bridge's history will find a place in the new propositions. When engaging in this kind of work we must be very

astute about the way we select and translate the information before us. We must expand the qualities not just imitate them. We cannot be over precious and romantic about the past and we cannot simply translate stories into abstract forms. We must make translation a complex issue if we are to make environments that speak of life and make places that communicate their authenticity in a meaningful way. How can we achieve this kind of outcome? I think this marvellous bridge can teach us something, because the energy of the ancient world still presents itself to us here. We must try to live as our ancestors did, in the moment, trusting nature, being brave, following our instincts and inviting our imagination. It's not an easy brief to fulfil.

I would now like to explore more fully the notion of the bridge and give you a series of notes taken from '*The Soul of the Bridge*' by Peter Bishop. (Sphinx 1. A Journal for Archetypal Psychology and the Arts.) London, 1988.

Peter Bishop, a designer of bridges and tunnels, describes these structures as being full of harmony and beauty. He describes his childhood wonder. "I can remember passing under one of the bridges over the Thames as a child and being chilled by the immensely-thick columns or piers; their materiality; green with slime, black and discoloured with mould and oil. The dark, opaque water, cold, deep, lapping against the columns; that precise place where the surfaces of two such distinctly different materials and forms met. This dark meeting of vertical and horizontal, of fixity and fluidity, immobility and flow, stone and water, was somehow hauntingly terrifying and beautiful at the same time."

This is a wonderfully poetic description. Later, Peter Bishop became interested in psychology and sociology and turned his attention towards metaphorical bridges - towards people, cultures, ideas, consciousness and the unconscious. He quotes Gaston Bachelard, who has written extensively on the psychology and poetics of matter

and who coined the phrase *the material imagination*. In his reveries on the four elements of fire, earth, air and water, Bachelard talks about the beauty of matter in itself, unmediated by specific form: “In the depths of matter there grows an obscure vegetation; black flowers bloom in matter's darkness.” All reveries must discover their matter, he writes. Because of our neglect, “the world is strewn with unrelated things, immobile and inert solids; objects foreign to our nature. The soul suffers from a deficiency of material imagination.” How do we talk about bridges? The term *building bridges* is a much-used metaphor to describe people who are forgetting their differences and joining together, so bridges do not just connect, they also gather up. According to Heidegger, the action of focussing, gathering, reorienting and of providing a vessel for the imagination, is the prime characteristic of a thing's essence. The bridge swings over the stream with ease and power. It does not just connect banks that are already there, the banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighbourhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream. Bridges, more than any other structure, can radically alter the face of a landscape. A massive redistribution of imaginative space can result from the construction of a bridge.

From reading Bachelard, we can also enjoy the detail of the interior spaces, the intimate corners and the poetics of space and event within the bridge. Peter Bishop describes three such spaces. The centre - the place between places, a place of reverie and a place of transformation that is described in many myths and tales. The ends of the bridge, that remind us of the approach and the invitation. We cannot pass the entrance to a bridge and resist stepping onto it. The ends also remind us of defence, of entry and of departure. And, finally, the underside of a bridge - a place of secrets and magical inhabitants, where tramps sleep and were we can smell the water,

earth, stone and wood and anything that has been carried by the stream. Bridges have an underworld, which is a place of stillness and exile. It is outside the rush and flow taking place above, over the bridge.

Bridges collect a number of important ideas that Peter Bishops describes. There is the naming of the bridge and stories about it. Sometimes it is set in real history and sometimes it is set in legend. We also find multiple images of the bridge's use - to be lingered upon by lovers or in solitary reverie, to be defended, triumphed upon, fought upon, as well as just simply crossed. Bridges might be centres for trade, battles and also crime. In the country especially, they were used as public meeting places, for gossip and chatter as well as for official business. Assassinations, executions and the display of severed heads, grace the stories of bridges. Bridges are beautiful, but they are both material and immaterial – both stone and stories. They are structures of transformation and also of gathering. They are paradoxical places which place the imagination and provide discrete and differentiated places for imagination to unfold and deepen. Bridges gather the imaginal senses and they speak to the heart. Such things demand paradox; they call attention to it; celebrate it. In mythology, there is always an ambivalence about bridges. There are rainbow bridges and bridges that have a special keeper. There are bridges to Hell, sometimes as thin as a razor and wondrous bridges to Heaven paved with gold. The bridge is a rite of passage and an initiatory symbol. While bridges are essentially horizontal architectural forms, imaginatively they express a vertical tension. The urge to soar, to transcend matter and the need to be grounded, to have a proper foundation, are mutually at odds in the bridge. The imaginative need to securely establish or *ground* the bridge often required a physical sacrifice to be offered to placate the spirits that inhabit the place.

As with the bridge, so with the material of our cities. In the same manner, matter is not just a convenient filling for supposedly

harmonious, but empty forms. Similarly, places are not just geographical locations. They can be places that help us remember who we are. Like matter, places are vessels for soul. Both places and matter are filled with imaginative resonances. A lack of beauty occurs when the materiality of a thing is ignored. There is then a kind of imaginal hollowness and insubstantiality when paradox is pushed out of sight into the corners, hidden behind and beneath things. The things of the world then seem dead, superficial, inanimate, soul-less. A general sense of disenchantment pervades the world. An object should bear witness to itself in the image it offers, and its depth lies in the complexities of this image. To a large extent engineers and architects have stopped listening to the complexity of the images in our environment. They have forgotten that it is crucial to listen to the *Things of the World* as they tell their stories.

