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Agrarian Utopia: An Artistic Experiment in Chiang Mai

Ou Ning

Kamin Lertchaiprasert was his full name in Thai. That family name was far too long for me to remember, so I just called him by his first name. With a long ponytail and goatee, black shirt, shorts, and skin that had been exposed to the semi-tropical sunshine, he looked at 46 much like some fellow villagers I remembered from when I was little – men who were in their prime. He was confident and passionate, handled things with dexterity, and had the air of a leader. He spoke English fluently, though with a Thai accent. His residence near Chiang Mai University was in a large courtyard filled with a luxuriant growth of vegetation, where a pick-up truck was parked. The house, which he'd designed himself, often housed artist friends from everywhere in the world. Rirkrit Tiravanija, a famous artist, owned the house next to his, but at the time he was in New York. In 1998, Kamin and Rirkrit founded The Land Project.

The first time I heard about The Land Project was in Yokohama, Japan, in the fall of 2008, when I had already become highly interested in agrarian experiments everywhere. During a dinner conversation, the Vietnamese artist Dinh Q Le mentioned the project to me. Later, in Lijiang Studio in Lashi Hai, Yunnan, Jay Brown showed me a book of an exhibition by Kamin and Rirkrit, *Nothing: A Retrospective.* Once I started to learn more about it, I began looking for a chance to visit it. That happened to be the tenth anniversary of the founding of The Land Project. Those who visited the project said that the small houses, built by artists from all over the world, were now desolate and decaying, but others said that, since Kamin and Rirkrit established The Land Foundation in 2004, certain projects were continuing. My interest in exploring the place deepened.

In December, 2010, Josef Ng, a curator active in Southeast Asia, partnered with the

Tang Gallery, which has branches in both Beijing and Bangkok, in curating the exhibition *Whose Land? Whose Art?* for the Chinese artist Yilin Lin, on behalf of The Land Project. I was invited to see the exhibition, which provided me with the opportunity to visit Chiang Mai for the first time. At that time Beijing was in the grip of a frigid winter, whereas in northern Thailand people were in light summer clothes. I chose to sit in the back of Kamin's pick-up, exposed to the moist wind, while we left Chiang Mai for The Land Project in Baan Mae village, Sanpatong County. The drive took more than 30 minutes. There were some unattractive small towns and villages along the way, and field after enormous rice field extended all the way to the foot of the distant mountains. Golden rice plants waved in the wind, reminding me of what the deceased Japanese documentary director Ogawa Shinsuke once said: "The Asian people are people that eat rice." It seemed much more vivid to define Asia by the food its people eat than the study of geography. Right now and right here, I was moving on the field in Asia.

The truck stopped at a rice field surrounded by hedge bamboos, plantains, palms and thin-leaf banyans – we had arrived. Kamin jumped out of the driver's seat like a straightforward and forthright farmer, welcoming us to his 'land'. Through the swaying bamboo leaves, I saw neat rice fields shining under the sunlight, and the various small houses were just a blur. It felt like the moment when an outsider steps into Shangri-La, not knowing what to expect of the new world opening up before him. There was no electricity down here – Kamin had prepared an electric generator. Upbeat Thai folk music from a nearby hi-fi floated through the air. Yilin Lin, with help from Chiang Mai University students, had set up his work by the pond. He had built a high wall and opened a small hole on it, from which protruded a steelyard arm, with a large bamboo basket hanging at the end of it. Several young people had climbed up to the top of the wall by way of the wood ladder, and they seemed to be holding fishing poles in their hands.

Yilin Lin's wall was located in front of the pond, facing a large open field. Everyone was standing in line to participate in his performance art: taking turns to go up and sit in the basket, then writing down their weight with a white chalk on the wall after the artist weighed them. As people were from different countries, the names on the wall were in English, Thai and Chinese, each with its own figure indicating weight. In a nearby stream a small waterwheel spun, while rape flowers on the banks contended to display their charm. Watching the scene from a distance, one would think that farmers were celebrating their harvest – people were weighing the crops to store them in the barns. Yilin Lin's work had always been installed in a wall, but it typically occupied part of a city street, or other outdoor spaces, or resigned itself to museums and galleries. This time he built the wall in a field, where it formed a farmwork-

like performance, strengthening the relationship between humans, land and art. It showed that he not only could easily maintain the character of his work, but was also able to develop the site-specific projects.

Though this was the latest element of The Land Project, I was even more interested in exploring its past. What I had read showed that, when Kamin and Rirkrit decided to buy the land, they were thinking of experimenting the idea of 'zero-property rights' – instead of being privately owned, the land should be open and shared by everyone; that was also why they established The Land Foundation later on. It became a non-profit organization, belonging to no one and shared by everyone, which mean that it could continue even if something happened to the founders, and made certain that it would keep on developing as it welcomed donations and new blood. It was a commune for the artists; different people from different places made short stops here, creating art, joining group activities, purifying their souls or learning organic farming. Some people even stayed for much longer, rising early in the morning and resting in the evening when the sun set, like local farmers. Sometimes it was beekeeping, and sometimes it was motionless quiet. Artistic events and farmwork took place by turn, reflecting the rhythm of nature.