So, when we are thinking about our environment, we need to employ the kind of psychological approach that is being indicated here. We need a psychological analysis that moves away from the study of individuals and attends to the world of *things*, to the imagination that exists in objects and places. Carl Gustav Jung was concerned that the term *inner* had come to mean inside the individual and the consequence was that the psyche had become trapped in our personal, interior space. He was interested in the boundary between a psychology of human, experiential subjectivity and a psychology of things in and of the world and believed that the greater part of the imagination, or soul, lay outside the body. He believed that if we ignored this fact we would live permanently in an imaginatively dead world, a soul-less place filled with inanimate things; a world in which we walk as isolated centres of awareness. We could now definitely declare that this emptiness is now our reality.

This eminent psychoanalyst sensed that we have lost “a world that pulsed with our blood and breathed with our breath.” He didn’t want us to inhabit a world in which *inside* is defined spatially, he wanted *inside* to be a form of perception that sees the *inside* of everything,

including the *inside* of outside things. He was certain that anything could be a vessel for soul, whether it be part of the world out there, such as a chair or a tree, or part of the world inside, such as an idea or a fantasy. This perception is not so far from Taoist thinking and, without doubt, Jung was greatly influenced by the processes that the ancient Chinese developed to make decisions in the world.

In his paper, *Anima Mundi*, James Hillman, an eminent Jungian psychologist, writes that “each and everything of our constructed urban life has psychological importance.” Hillman too is interested in connecting with the psychic depths of the world, which he believes, “comes with shapes, colours, atmospheres and textures. He says all things show their faces; they speak, announce themselves and bear witness to their presence. “The more we confine interiority to within the individual, the more we lose the sense of soul as a psychic reality within all things.”

He is not saying that things or objects feel, that they are inhabited by spirits, he is relooking at the idea of psyche and of the imagination. For him, psyche is not only experience, it is also a sensual image. He wants to remind us that things present themselves in their images, that psyche is image and imagination is also display, not just experience. These things demand our attention, he says, but they are not simply passive beneath our gaze. If the imagination is pre-eminently in things, out there, not inside us, we must be careful not to attempt to claim them. Taming and naming the soul of things will make them powerless. We should not drag them safely into our world, rather we should follow them into the mysterious depths of their world. That is how we should approach the revitalisation of old villages. We should find a process that helps us to redefine ourselves as participants in an imaginatively alive world.

We will not achieve an in-depth thinking if we respond only to the needs of developers. In the past, the radical thinkers were monks or mystics, shamans, poets and dreamers; all those who have a close relationship with nature and our inner world. These people knew

that the things of this world are not silent obedient slaves or simply manufactured products, they regarded everything as a concrete image of animation, a location for a material soul that has names and faces and which needs to be perceived and honoured.

This perspective of a new architecture attempts a re-enchantment of the world. This is not a sentimental enterprise, a soft-eyed Disney fiction. It is a remembering of the beauty of things; beauty as something disturbingly paradoxical, evocatively substantial. A beauty that both gathers the world, and which also shakes it apart. Not just a complex unity, but a series of individual things coming together. The beauty of bewildering particularity. By attending to our industrial world as closely as we attend to the things of nature, by listening and allowing ourselves to be imaginatively taught by the things themselves, we can begin enlivening our environments. We need to develop a rigorous open mindedness towards the process if we are to create individual, separate objects that are capable of being joined to the heart of things. It is in this state of fusion, between object *otherness* and our shared sense of meaning, where ideas are interchangeable, that the poetic identifications flow.

## Part Two - The Breath of Jīngshén - 2018

Jīngshén, a young architect, is celebrated for her exceptional kindness, but the innocence of her actions is both her dowry and her downfall. She is a dreamer, given to vivid hallucinations, and everyone avoids her, believing dreamers are impossible to comprehend. Jīngshén refuses to work on the computer until she has produced a great quantity of models and pencil drawings and insists upon conversing with the drawings she is working on and asking the finished buildings if they like her proposals. Jīngshén is incredibly beautiful and she has hundreds of admirers, but none try to start a relationship with her. The truth is, no man could be certain of winning her and none are brave enough to try. The modest glow of their smouldering flames could not survive the rays of her incomparable brightness. Jīngshén has no desire to dash hearts, but her lack of confidence only fans the flames. Any modest flush of embarrassment on her delicate cheeks sends shockwaves through every eligible man. For her own part, Jīngshén wilts under the gaze of everyone because she sees into their hearts and minds. She has no idea that such a facility is extraordinary, for she imagines that everyone has a talent to read minds.

The news of Jīngshén's breath-taking loveliness spreads rapidly beyond the office and soon it is talked about throughout the city. Her astounding grace are on everyone's lips and each day, pictures paying homage to her are shown on the internet. Men even stand outside her office in blissful awe, trying to catch a glimpse of her. So vast is her fame that some declare she's more beautiful than the ancient Goddess Bai Mudan. They talk as if Bai Mudan has descended to earth, incarnate as a mortal, and some even boast they have seen the Goddess glaring angrily at Jīngshén, because the temples where she is worshipped are now deserted.

Bai Mudan, a lightening performer if her reputation is

threatened, is angry.

“Yù Huáng,” she roars, “I am the representative of beauty on earth. You promised my loveliness would shine above all rivals. Take my cause and remove the threat of Jīngshén. Can I be expected to share sovereignty with a mere mortal who imitates me? Must I do nothing while my bright name, registered in the heavens, is dragged in the mud of mortals? Motherly Dao, great Queen, do you assume that I am content to share in the attention given to this wretched flirt? Do I reign with tiny glimmers of reflected glory alone to nurture my beauty? This cannot be! Help me make this enticing tease pay for her impudence. She cannot usurp my holy name, good looks and place of honour; I must take reprisals and have vengeance.”