When they were designing the layout of the land, Kamin and Rirkrit were influenced by the "Buddhist Agriculture" thinking of Chalaoy Keawkong, a farmer who came from the Paisalee area of Nakornsawan province in northern Thailand. Fed up with modern agriculture's heavy reliance on pesticides and fertilizers, and with the Thai government for pursuing export so single-mindedly that small farmers were brought to the brink of bankruptcy, he singlehandedly developed a unique agriculture practice deeply influenced by Buddhist thinking. He argued that, after realizing Dharma, one realized life, and that, after realizing life, one realized agriculture. Human lives came from nature, and therefore, like nature, should incorporate the four major elements – earth, water, wind, and fire, which, as he said, were "The Mother of Nature." The key to coexisting with nature was for humans to balance these four elements, which was precisely the essence of agriculture. Acting in accordance with the human physiology, he dug seven ponds in his own field representing the left and right chests, two arms, the heart, the stomach and reproductive organs. He grew rice at the stomach, the most important part of all, and bred fish, shrimps, crabs and conches in the other ponds. He then built his residence next to a pond, planting coconut trees, mango trees, banana trees and bamboos around it, which aired the space and dispelled the heat, allowing water and earth to nourish each other. Many different kinds of animals and plants lived in harmony with the human residents, and the four elements of earth, water, wind, and fire formed an auspicious eco-circulatory system, becoming the

model of The Land Project. [1]

Beginning in 1967, Thai government launched a so-called "Green Revolution", implementing a new agriculture policy. It used new seeds cultivated in labs, and applied fertilizers, pesticides and heavy machines to create large-scale, high-speed farming, ensuring that mass-produced crops were exported in the interest of economic growth. As traditional agriculture was transformed into so-called modern agriculture, farmers began mono-crop farming, either at the behest of the government or the enticement of the market. As the costs of fertilizers, pesticides and labors were too high (large-scale farming requires extra labor), farmers had to borrow money from government banks or agriculture companies. The money they earned from selling their crops in the market was often nowhere near enough to pay back their loans, and many were pushed to the brink of bankruptcy, forcing the indebted farmers to leave their land and find jobs in the cities. The unequal allocation of social power, the deprivation of farmers' freedom to farm, the destruction of the original ecosystem through mono-culture agriculture, and the pollution of the land by the toxic by products of fertilizers and pesticides came in for constant criticism by agronomy, NGOs and consumers. In Thailand, the first person to propose the theory of "Buddhist Agriculture" was a scholar called Pravej Vasi. As early as 1988, he had criticized "The Green Revolution", and suggested that "Buddhist Agriculture" was a potential solution to this series of problems.[2] Chalaoy Keawkong, by contrast, was a spontaneous and grass-roots experimenter. Though they did not know each other, they nevertheless shared the same ideas. By learning from the latter, The Land Project has displayed reverence toward Thailand's agriculture and Buddhist traditions.

Like Chalaoy, Kamin and Rirkrit believed that digging ponds had to be the first priority. They transformed three-fourths of the land into ponds. After digging the ponds, they planted different kinds of vegetation around them, and invited artist friends from around the world to visit and conduct a series of experiments on micro buildings. They had a rule, which was that each building could be no more than 2x4 meters, and it had to be near a pond. In fact, this encircling architectural layout, which left the center space open for public activities, was similar to the layout of traditional Thai Buddhist temples. The first 'house' was started in 2000 by the Thai artist Mit Jai-In. He planted twenty teak trees in a circle, forming a residence and emphasizing the zero distance between humans and nature. His inspiration mainly came

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[1] Vitoon Liamjumroon: 'The Buddhist Agriculture of Chalaoy Keawkong', *Nothing: A Retrospective,* pp 140-157, Ching Mai University Arts Museum, 2004.

[2] Ibid.

from Buddha, as Sakyamuni was born under a tree, meditated under a tree, and reached enlightenment under a tree; even his nirvana was achieved under a tree. The second house was designed by Kamin for the care-taker of the land. The third one, "The Kitchen", was designed jointly, in 2001, by Rirkrit, Kamin, German artist Tobias Rehberger and the Danish art group Superflex. Later, many new structures were added to the land.

Led by Kamin, I felt I was engaging in an archaeological study, looking for and recognizing the small houses that I had once seen in books, media and web sites.

The first house I saw was "The Kitchen". It originated from an exhibition in Lisbon, *More Works about Buildings and Food*. As early as 1991, Rirkrit had tried to make the process of cooking coconut juice into a gallery exhibition, and later he became even more famous for cooking and sharing Thai food in museums or galleries with the audience. In the Lisbon exhibition he was invited to cook, while Superflex designed the gas system and Tobias designed the platform of the gas system. After the exhibition, the three of them decided to have a real kitchen in The Land Project, and eventually the house was designed and built by Kamin: built on stilts, it stood above an open space where people could cook; the second level, with a slanting roof, was also open and had railings and seats, and that was where people ate; above the slanting roof was a pavilion, which was also an observation tower, which was where people rested after meals. Superlfex designed a biogas system, which used buffalo manure and other recycled organic materials to produce gas and transport it to the kitchen for cooking and lighting. Tobias designed the circulatory equipment for the gas, as well as the kitchen operating platform.

Superflex often went to underdeveloped areas such as Africa, Brazil and Cambodia, where they mobilized local farmers, international engineers and anthropologists to work together, engaging in artistic activities with an element of social intervention. Their biogas system had received technical support from biogas experts in the Netherlands and Tanzania, and it worked quite well. However, after the system was adopted by The Land Project, it was said that its cost was higher than the system typically used by local people. From a practical standpoint the system was probably not worth mentioning, but art can never be judged by such standards. Considering the fact that Superflex's works always displayed anti-capitalist tendencies (for example, In Brazil, they developed a non-alcoholic beverage along with local farmers that used Gualala as the major ingredient and sold it themselves; in Tokyo, they opened a "Free Store", where people could shop without paying money; in Taipei, they made public a beer formula for people to make it themselves, and so on), it might be best to put it this way: their biogas system, through individual artistic practice and a direct act of original invention, had challenged the mass production and consumption patterns of capitalism.

That same year, Tobias and Rirkrit were invited by Moderna Museet in Stockholm to the exhibition, *What if: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design*. They built two small residences of Scandinavian wood to be displayed in the museum, and after the exhibition, they decided to move the two residences to The Land Project. The 'transfer' of the two residences reversed not only the traditional production and exhibition process of museums (while museums typically bring objects from the outside world into their exhibition spaces, they turned the museum exhibitions into objects of everyday life), but also the direction of the trade of international wood (Thailand ordinarily exports its wood, but they were importing European wood to Thailand). After the residences were relocated to Thailand, they considered the local natural conditions and added stilts, turning the original two-story buildings into three-story ones. According to the Thai architect Sumet Jumsai, floods are very common in the Thai countryside, and residences on 'stilts' are very popular there; houses became amphibious in a sense, and well-adapted to the natural surroundings. The house would not be disturbed by floods, and when waters were low the underside of the house could be used as storage space, a kitchen, or common activity space.[3] Most houses later built on The Land Project adopted this model.

Tobias's house was nowhere to be seen (it had been demolished after being severely damaged), and only an empty shell was left of Rirkrit's. The latter was designed entirely according to his own needs: the top level provided him with a space where he could rest in solitude, where it was only possible to lie or sit down; the second level could be used for gatherings, where people could read or meditate; in the bottom level one could light a fire and cook. This micro-building emphasized the functional needs of modernism, and also paid close attention to its evolving relationship with the eco-environment. For example, it took advantage of the plantains on both sides to provide shade, and opened windows on the top level, allowing natural sunshine substitute for alarm clocks to wake residents. (Rirkrit had always declared that his art was practicing a "Relational Aesthetics".) His wife, Annette Aurell, had given us a tour of their house in Chiang Mai, a modernist villa, which they designed themselves. The unpolished dry concrete was surrounded by flourishing semi-tropical vegetation; and while the living room and kitchen were open, the bedrooms and studio were private. A few years ago, I had read an article in the *New York Times* describing the house. Rirkrit was a nomadic artist (his father was a diplomat and he was born in Argentina and had lived in different countries since he was little; after becoming a successful artist, he had houses in New York, Berlin and Chiang Mai, and had traveled around the world to attend

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[3] Karen Demavivas: 'The Land', *Nothing: A Retrospective*, pp 54-82.

exhibitions) , he spent little time in his villa in Chiang Mai, not to mention the small wood house in the countryside.

"The Care-taker's House", designed by Kamin, was the only house that had been truly occupied for a long period of time. A Thai professor, Vai, had lived and farmed here along with his wife, at the same time keeping an eye on the place. Kamin insisted on adopting local materials and employing local people to build the house. He liked to incorporate the typical tastes of local villagers to the house and rejected entirely foreign culture; yet he did not object to other artists doing it. Kamin was born and grew up in Lopburi, a central province of Thailand. Though like Rirkrit he had stayed in New York and attended exhibitions around the world, in his heart of hearts he leaned more toward localized oriental thinking. He loved vegetation, practiced Yoga, was obsessed with meditation, and, in 1990, had shaved his head and become a monk. He took care of routine matters in The Land Project, and, as he taught at Chiang Mai University, often worked with young people and included them in the activities of The Land Project. He had never forgotten the experience of working hard at the bottom of society, and he always hoped that his work might transcend so-called art and directly face reality, therefore entering a wider social range and deeper personal level. In his house in Chiang Mai, I had seen a poster of him and Rirkrit, declaring that "Art is over". Like "The Kitchen", Kamin's "The Keeper's House" had a slanting roof, a typical structure suitable for Thailand's rainy weather. After Professor Vai and his wife left, the rooms on the two floors, once stuffed with household goods, were abandoned. It seemed an echo of Kamin's thinking, revealing the embarrassing limits of art.

Other Thai artists, like Kamin, had tried to follow local cultural tradition when they designed the small buildings here. "Meditation House", built in 2002 by Angkrit Ajchariyasophon, was less than three square feet, and influenced by Thai monks' simple and austere lives; "Stage", built in 2004 by Soyot Hananuntasuk and Thaivijit Poengkasemsomboon, reproduced the small-scale public entertainment spaces of Thailand's countryside, where participants of The Land Project could give speeches and perform; "Asian Provisions", designed by American artist Robert Peters and Thai artist Thasnail Sethaseree, which combined the spatial features of American trailers and Thai three-wheeled "Tuk-Tuk", was also an experiment in "transfer" architecture. All of the three buildings adopted "stilts" as their support. The first two were now unoccupied, and though the third one's framework had been constructed in 2005, it remained unfinished.

In 2003, French architect Francois Roche and artist Philippe Parreno built a strangely-shaped building, "Hybrid Muscle": many steel bars were planted in a wavy concrete platform, and the pillars on the steel bars supported a reversed U-shaped red plastic canopy. People

could live in the space between the steel bars, and activities could also be held there. An unusual power generator was installed at the end of the building: as a buffalo (at first the suggestion was elephants) pulled a heavy metal plank and lowered it down slowly, its muscle impetus was transferred into electricity, which was enough to illuminate ten light bulbs and recharge the batteries of laptop computers and cell phones. Bruce Sterling, the science fiction writer, had written a review for *Domus* and said that it was "an architectural freak", and Mark Wigley, the dean of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, simply called it "a branch of science fiction". Indeed, the building was originally constructed for Philippe Parreno's architectural sci-fi film *The Boy from Mars*; he made the film with the building as the lead actor: the mysterious night sky, the slowly moving starlight, the footprints left in the rice field by the buffalo, its silhouette pulling hard and submerging into the pond, the buffalo's bright and piercing eyes, the slowly illuminating light bulbs, the sun above the field during the daytime, the poetic tableau of the plastic canopy and the surrounding trees blown by the wind, and the chanting of an aged man at the end of the film, all contributed to a hallucinatory atmosphere that was hard to forget after viewing. Even though the plastic canopy had been replaced by fibro tile, this creature from outer space was still on the land in Bann Mae village, keeping company with lines of large Thai leaf mustards nearby.