The gods realise that Jīngshén’s sweet loveliness will become a grave wound, but they allow Bai Mudan her monopoly of beauty. In Jīngshén’s defence, they insist that she never claimed to be beautiful, but Bai Mudan cares not for their sympathy and vows to turn Jīngshén into a fool. She calls her assistants and asks them to find a young demon who can turn himself into the ugliest creature imaginable. After an extensive search they find Sun Wukong, who has just returned from a journey to the west. They present him to Bai Mudan and she explains his task.

“A girl called Jīngshén has taken all of my admirers and denied my supremacy. I want you to exact a terrible revenge on this vile and detestable impostor. There is not one who offers divine adorations to me anymore; they celebrate love through this slip of nothing. They look upon her daily and scatter flowers in her path. These are the tributes due to me, not some despicable spoilt brat who has too much attention. She must be punished. I require you to turn yourself into the vilest thing that ever lived, and make her agree to marry you. Then you will bring her here to me.”

Sun Wukong marvels at her wild anger and finds her appalling temper a thing that only increases her stormy magnificence. His attention sharpens when he realises it’s a young woman of

incomparable beauty who has caused her anger, for he suspects there may be something in this for him to appreciate. He can't believe he never learned of a woman whose grace and charm are so remarkable that people travel to catch a glimpse of her. He can hardly wait to set his eyes upon her.

Even before Sun Wukong has seen Jīngshén, the tricky demon is smitten with desire for her. He has never punished a girl of unique beauty before and he's not about to start now. He leaps like a wild hurricane to her father's house, sees Jīngshén seated alone in the garden, and his predatory instincts erupt. She's the revelation confirming every fantasy he's ever invoked. Not one fibre that's alive in him fails to resonate with deep passion. He flies to her father's office, where he and his wife are discussing their unwed daughter. He whispers in the father's ear.

“Go to the Temple and there Yù Huáng will tell you what do about Jīngshén.”

Jīngshén's father instantly informs his wife what he is about to do, and she is delighted that he is finally taking some action about their daughter's dreamy nature. At the Temple, the father offers prayers and sacrifices to Yù Huáng and vows to follow his advice, providing it produces a husband for Jīngshén.

Sun Wukong, hiding behind the giant statue of Yù Huáng, tells Jīngshén's father that she must be betrothed to an ugly demon this evening and when she wakes in the morning she will discover that he is a handsome young Lord. Her father refuses, but Sun Wukong insists that even if her spouse is a creature of the blackest night, he must obey. Bai Mudan watches the young demon's actions and she's delighted by his plan. She returns to her palace, singing for all the world to hear, a thing she's not done for many months. Jīngshén's father cannot alter the meaning of the sacred words, nor refuse to comply with Yù Huáng's instruction without losing his honour. Utterly devastated, he returns woefully home to inform his wife.

When Jīngshén hears of her fate she is desolate, this edict is

more pernicious than all her frightful reveries put together. Her visions destroyed her peace, but these ghostly revelations of her father will shipwreck her life. She refuses to reconcile herself to the demands of his aberrant justice, but once all the family have gathered she knows she has no choice. Soon, Sun Wukong presents himself in the form of the vilest monster any of them have ever imagined and a ghastly howling fills the house, sending tears down Jīngshén's cheeks. She gently wipes her eyes and asks the gathered crowd to cease their weeping, for she must accept her fate. When the house finally becomes silent, Sun Wukong takes Jīngshén in his arms and leaps into the air with her. All are aghast, and their wailing commences, howls they do not stop for days. When the news of Jīngshén's fate reaches the architect's office where she works, all are appalled by this abysmal waste of a delicate and graceful life.

Yù Huáng sees what this wicked monkey is up to and asks Feilian, the god of wind, to comfort Jīngshén. As she is carried through the air, he whispers in her ear.

“Jīngshén, you can be saved providing you make a connection with the healing rhythms of the natural world. You must listen to the stories told by all forms of life on earth; only they can coach you in the delicate art of natural survival. You must tune your senses and know that your frailty has occurred because you have ignored the true nature of things. You must learn that the imagination is in everything, not in your head. Anything can be a vessel for soul; a river can ease a tortured mind as well as fine words or ideas. You must make yourself available to the world, let it to teach you that it is filled with meaning. Every single thing in the world has an elementary form of breath.”

It was the intention of Sun Wukong to hide Jīngshén in the mountains, but as he is flying over Sōng shān, Yù Huáng asks Hou Yi, the heavenly archer, to shoot an arrow into Sun Wukong's arm. The tricky monkey releases Jīngshén and falls into a river. Before Jīngshén falls too far, Feilian whisks her up and places her gently

beside a mountain stream. She stands up, bewildered, loses her balance and falls in to the stream. The stream understands her anguish and raises Jīngshén out and places her on the bank among the herbs. Jīngshén cannot picture where she is. She has faced so many tragedies in such swift succession, she is completely lost.

Tǔ Dì Gōng, the earth God, sits by the river watching his herd of goats eating the grass. He sees Jīngshén's sorrow and knows the reason for her dazed look, so he makes her a cosy bed. Tǔ Dì Gōng picks up his pipes and blowing melodiously, addresses Jīngshén in lyrical tones, sweeter than music itself.

“In my old age, I have expertise in many things, including that which wise men call divination. I see by your short breath, your pale hews, your sobbing sighs and your watery eyes that you are in danger and you have lost your way.”