Most foreign artists, while engaging in their works, did not pay much attention to local culture, history or natural condition, and The Land Project did not seem to demand it of them either, which made the place more like a free and unrestrained "Utopia". Carl Michael von Hausswolff, the Swedish sound artist who from 2004 to 2005 built "Star House", also currently unoccupied, adopted four-pointed stars for the shape of the two floors above the "stilts", and installed eight doors that could be pushed and pulled so that residents were able to create different spaces by opening or closing the doors. It collected electricity with the help of solar reflection boards, which could recharge a laptop and receive a designated radio frequency (his way of paying homage to occult scientist Friedrich Jurgenson, who claimed to communicate with the dead via radio). Furthermore, in 2006, the Elvis Presley house reproduced here by the French artist Alexandre Perigot had nothing to do with its surroundings. It was a framework of the original-size building temporarily built with bamboo for use in concerts, then demolished after the concerts concluded. At the same year, German artist and designer Markus Heinsdorff also constructed a tower-like pavilion "Living Bamboo Dome", which was very beautiful and of typical European style. Josef Ng, the curator, and I tried to climb the bamboo ladder to the second floor, but we had to stop after only a few steps as we heard the bamboo cracking.

The condition of the buildings showed that they had not been cared for or managed, and that they had been long unoccupied. Perhaps people would visit from the cities by cars or trains only when a new project was being put on, like Yilin Lin's this time. No one lived here, which came as a considerable surprise to me. I saw no local farmers in the audience either. I asked Kamin why that was, and he said that the next village was far away from here. Later I again went through all the information and photos he'd given me, and again caught no glimpse of any farmers in their past activities. The information indicated that they had once organized two activities that had each lasted for one year, attracting volunteers from around the world to participate in farming, group meditation, Yoga practice, artistic creations and discussions. They grew two crops of rice on 9,200 square meters of paddy; from August to November they grew jasmine rice, and from January to April they grew sticky rice. Each crop had a harvest of about 600 kilograms. They also planted all kinds of fruits, trees, herbs and vegetables, and they raised fish and shrimp. They not only were influenced by Chalaoy Keawkong, but also emulated the organic farming of Masanobu Fukuoko, the founder of Natural Agriculture in Japan, eschewing pesticides, fertilizers and removing weeds. Even within these farming activities, however, I could rarely see a farmer. Was it because the concept of organic agriculture was in conflict with the farming methods in common use by local farmers? During my contact with the Chinese Rural Construction Movement, I had noticed that such conflicts were quite common.

The impression I got from The Land Project was that it felt very much like a closed and isolated "Utopia" – its main body of action limited to artists and art students, with only a weak connection to the communities around it. Karen Demavivas, the New York critic, had compared the micro architecture in The Land Project with "Plug-in City", the 1960s experiment by the English architectural group Archigram, and quoted the philosophical slogans from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* as praise for this kind of "plug-in".[4] Archigram had proposed a radical project on paper, where they delineated their concept for the architecture of a future city. Perhaps due to the limits of their time, those delineations were strongly characterized by machines: their architectural designs either featured mechanical limbs, which could crawl around like animals or be taken apart, reassembled and "plugged" into any community or city when needed. Their diagram had an even stronger atmosphere like science fiction than the "Hybrid Muscle" of Francois and Philippe. Judging from the ability to "transfer" and "plug in" in a alien context, all the buildings of The Land Project were indeed similar to Archigram's

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[4] Ibid.

proposals. They were physical "plug-ins" in the Thai landscape, created by artists and elite intellectuals who lived in the cities or "transferred" a lot around the world. The localized designs by Thai artists, including that of Kamin, could not avoid the same nature. The point was not the style of the buildings or whether they were consistent with the rural scenery and local culture, the point was the artists never showed up unless there was some specific activity. Ordinarily the buildings remained unoccupied, which made them the same as Archigram's designs: a kind of "fiction".

Perhaps similar to the cooking Rirkrit did in museums or galleries, where the basic intention was "Anti-institutional" – breaking the outdated conventions and habits in institutions like museums and galleries, and rebelling against their regulatory control over artists – The Land Project was based on the same intentions. They fled museums and galleries and moved the site of artistic activity to the open field. Agricultural farming and spiritual meditation were means to cultivate self-knowledge and self-control. They were more interested in introspection than they were in the complexity of social reality. They paid little attention to social mobilization and held themselves separate from social movements. The Land Foundation declared that, they support democracy regime with the King as Head of State in a non-partisan way and not give any financial support or any assets to any politicians or parties. They were a group of artists, thinking and acting in the way of art. They self-organized, trying to transcend the art which was institutionalized and systematized, but eventually were forced back upon the dilemma of art itself. The empty and decayed buildings on the field were the best proof of that.

When I'd finally finished my inspection of every one of the buildings, the sky was growing dark. Yilin Lin's performance had long since concluded, and people were gathering at the edge of the field for a picnic. The electric generator was making a faint sound in the distance, and the light it generated brightened the picnic area. Many small bamboo poles were stuck in the ridges between rice fields, and kerosene burned at their tips, the small flames flickering and looking particularly beautiful in the darkness. The Thai festival Loy Krathong, held in November, had just passed, but its aftertaste still endured. The young people from Chiang Mai University were exhausted after working all day at the exhibition, and now, stuffed with food and drink, they started to send out Kongming lanterns over the field. After a busy farming season, and after the conclusion of the rainy season, people celebrate the Loy Krathong Festival at the next full moon. They make lanterns out of banana leaves and fresh flowers and put them in rivers or paddy fields to pray for blessings. In addition to floating lanterns in the water, they send out Kongming lanterns into the sky. The Loy Krathong Festival is a little like the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Kongming lanterns

were from China. Asian countries often share similar cultural elements, and this realization joined with the Asian consciousness that had been aroused by the rice fields on the road that morning. Kongming lanterns were flying higher and higher in the dark sky. I thought of the village in Guangdong where I grew up. I thought of my mother who worked as a farmer all her life. I thought of all the times that would never again return, and all the old things that had disappeared. This so-called nostalgia gradually spread out into a broader emotion, surpassing our geographical boundaries. Could the artistic experiment I'd seen that day help cure this nostalgia ? I was not sure. I just made a mental note that that was December 11, 2010, the first night I spent on the Asian field.

Translated by Shumei Roan

The Annals of Dijiahe

Li Rui

Dijiahe is the village I was sent to in that year.

It was a recent telephone call that suddenly called forth the impulse to record something of Dijiahe. The call came from Run Yuezi, my landlord during my time in the countryside, who called to tell me that his granddaughter Yingying was about to get married. He added in passing that the new village buildings had been completed and that his two sons, Ping'an and Xiaoliu had both bought and moved into new apartments there, where they would be spending Chinese New Year. He told me that after public subsidies, the average cost of an apartment was 30 to 40 thousand yuan – not very expensive. "I haven't bought one, and I won't live there," Run Yuezi said. "I'm old now, I can't bring myself to leave my old cave."

As I put down the telephone, my eyes were filled with scenes from forty-two years ago: leaving the inn at Dongguan, Puxian County, and following the production team carriage along mountain roads for an entire day; as night fell, after we'd zigzagging some half a kilometer, the twelve of us educated youths finally caught sight of Dijiahe and its ten handful of houses, and beheld the vastness of the old holy tree at the entrance to the village. The sound of drums and gongs welcoming us echoed thinly in the open valley. The faint shadow of the ancient tree hung in midair; behind which stood the dim wall and roof of a building, but no light could be seen. Children bore themselves madly back and forth through the crowd, several dogs barked after us, and the villagers greeted us warmly in out-of-tune Mandarin: "Welcome, welcome, a warm welcome!" What followed came in the more natural speech of their dialect: "Hey, you poor things, you must be tired from walking! Are your legs sore? Hurry up and come inside to sit down and rest!"

Dusk is very short in winter, and darkness fell in the blink of an eye. Shadows flickered

and the hills were silent. The chiaroscuro effect created by a forest of ashen grey standing on the snow-covered hillside formed a bottomless void. A mountain stream flowed down to the village from the slope of the Laojun terrace opposite, where it splashed out of a stone trough, the patter of which continually broke through the stillness. At that moment I was struck by a feeling of eternity and felt unutterably strange and alone. I was eighteen years old that year.

In the blink of an eye, forty-two years have passed.

Far from such dreamlike recollections, the Dijiahe of forty-two years ago has truly begun to disappear.

In fact, the use of the character "底" (dǐ) as the first character in Dijiahe's name is a misunderstanding which was perpetuated by later residents and subsequently became established custom. The correct character is "邸" (dǐ), which arises from a piece of mountain land to the east of the village known as the Di family graveyard. Although the graves themselves are long gone, there is still a stone tablet in the graveyard. Run Yuezi and I were once hoeing wheat when we decided to look for the tablet and found it standing in a wild grassy area. An ant colony and other insects moved wildly across its dark, damp surface and it seemed as if all of time was in flight; after the frantic escape came to an end, traces of the characters on the tablet emerged:

The Di family graveyard – spirit tablet – the fourth year of the reign of Xianfeng, Qing Dynasty, 8th of March, Qingming.

There is powerful evidence for the historical evolution of Dijiahe. Families surnamed Di have long since vanished from modern-day Dijiahe. According to older villagers, the Di family was not a local family, but came from the lowlands: the flat stretch of land in Linfen, Xianfeng County. The Di family opened a salt shop in the area, and used 'long-legged' animals to carry lake salt up from Yuncheng and to transport mountain goods back down to the lowlands. The family prospered for several generations as a result of such business. Local people called animals such as horses and mules 'long legs', and the use of such animals for carrying goods was known as 'taking the long legs'. Natives of the myriad gulleys in the Lüliang Mountains have relied on the use of mules and horses for the trade and transport of materials for the last thousand years. It became an unchanging way of life for many mountain people to plant crops in the fields during busy seasons and walk with the horses during low seasons.

In the present day, no one is concerned with salt or its supply. It never requires any thought, and such matters cease to enter into our consciousness. In the not-too-distant past however, sixty or seventy years ago, salt was the most serious issue of concern in mountain regions. Other things could be replaced, but if there was no salt, there was no way to go on living.

The Lingfen region of southern Shanxi Province was known in ancient times as the Pingyang sovereignty. The eight counties of Puxian, Daning, Shilou, Yonghe, Xixian, Fenxi, Jixian and Xiangning, all located in the Lüliang Mountains, were known as the eight western counties of the region. These counties lie on hard, barren land. It is said that in the past it was seen as a perilous undertaking to be sent to the area, even to take on the position of the County Secretary or County Magistrate. An appointment there was seen as a way to toughen up cadres. I once saw the following description written in incomplete county records: "The myriad hills in the area contain villages but this is not a decent county. Men do not engage in business and women do not make textiles. The fields lie on mountain tops and people live at the bottom of the hills. Without rain for ten days the seedlings rot. Again the fleas tremble with cold and an August frost falls from the sky and slowly invades the majority of the cultivated land... " Puxian County lies in the southern stretch of the Lüliang Mountains. Dijiahe is part of the Diaokou commune, which is a gulley of seventy or eighty li in length. This gulley is known as the Nanchuan (the 'southern river') in Puxian County. The geography of the land is formed by many gullies, which branch off from both sides of the 'river', a formation that is repeated throughout the Lüliang Mountains. Because the river plain has a relatively large area of flat land suitable for farming, all of the larger villages in the area are located within the plain under the recesses of hills that are south-facing and sheltered from the wind. Smaller villages are all located on the sunny sides of gulleys that have sources of water.