Jīngshén, feeling comforted, falls into a deep sleep, and Tǔ Dì Gōng continues to speak to her through his pipes.

“Jīngshén, may the oblivion of cares leave you while I pillow and aid your drowsy head. You are wandering through a maze where music washes over you. Before you there's a garden, golden with the light of lamps that hang in great profusion from many branches. Before you, ripe pomegranates, quince, apples and pears are yours to eat. Lie here on this bank that we have piled with purple cushions and allow your limbs to recover and relax. Try to believe that you're clad in the richest silks, fringed like the ends of clouds round the sun. When you wake, you will not recall the many confused hours that preceded this fine sleep. You may be dimly aware that some evil has recently befallen you, but these tyrannies will disappoint recognition as though a potent drug has charmed you into a lasting forgetfulness. It is in this condition that you will begin your tireless journey through many lands and other worlds. Though very many hardships will hamper your journey, you will in time flourish.”

After this considerable turmoil, Jīngshén is still at the starting point, but it is at a place where things can begin afresh. She is the

most beautiful woman in China, yet she is vulnerable to every possible danger and her life will only get more difficult. She has no resources and she can't imagine how she'll be brave enough to start again, or how she can wander the world, living as a pauper. She is without any idea how she will exist and from where she must learn to grow, but at this moment of despair a stone she is sitting on speaks to her.

“This is how the world began, the place where hope resides; a profound region, a region below that place where despair can operate. Here, it's pure nature, where everything that is subject to anticipation fails, where virtue thrives, and submission and acceptance is the only working rule. Jīngshén, it is your breath that knows this, and it is never without hope. It is the will of your breath that knows how to support expectation. Trust it.”

When Bai Mudan learns that Sun Wukong has played a wicked trick on her, she is on holiday, reinvigorating her worn out beauty in a sea resort where spas and springs are renowned for rejuvenating the damaged bodies and spirits of the Gods. She screams for all to hear.

“What did this monkey think, that I was a mistress of harlots by whose introduction he could become acquainted with a maid who commandeers my name and fakes my finest virtues? I shall have his tail in a hotpot and relish the loss. Come, courtiers, we must leave this retreat and fly to Sōng shān to capture this girl.”

Jīngshén is drifting aimlessly, hoping the eye of providence will facilitate her. Her mind goes out to the future, down the ladder of all time, a gossamer seed blown about without a single breath of hope. She fantasises about just resolution and prays she will be saved. She has no friends; her hunger brings sickness and her only source of conversation is with the grass and stones. This could be taken for madness, but this delicate and sensitive contact provides Jīngshén with a form of healing. She is not losing her mind; nature truly speaks to her, offering her its wise and valuable advice. The reeds by

the river scan the horizon for her and whistle sounds that she translates into the facts that help her survival. As Feilian predicted, it is in this manner that Jīngshén discovers friendship and some kind of familial attachment in the world.

One morning, with rare optimism, Jīngshén spies a temple on top of a hill and imagines that praying here will have a beneficent affect. Moved by wilful breath, she undertakes the difficult journey, but the temple is deserted, bearing the same neglect that she endures. Sheaves of corn in heaps, old rusty blades, withered garlands, reeds of barley, hooks and scythes, all of them tossed aside. Sickles, and other reaping instruments lie in a disordered state as though they were cast to the floor by the hands of labourers. Resting in the corn, she slips into a reverie. When she wakes, still exhausted, she is upset by the surrounding muddle and, thinking it an offence to neglect the temple of any God, she gathers up the various items and gives them a form of order. Guānyīn, seeing the princess busy in her chapel, calls out to the obliging maid.

“Dear Jīngshén, I know you are needful of mercy, but I must warn you, Bai Mudan is searching for you everywhere. She’s intent upon exacting her revenge on you and yet you neglect your safety, being more mindful of caring for my temple.”

With Guānyīn before her, Jīngshén falls on her knees and washes the feet of the Goddess with her tears. Then, wiping the ground with her hair and weeping with lamentation, she pleads to Guānyīn to do all in her power to grant her a pardon.

“Allow me to hide away among these sheaves of corn until the anger of Bai Mudan is past and I am out of danger.”

“Dear Jīngshén, I am greatly moved by your prayers and tears, please know I desire with all my heart to support you, but if I allow you to hide, I’ll increase the displeasure of Bai Mudan. We have a treaty of peace, an ancient promise of amity. I dare not break it. Depart from here. I will at least refrain from giving the angry Goddess news of your whereabouts. In other circumstances I would

gladly allow you to abide and remain in my temple, for I cherish your innocent gracefulness.”

Jīngshén wearily stumbles out, a forlorn outcast. Now, contrary to her hopes, she’s doubly afflicted with sorrow. Leaving the mountain, Jīngshén sleeps in the shade of a tree and does not wake until the next day when the sun is high in the sky. Seeing the shadow of a head lengthening on the wall before her, she starts up and gazes appalled as it fills and darkens the wall. As Jīngshén leaps up, the shadow disappears. Did she frighten an animal or is some unknown beast engaged in stalking her? A cackled voice tells her not to fear. Jīngshén sees an old woman bent under the weight of many willow sticks. The woman smiles and Jīngshén, seeing the goodness she radiates, doesn’t ask her what kind of messenger she is. The woman unties a cloth bag, takes out a package of rice and meat and hands it to Jīngshén.

“Eat this and listen to my counsel. In that direction you will find a fast-flowing brook where you can drink and refresh your forehead with its lovely coolness. Like you I am a wanderer and must go, but I will see you again, be sure.”

With this, she lifts her load of willow sticks and walks on. After the much-needed sustenance of rice and meat, Jīngshén looks for the brook to drink, to wash and to cool her weary body. On the bank she sees a second woman, much like the first. She sits like a beggar, requesting alms with her hand outstretched. A broad smile on her face, she addresses Jīngshén.

“Maybe not tonight, maybe not tomorrow, but you’ll have the key to the mystery before long. There is much fear. Don’t heed it. Fear is what paralyses you. Stay ahead of it; it costs you nothing. We’ll keep you in view.”

The woman walks awkwardly away from Jīngshén, who imagines a whistling sound in the air long after she has disappeared. Then, her body heavy, Jīngshén moves slowly up a hill where she spies another Temple. Having no desire to pass a place where hope might direct

her, she walks towards the sacred door. She passes trees adorned with prayers, litanies engraved with letters of gold, hanging on the fresh branches. The Temple is dedicated to Xiwangmu and the columns bear her name. These days, Jīngshén is happy to seek the pardon of any Goddess. She enters within and kneels down before the altar, embracing it with her hands. She wipes the tears from her eyes and starts to pray, but she has no time to finish as a servant of Bai Mudan, called Zūnxún xíguàn, flies in and shrieks at her in a gruff voice.

“Wicked harlot; now you will know you have a mistress who is above you. I am ordered by Bai Mudan to haul you to her palace. Don’t show surprise, as though you didn’t know about the great efforts we have undertaken to find you? I shall delight in throwing you in the darkest pit, even to the gates of Diyu. Now you will feel agony, and I will witness your pain with great pleasure, for it will be a lesson to the world. No one will ever think to set themselves above Bai Mudan again.”

Zūnxún xíguàn pulls Jīngshén from the temple by her hair, throws her in a chariot and with speed brings her to Bai Mudan. The Goddess eyes her and smiles, as all wicked persons are accustomed to do before inflicting a punishment. Jīngshén is about to speak, but Bai Mudan raises her hand in censure.

“You might imagine that your visit to this place is the start of forgiveness, but wait until you learn of the abysmal punishment I’ve planned. I will not try to list the numerous reasons I have to punish you, you deserve it simply because you are a Wūpó.”

She instructs Zūnxún xíguàn to take Jīngshén to a storeroom where a great quantity of wheat, barley, poppy seed, peas and lintels lie in complete disarray. Bai Mudan mixes them all up together in a heap.

“It would appear that you succeed because of your diligent and painful service, so now we will determine the full extent of this fine skill. Divide this pile of grains one from another and arrange them

into separate piles. And, so you don't think the trial is too easy, ensure that you have the job complete before nightfall."

Bai Mudan screeches an appalling laugh for all to hear and, leaving Jingshén to her appointed task, she locks the door and goes to the hall where a great banquet has been prepared in her honour.

Jingshén can't begin the chore of separating the grains, it being a thing that's impossible to achieve. Astounded by the cruel behaviour and mean demands of Bai Mudan, she weeps in misery. A little ant, taking pity on Jingshén's immense difficulty and labour, runs hither and thither. Cursing the injustice of the Goddess, she vows revenge on her insulting behaviour.

"Come my dear friends, my quick sons of the ground, mothers of all things, take mercy on this poor maid. Gather now to assist her."

Soon one ant after another arrives and busily begin dividing the grain. After they've put each kind in order, they run away in haste, fearing to be caught.

Bai Mudan, having drunk far too much, returns from the banquet smelling of balms and wearing a garland of roses. When she spies what Jingshén has achieved she spits out her sadistic anger.

"You have not achieved this by labour, but by evil magic, just you wait, tomorrow I will set you a more difficult task."

Early next morning, Bai Mudan returns and takes Jingshén out onto the terrace.

"You are to go to the mountains on the far side of the river and find the black goats that graze there. I command you to cut the wool from their fleeces and bring it to me."

Jingshén sets out, determined to throw herself into the river. As she approaches the bank, a green reed, inspired by his love for all things, gathers the wind and speaks to her with gracious tune and sweet melody.

"Oh dear, kind Jingshén, I beg you, please don't trouble or pollute these waters by taking your life. Set to the task appointed you, but you must not go anywhere near the terrible black goats until

the heat of the sun is cooler. When the sun is at the zenith, the goats live in a kind of fury. They have sharp horns, stony foreheads and great gaping throats. They are armed only for destruction. Until they have refreshed themselves in this river, you must hide here by me, under this plain tree. As soon as their time of great fury is past, you may wander along their pathways. Walk only among the rocks and bushes on the mountainside, for here you can gather pieces of black fleece on the rocks or on the tangled briars.”

Once the great fury of the goats has abated, Jīngshén gathers up the locks, puts them in her apron and takes them to Bai Mudan, grateful to the gentle and benign reed that saved her life. The success of this labour does not please Bai Mudan, who claims she has still not gained proper evidence of Jīngshén’s skills. She growls.

“It is certain this is not your doing. I will prove that you are not so stout, as good at courage or as singularly practical as you appear to be. In this next test, failure will mean the death of you. From the top of that mountain, water runs out with a black and deadly colour. These waters fill the valley of Diyu. I charge you to go there and fill this bottle of crystal with that water.”