It was not until many years after the Cultural Revolution that the first car passed through Nanchuan. There was only one public path, on which a horse-drawn cart could travel. If villagers had any business to conduct they had to walk. Only the village post office had a bicycle, which was the envy of the village. Once a week the clear chime of its bell would ring out as it flew down the path as quick as lightning. If the mountains were closed off due to snow in the winter there would be no news of the outside world for several months. One can well imagine how the salt shop made Dijiahe into the social center of an area tens of li in circumference for a long period of time. Older people say that originally, people who came to Dijiahe would refer to it by the name of the salt shop rather than its own name. Locals told one story in particular with great relish, about a family of ten or so people, including men, women, children and elderly family members, who fled deep into the forest to escape the Japanese. When they fled they took with them all of their family's possessions: grain, farm tools, seeds, cows, donkeys, chickens and dogs. They also made sure to take one full sack (a sack stitched with thick goat's wool) of salt to make do with for cooking. The family hid in the depths of the hills where they had contact with no one, and in a flash more than ten years passed. When the sack of salt was finished they had no choice but to take the empty sack

back to the town by at the lower reaches of the river. When they arrived at the shop, they asked in a low voice: "I say, manager, have the Japanese gone yet?" The store manager was staggered, and then burst out in a hearty laugh: "Hey! What the hell? Do you know what year it is? We've started a commune, and you stupid idiots are asking if the Japanese have gone yet! Are you a fool?"

There was a stream at the southern foot of the hill by the Di family graveyard, and past the stream was the Laojun terrace, in front of which was a ridge of yellow sandy soil. Behind the terrace lay the stone forest. The Laojun terrace was dry and barren and could only support buckwheat, naked oats and potatoes, which were planted in rotation in order to rest the land. Naked oats and buckwheat are similar in character to the people of the Lüliang Mountains themselves: they are resistant to cold, drought, hardship, and inhospitable environments. Buckwheat, greens and white flowers grew from the yellow sandy earth. When the buckwheat flowers opened, a faint pale-red would appear against the background of snow-white, and from a distance it looked like strips of pink satin hung on the hillside. Deer often walked out of the forest at ease, the adult leading its fawns between the stretches of pale pink and deep green. Standing by the Di family graveyard, watching this scene in the distance, I called out over the gulley. The deer raised their heads to look but were not startled and did not move, once again lowering their heads to eat.

Subsequently, the county town of Puxian was connected to the public road system. As soon as the road arrived, the salt shop collapsed. Not only the salt business suffered, but also many other businesses that relied on the use of horses or mules. The salt shop remained in Dijiahe in name only. When it was hot the production team would hold a general meeting. The leader of the production team would stand on his roof, red eyes glaring, and shout out: "Commune members, everybody listen! This afternoon after lunch we will have a meeting in front of the salt shop!" The villagers laughed at his shouting, saying: "Hey, who does red-eyes want to boss-about today?" The salt shop had closed long ago, but it was still used for meetings because there was an open space in front of its door with a millstone, a roller and two old sandalwood trees, under which lay a rare patch of shade.

At that time, the girls in the village dreamed that they might be lucky enough to marry and move to the lowlands. If they were unable to get to Heilongguan or Hedizhen, then a marriage in Diaokou, Xiwan or Chejuhe was a good alternative. They scarcely dared dream that they might move to Linfen, the capital of the county. The boys in Dijiahe were even worse off. They were born into a life of hardship. Like trees the boys were rooted to the yellow earth on which they grew, unable to elevate themselves or move. There is only one word to describe it: endurance. They endured until they were white of hair and bent of back,

and with eyes closed they entered the yellow earth, into which their bones disintegrated and became one. Their entire lives were spent enduring, waiting for the end. While they still lived, they faced the yellow earth with their backs to the sky. This was their way of life, unchanged for thousands of years. At that time, the fantasies of happiness triggered by steamed buns, a pot of meat, a flowered dress, a pair of black socks, a bicycle, or a watch, were far more powerful than the possession of these objects themselves. We all looked forward with eager anticipation, waiting for the day that a public road would reach the village, the day that Dijiahe would be able to dig a coal pit like other places. In the later period of the Cultural Revolution, I did once have such hope: there was news that the Linfen military subzone was going to construct a military storehouse in the nearby village of Nanyao. A survey team was sent in and a survey was carried out for a length of road between Heilongguan and Nanyao. Us youngsters could not help ourselves and followed the survey team along excitedly to help out with odd jobs. Facing the biting winter wind we carried measuring poles on our shoulders, chopped brambles, held tape measures, reported data, crossed hill after hill, and sat next to a fire roasting things in pots, singing and laughing. Many visions flashed through my mind. Each of those ten or so days felt like a celebration. However, after the excitement died down there were no further developments and quiet returned. Everything was once again as it was, to a past of a thousand years that seemed like a day.

I spent six solid years in the countryside, where I shed blood and sweat with villagers who had lived in the mountains for generations, and tasted a life as a labourer. It is because of this that I have an instinctive aversion to words of praise for labor and laborers. I keenly despise what is known as "rural beauty". I know that no one who praises such things has done a day of rural labor themselves, and moreover knows nothing of generations of peasant life. The people who praise the fields do so only because they have visited them for travel or leisure. They are only observers of rural life; they would never let themselves become buried in the fields for eternity. I know from my own experience how real and fierce such eager longing is; the kind of longing for which there is no response, and this has lent me a modicum of despair and resentment for history.

Now, Dijiahe really has changed, and the transformation is earth-shattering. Like the salt shop it is fading into a dried-up placename.

In fact, the changes started long ago. Five or six years before Run Yuezi made his telephone call, a survey team arrived in the mountains near Dijiahe and then the coal company came and rumbling explosives broke open the hills. This was followed in order by the construction of new roads, shaft frames, a coal preparation plant and a coke plant. In order to ship the coal out as quickly as possible, the coal company ripped open the bowels

of the foot of the hill at the Laojun terrace to dig a temporary road through the village, and the roar of heavy trucks could be heard day and night under the old holy tree. There was a piece of valuable land by the river in the neighbouring village of Nanyao, called the hundred mu field. The fact that it had its own name demonstrates its worth as farmland. The land was requisitioned for a coke factory and was ripped up by bulldozers. However, a dispute arose between two companies in competition for the land. The dispute raged on unresolved for three years and crops failed, but the farmers were not given a penny of compensation for the requisition of their land. The villagers went to find the town leader, who told them from the seat of his car: "Sue me if you can." I was the Provincial Committee Member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference at the time. The villagers of Nanyao presented me with a collectively signed appeal and asked me to help them to seek justice. After passing through several hands, I formally submitted the appeal to the CPPCC. In the end the farmland subsidies were recovered, but the threats and temptations, the nearness of life and death, the distress, and the twists and turns that ensued along the way were like a television drama. This popular rhyme became famous on the internet last year: "Corrupt officials fall, Puxian County eats its fill". It refers to Hao Pengjun, the former Deputy Secretary of the Party General Branch of the Coal Bureau, who embezzled 120 million yuan and owned thirty-six pieces of property both inside and outside of the province and was as a result ranked among the "ten most corrupt officials" in China in 2010. One man was able to amass hundreds of millions of yuan in assets illegally, simply due to the years that he spent as an official in the Coal Bureau. This is only the tip of the iceberg. It was during this uproar that the new village buildings were constructed and Dijiahe began to uproot itself. The villagers of Dijiahe learned from brutal experience that when the earth-shattering changes arrived and their hopes became reality, reality would in fact tear their dreams to shreds.

Yingying's story also forms a part of these monumental changes. In the summer, six years ago, I returned to Dijiahe and stayed again at Run Yuezi's home. During that visit I happened to meet Yingying, who had just returned home after graduating from junior middle school. Yingying did not pass the entrance exams for senior middle school but was keen to continue her studies and was hard pressed for an alternate way of doing so. When I returned to Taiyuan I discussed the matter with my wife, Jiang Yun, and as it happened one of her old classmates was a teacher at the Taiyuan Accountancy School. Moreover, the school was expanding student enrolment numbers and applicants only needed a junior middle school graduation certificate to register for an interview. As a result of these fortunate circumstances Yingying entered vocational school and after graduation she found work and remained in Taiyuan. Yingying is a very hard-working child who has a very good understanding of value.

She continued her studies independently while working and quickly obtained her primary accountancy certificate, and her intermediate certificate should not be far off. In an instant, this sixteen-year-old girl established herself in Taiyuan and is now soon to be married. Her fiancé is from Qingxu County which is very close to Taiyuan. Yingying and her future husband both work for the same company in Taiyuan and are planning to buy a car after they are married so that they can drive to and from work. Yingying is now an enviable girl in Dijiahe; she is much like a modern-day Cinderella.

I cannot help but ask myself: would it have been better to leave Yingying in the fields of Dijiahe, to let her remain forever a part of the rural landscape? Or was it better to help her leave her home and begin afresh in the city? Who has the right to determine what way of life will bring Yingying happiness? How happy are the people who devote themselves to such decisions about the lives of others? Morally, what is the bottom line for making such decisions on the changeable starting line of development? This is how the world is: it simultaneously gives us objects of both our hopes and despairs, things that we did not even know we longed for; it does not ask us whether or not we want them; it never asks us what it is that we really want.

Arriving at this point, I am suddenly struck by the question of how such a trivial essay about a small mountain village can be worthy of the word "annals", which is formed in Chinese by the two characters "spring" and "autumn". The commanding position of these two characters in the history of Chinese writing was established by Confucius 2500 years ago. Only the greatest historical achievements and written works of the ages are deserving of their use. However, I am bringing the stories of the salt shop and Yingying into this grand history. I am incorporating the stone tablet of the Di family graveyard and the dreamlike buckwheat flowers of the Laojun terrace into a history of the ages... there is no grand justification for my choice, which was driven only by a true sentiment.

As this essay draws to an end, I am reminded suddenly that it was on January 12th 1964, forty-two years ago to this day, that I left Beijing on the train to Shanxi. As the whistle blew at Beijing Railway Station, a cry suddenly rose from the platform. I held an apple in my hand, one bite taken out of it, and as I fought back my tears and assumed a smiling face I shook the apple fiercely at my classmates and relatives through the window.

I was not aware at the time that I was in fact an eighteen-year-old in the prime of my youth, ripped open by myself.

Translated by Lucy Johnston

The Curse

A Yi

A chicken can disappear as easily as an insect. The owner of this particular missing chicken, Zhong Yonglian, had deduced that her neighbour Wu Haiying was responsible for the disappearance. There were two pieces of incriminating evidence: first, a trail of claw-prints ending in Wu's vegetable garden; second, her house smelled of stew. Wu Haiying was not a woman you wanted to get on the wrong side of: she liked a fight, and would easily set fire to your house if she felt like pursuing the quarrel. If only Zhong Yonglian's son, with his dark, murderer's glower, had been around, she thought to herself. But he hadn't phoned for ages, or sent any money home.

As dusk approached, two aspects of the problem occurred to Zhong Yonglian: one, it was Wu Haiying who had sabotaged their ostensibly harmonious relationship, and it would take more than Zhong's own non-confrontational nature to mend fences; and two, although the disappearance of a chicken was not a disaster of the first order, it could not be overlooked. If Zhong waited till tomorrow, her moment would have passed. And so she decided to take a tour around the village. "Have you seen my chicken?" she asked everyone she met. "Where could it have gone to?" "It was last seen on the east side," she told anyone who seemed interested. She'd learnt this tactic from her husband. You need to prepare your ground first, he'd instructed her, near the end of the long illness that finally killed him. Finally, Zhong Yonglian advanced upon Wu Haiying's house: "Who could have stolen my chicken?" she sang out three times.