Jīngshén sets off on her journey to the mountain, but not to fetch water; she takes it in the hope that she will end her short life. A week later, she arrives at the ridge of the mountain and sees a great rock gushing out thunderous fountains of black water. She knows it is useless for her to attempt the trial. The shrieking blackness is born downward over rocks and ravines to the dark valley far below. On each side, great green dragons stretch out long, bloody necks, searching for intruders. Terrifying, corrupt and watchful, they never stop to rest, always keeping an eye on the river should any try to approach. The winds, whistling around the mountain, cry out in fearsome tones. ‘Away, away, fly or be slain. Away.’

Jīngshén stands utterly rigid, as if she’s been transformed into stone. Present in body, she is absent in spirit and sense. The peril here is so great, even her ability to weep is beyond her. Just then, an

eagle who has been watching the young girl, decides to help her. He swoops down, landing on a rock next to this very frightened and bewildered girl, and addresses her.

“Oh, simple woman, without all experience, do you think you can manage to gather up any drop of this dreadful water? No, assure yourself that you will never be able to get close to it. You are innocence itself. Have you not heard? It is a custom among men to swear by the grace of the Gods and the custom of the Gods to swear by these dreadful waters? The Gods themselves fear the very sight of this place, but all is possible if I assist you.”

Jīngshén hands him the bottle without a thought and the valiant bird plunges into the loathsome valley. The majestic bird hovers high above the vile river, then dives abruptly down to the water and fills the flask. Taking his escape midway between the many dragons, he returns and gives the flask to Jīngshén. Amazed at the support that comes from such unlikely quarters, she places a grateful hand on the eagle’s wing by way of thanks, and returns to Bai Mudan with the bottle, grateful that the bottle is full and sad that her heart is empty.

The Goddess is not appeased. She terrorizes Jīngshén with cruel words.

“You are a witch and a sorceress. Now I will set you an impossible task. What you have accomplished is not what we expect mortals to achieve, so beware; the next commission I set you will undeniably put an end to your long run of incredible luck.”

Bai Mudan leaves Jīngshén alone for days, hoping to sap her spirit. When she returns, she holds a small box in her hands. She informs Jīngshén that she must take this precious casket to the gates of Diyu. The look of horror and confusion on Jīngshén’s face clearly indicates her misery. In her view, she is already in Diyu; the kind of Diyu that comes from a dark and forlorn state of mind.

“Your assignment is to take this box to Heibai Wuchang, the two deities who escort the spirits of the dead into the Underworld. It is said that they always steal a little beauty from any young woman who

passes by. They keep this beauty in a secret store and you are to ask these two spirits if you might have a little of it, just enough to keep me going for a day. If they agree you must ask them to place it in this box. They will not give up this beauty lightly, so you must find an excuse. Tell them that I have consumed a great quantity of my own beauty in fighting you if you think this will work. Whether they will give it up or not depends entirely upon their mood, not upon the cause, so all is hopeless, but try to return with an empty box and I will make you wish you had remained in Diyu. The Theatre of the Gods begins next week, so this isn't a journey of coquetry and gazing about. If I do not have my beauty by next week my vengeful wrath will know no bounds. Now get yourself off!"

As she stumbles on, Jīngshén perceives the end of all fortune. How can she find the skills to enter such an awesome domain when no one before her has ever accomplished it? Imagining all the dreadful terrors before her, Jīngshén's heart chills. Certain she'll never return from this trial, she finds every step a wretched misery. She is only spurred on by the notion that from the top she could throw herself down. As she contemplates this terrible act she hears a voice on the wind.

"What brings one such as you to this sad and lonely place?"

Jīngshén exhausted and bewildered, falters at the voice. To her right lies an old tower covered in ivy. Beautiful and sombre, it seems almost to be a living thing. She moves slowly towards it, wondering if someone or something is within. The old ruin is empty, save a beautiful butterfly fluttering about its walls. She looks through a window and hears a faint insistent whistling within. The more intently Jīngshén listens, the more her hearing becomes attuned to it. She imagines the wind blowing through the tower is turning the silent ruin into a supernatural voice box. For Jīngshén, delicately holding on to whatever loose threads are still connected, this ancient ruin is a living, active, breathing construction, offering wisdom known only to the wind.

“What’s your direction?” A voice speaks.

“I seek Diyu,” says Jǐngshén. “Tell me, who or what are you?”

“I am not a tower, as you imagine, a thing made with stone and mortar, I am better described as a harp. My days are spent with poetry and music. If you would like to hear my inspiration, I may find words to connect you to the insights of nature and give you advice to lift your drab spirits.”

“Lift my spirits? I doubt I would recognise my spirit, lifted or otherwise. I am threatened by Bai Mudan. She sees me as an enemy and insists I go to Diyu.”

“Oh, poor miser, you must have angered her greatly. Was it your beauty? I wish I had eyes to enjoy it. Is this why you wish to slay yourself? Why give in to the idea that death will be a solution? Once your spirit is separated from your body, you shall surely go to Diyu and never return again. Accept this final challenge. You are soul and mind and breath and life, these are all the forces within you. There are many things that can challenge the wrath of Bai Mudan and they will be yours if you know how to activate them. So now you must travel to Diyu to stay alive and somehow you must discover how to get there.”

“Bai Mudan has given me this box; demanding that I ask Heibai Wuchang to fill it with beauty. Once achieved, I must return it to her before the new moon.”

“Time is a complex issue, but in Diyu it doesn’t exist. You need not be in a hurry there. Now listen. You must go Mount Tai and ask for directions to Fengdu. There you will find a hole leading to Diyu. But take heed, you cannot think of going to that land of darkness empty handed. You must take with you four bags of fresh hay to feed the horse guardians; that’s two for going in and two for coming out.”

Jǐngshén stares hard in the direction of the voice and from her silence the tower realises she knows nothing about the dangers of the task that lies ahead of her. He lets out a low sigh.

“My poor, innocent woman, there is much I must tell you, for I must act as your guide. When you have reached the base of Mount Tai, you must go in the direction that looks to be the darkest. It is neither up nor down, neither rocky nor smooth. Moss covers everything and there is an insidious dampness. Only by the dark alone will you know the direction. Remember this. Don’t imagine that your heart will fail before you get there. It is difficult, but you have no reason to fear. Even the robbers among its many inhabitants take no benefit from robbing. You must stay alert and you must look out for tricks. Attend closely. When you have passed a good part of that way, you’ll see a lame mule carrying wood and a lame fellow driving him. The fellow will ask you to pick up the sticks that have fallen from the mule, but pass on and do nothing. Don’t ask me why. You can forget why. Only your wits will get you through this. Your intention is all that matters.”

“Suddenly you will come upon Niú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín, the horse guardians of Diyu. Before they have time to menace you, you must feed each of them a bag of hay. An old woman will give you these bags. She sits beside rivers in the guise of a beggar. She’s your guardian and has most certainly been kind to you before. Niú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín will relentlessly wave their hands about, pleading with you to scratch their ears, but you must pay no regard to their piteous shrieks. No matter how much they cry out, you must ignore them. This, it seems, is not a skill you learned in life, but now is the precious time to learn it. You must walk briskly away until you meet Heibai Wuchang, who escort the dead into the Underworld. They will be very sweet to you, but it’s a trap, so beware. Your only hope is to be rude and brusque to them. Be true to yourself and have no fear, simply ask for what you want. When you have received the beauty in your box, don’t delay one second. Don’t even stop long enough to thank them. Imagine the box is yours and they have stolen it. Nothing else works. You must make certain you come back into the world the same way you left. All powers must obey this law,

including the evil ones, it has been like this since the beginning of time. Above all things you must not look in the box. Move heaven and earth to eliminate your curiosity about the treasure that lies within it. The divine beauty it contains is not for you. You may think that you will not be so moved, as having too much beauty has already been the cause of your many trials, but do not doubt that temptation is never very far away. Don't imagine you will not do it because you have made up your mind against it. One can act instinctively for good or bad. Remember this; how to invite generous intuition is your great assignment."

"Now you must rest. No danger can come to you while you are sleeping. No dreams will come to infuriate your spirit and no intrusive apparitions will aggravate you and cause you fear. Know this, nothing will demand you exert physical energy on this sinister mission. When you are awake, be alert and most importantly, you must never let fear get the better of you. I am the breath of the wind and if you can hear my words of instruction, then know that the breeze imparts wisdom. Listen, remember, relate; do this and you will travel many worlds."

These were the last words from the tower. As she comes down the mountain, grateful for the tower's tuition and insight, Jīngshén gives thanks to the breath of the wind blowing through it. Trusting to fate, Jīngshén walks in the direction of Mount Tai, fighting her despondency with optimistic thoughts about the pleasure Bai Mudan will receive from the box of beauty. Now and then Jīngshén asks the way from those who appear friendly. They all direct her to go straight on, saying it's not far to go, but she never reaches the place. Before each hill, she wills it to appear. Gazing through the shimmering waves of heat rising from the rocky plain, she often thinks she sees it in the tricky light, but each time she is misled. Jīngshén spends her days, straining her eyes in a desperate effort to separate illusion from reality. She frequently wills herself to boost her resolve, but the shape-changing landscape fills her with fear, as do the many

shadows that cross her path. When the dear old woman carrying willow sticks appears, she is a welcome surprise.

“Fear not. These visions are not designed to act as siren to your innocent sailor. If you are looking for Mount Dai, you are already on it and Fengdu is just ahead of you. Take these four bags. They contain the fresh hay you must feed to Niú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín. You must know this; these two will surprise you, but you must not expect them, such thoughts will lead you astray. Don’t be fooled; keep straight on track. Believe that the Fates have you in view and that Diyu is before you. Don’t be afraid. If you see a spring beneath you or a hole in the ground, know that Diyu is very near.”

The moment the old woman vanishes, Jīngshén stands frozen to the spot, amazed that water could just appear at her feet. With great speed, it flows down the valley, trying to pull her with it. She stands fast, wishing it would transport her from this baleful place. Unexpectedly, she sees is a dark gaping hole and intuitively, Jīngshén steps into it. As she steps into the dark, the breeze and the sun are no more.

Having passed over into an unexpectedly cold and damp Diyu, Jīngshén walks on in the dark. When she least expects it the lame man and his useless mule appear.

“A favour from you, dear woman, I am not wealthy enough to lose a single stick and yet this mule of mine continually drops them. Please pick them up for me and return them to his back?”

Jīngshén ignores the request and runs from him. It is difficult in the darkness, but she keeps to the appointed route and within minutes two great heads are before her. Jīngshén is mesmerised by the heads flaying in all directions, each a cavernous trap, a saliva-filled nightmare that could end her life in seconds. She quickly opens two of the bags and fills each mouth with hay. While they are munching, Niú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín relentlessly wave their hands, pleading with her to scratch their ears, but she pays no regard to their piteous shrieks and moves quickly on.

Suddenly, Jīngshén glimpses two huge gates, with Heibai Wuchang standing guard before them. They courteously invite her to enter, but she ignores them and sits on the ground. She attempts a casual pose and starts to compliment the fine gateway, but then she recalls the advice the tower gave her. ‘Act naturally and come straight to the point.’ Jīngshén stands and addresses them sharply.

“I have been sent by Bai Mudan because she wants you to fill this box with some of the beauty you have stored. She has great need of it.”

No sooner is the sentence out than Mr. Black and White take the box behind the gates and return with it filled and sealed. They start chattering amiably about the journey ahead, but Jīngshén snatches the box from them and runs back in the direction she came. They do not chase her, but soon Niú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín are upon her. Without a thought, she throws her two bunches of hay at them and they bend to eat it.

Suddenly, Jīngshén feels ecstatic, she feels completely free. She imagines she’s travelling in space, past transient stars towards a place where she feels at one with the Universe. She pictures new winds sighing from the mountains, clearing mists that have mustered in valleys for centuries. The winds gently refresh waters that have long stagnated in hidden brooks. Many secret wells flow again. Rain washes the land and soaks the vegetation, filling the air with fresh green scents. The birds, perched in their trees, pipe merry songs and fragrance issues from a garland of roses that now sits on Jīngshén’s head. She imagines that the breath of the wind is resonating across the bright blue oceans, filling the air with a sweet music that multiplies with endless variations from mountainous terrains to boundless deserts. Jīngshén, conceiving she is growing taller, start to sings. She imagines her voice is magical, that it can resound through a million hearts and all who hear the echoing sounds talk of a new dawn. For the first time she can imagine the possibility of love springing into the air; she feels confident and

excited at the prospect of starting anew.

Jīngshén, her valiant and exhausting mission almost complete, walks back the way she came. She is in no hurry and there is no lame man with a totally useless mule to demand assistance. She follows her intuition, anticipates nothing and avoids fear. She has no idea how she can return to the land of the living, but she had no idea how to get to the land of the dead either. She trusts that the same kind of magic that transported her from the mortal world will also transport her back again. She remembers it as a sudden transformation, so she remains alert. There are no signs displaying the way and no visible geography or devices to gauge it by. She makes for the high ground and takes in the vast panorama that is spread out before her. On top of one of the hills she spies a tower in a ruinous state. Certain it is the tower that is companion to the wind, her spirit sings out with gladness. She runs toward it, feeling the faint breath of the breeze getting stronger as she approaches. She touches its walls lovingly and waits for the words of the tower to assist and revitalise her. On a window sill, a butterfly rests; its wings folded. A tiny crack between door and jamb reveals a bright shaft of light. Jīngshén gently steps up to the threshold and looks at the world inside. A draught of air whistles through the opening. She pushes the door open and steps inside. When she closes the door, she is again in the mortal world, breathing in the sky and the sunlight.

Suddenly, Jīngshén's exhaustion turns to tiredness and she falls into a sweet sleep, hardly moving a muscle. When she wakes, she gazes towards the sunrise and reflects upon her fearlessness and her success. She hopes her trial is complete. She wonders if Bai Mudan will now find it possible to forgive her. She gazes proudly at the box, knowing that the beauty demanded by Bai Mudan is within. Idly, she runs her finger nail between the lower box and the lid. Creating the slightest of cracks, she instantly falls into a deadly sleep. A blast of air gusts swiftly from the tower, but it is too late, the disastrous contents of the box have invaded her.

With her body frozen, she lies on the ground, a sleeping corpse. Jǐngshén cannot know what caused her to jeopardise her happiness, but her reward is now clear, it can only be oblivion. Why did her finger nail lift the lid? Was it to glimpse its contents, to steal a little beauty for herself, a reward for her efforts? We will never know.

The tower, recognising that Jǐngshén must be saved, dispatches the iridescent butterfly from its window sill to find Mǐnrui, who is working in an architect's office.

Mǐnrui, always ready, instantly recognises the butterfly and drives quickly to the tower. There he sees Jǐngshén sprawled out before its walls. He gently awakens Jǐngshén with a kiss and deftly hides the casket in the tower's foundations.

"Oh, my beautiful friend, you will never know how close you came to oblivion."

"Well, my beautiful friend, I cannot tell you how relieved I am that you found me. What brought you to this place?"

"The tower alerted me by sending the butterfly to my office."

While Mǐnrui drives Jǐngshén back to his office, Jǐngshén explains that she was working in an architect's office when she was taken over by a series of strange visions. Mǐnrui explains how he became friends with the tower and how the sounds through its walls help him with his architectural projects. Jǐngshén then explains that she is still fearful that Bai Mudan will once again hound her and demand the casket of beauty. Mǐnrui comforts her.

"Believe me when I say, she is a thing of the past. From now on, I would like you to work with me and use your visions to create fine places for people to live in. You will never have to go through these trials again."

That evening, Mǐnrui invites his family, friends and colleagues to a feast. Once they are assembled he addresses them.

"I will tell you what I know of Jǐngshén's extraordinary qualities. I must inform you that her connection with nature is so profound that my words will probably sound like an exaggeration, but please

accept this. Jingshén has *a compassionate sense of connection with everyone and everything* and her talent for listening is so great she could engage in a dialogue with the lazy breeze. As you can see, Jingshén possesses extraordinary beauty, but what she's most admired for is living without spite or envy. I have invited her to work with me at 'Material Imagination' and I hope you will welcome her and enjoy her company."

It is easy to see why Jingshén was readily accepted as a new member of the architect's practice known as 'Material Imagination' and how her work with MǐnRui and his fellow workers brought new life to many buildings in the city. It doesn't need elaborate words to explain how delighted MǐnRui and Jingshén were at their marriage and it is not possible to describe the breath-taking delight they felt at the birth of their daughter, Xiyue.