"What's wrong?" Wu Haiying asked.

"I'm trying to find out which lowlife took my chicken." Once the words were out, Zhong Yonglian felt almost dizzy at her implicit declaration of war. "It'll come back in

its own time," Wu replied. "What if it's already dead and eaten?" Zhong renewed her provocation. She quickly looked away. Wu Haiying at last caught on. "You think I stole it?"

"You tell me," Zhong Yonglian pronounced, turning to leave. Wu Haiying pulled her back by the sleeve. Zhong shook her off: "Fuck off and die."

"Are you saying I ate your chicken?" Wu Haiying screamed.

"No. But you just did."

"When?"

"To eat a chicken's an easy enough thing. And tidy – no evidence left."

The rain was coming down in sheets. Wu Haiying grabbed Zhong Yonglian – a thin, weak woman – by the collar, stared fiercely at her accuser's face, then slapped it hard. Zhong Yonglian's eyes and nose began streaming tears and blood, her face twisting with the double humiliation. As Wu Haiying prepared to administer a second blow, Zhong remembered her deceased husband and – with a sob of melancholy outrage – charged at Wu Haiying, who lost her balance in the surprise assault. Scrambling back to her feet, she seized hold of Zhong Yonglian's hair (as easily as if it were a bundle of grass) and twisted hard, pulling her to the ground. When witnesses reached the scene, there Zhong lay, screeching for her dead husband and absent son, with Wu Haiying standing alongside, ignoring her husband's calls for her to go back inside the house. "She started it," Wu explained. "She said I stole her chicken." Zhong Yonglian beat the concrete with her fists: "Shameless bitch." A few of the women tried to pull her up, but she refused to get up. Her hands and feet started to spasm.

"She's faking it," Wu Haiying said.

"Just shut up," her husband suggested. She wasn't finished, though, even as he dragged her inside. "You all heard her: she said I stole her chicken. Strike me down if I did." Now Zhong Yonglian sat up and stabbed a finger in her direction: "If you stole my chicken, I swear your son will die this year. If you didn't, my son will."

"If I stole it, my son will die." Wu Haiying accepted the terms of the curse.

"I still don't believe her," Zhong Yonglian muttered. Even as she cried herself to sleep that night, she felt that having the last word had mitigated some of the injustice of the encounter. The next morning, the chicken came home, slick with rainwater, like a shabby hermit back from a retreat, scrabbling away at the ground, a red rag tied around its leg. She carried it inside and quietly killed it.

Zhong Yonglian felt guilty whenever she saw Wu Haiying, until one day she realised that even if Wu Haiying hadn't stolen her chicken, it didn't mean she was a good person, or that she wasn't a thief. She remembered the salty bitterness of her blood and tears, of Wu Haiying pulling her down to the concrete by her hair.

Whenever the two women encountered each other, Zhong would strive to match her antagonist's look of contempt. She stretched some sheet plastic over the fence around the chicken coop, to prevent the birds from flying away, and asked her son-in-law to write "Death to thieves" on the strip of red cloth wrapped around every chicken's leg.

The two women took care to have nothing to do with each other.

As the final month of the lunar year came round, the village spoke of nothing except the return of Wu Haiying's son from Dongguan. He'd come back driving a white Buick that had rolled noiselessly over the frozen grass and stones of the road into the village. He pulled on the hand-brake and slammed the door shut behind him, with a perfect Politburo swagger. He tapped the remote control and the still car yelped, as if with fear. A girl – no local, for sure – somewhere in her early twenties also emerged from the vehicle, gazing adoringly at him. Her soft, white face could have been caught in a single handspan; her eyes shone with the lustre that the villagers associated with foreign, not Chinese, girls. Her hair – dyed sunset-red – was cut in a dense crop. Although it was winter, she wore nothing but a tight grey t-shirt and a pair of black leather trousers, her clothes clinging to her slim curves and long legs. She smiled guilelessly at her audience, revealing pearl-like teeth.

"In you go, Xixi," Guohua told her, and she obediently disappeared into Wu Haiying's house. She was easily the most beautiful thing the village had ever seen. That whole day, the villagers were troubled by a curious sense of emptiness, of vexed enchantment. Guohua kept her shut up at home until Wu Haiying told them to make a tour of the village, after which he finally took her to see a few of their relatives. Wu Haiying, by contrast, always seemed to be out on calls, her face radiant with delight. Knowing what she'd come to hear, all her hosts hastened to compliment her on her good luck. "Her parents haven't agreed yet," she'd reply, in an attempt at modesty. If her interlocutor failed to say something along the lines of "sooner or later, then", she'd quickly interject: "They've exchanged rings, you know." She was so euphoric that she even forgot to sneer at Zhong Yonglian, who consequently felt that her humiliation was now complete.

Zhong headed off to the country town, where she asked the proprietor of a public phone-stall to ring the number on the piece of paper she gave him. She wanted to tell her own son, Guofeng, that he should bring a girl back with him for New Year – even if he had to pay her. There was no answer, after several attempts. "Try again," Zhong Yonglian urged the man. "Did you dial a wrong number?" The next time he tried, whoever was on the other end had turned the phone off. Guofeng had always been a loner: he never told his mother where he was working, nor rang home. "I don't care about you," he'd say if she ever admitted to being anxious about him. "Haven't you got better things to worry about?"

Almost every year he'd go into town for New Year, wandering back long after dark: barefoot, his face bleeding. He'd never tell her what had happened. One year he'd not gone into town because he was helping his uncle with some haulage work. When the uncle fell ill, Guofeng went AWOL with the van to Anhui over in the southeast, eventually ringing home to say it had broken down. Off the uncle went, hundreds of miles across China, and found the van with the door open, the keys still in the ignition, but no sign of any driver. "You should have thrown that pile of junk away ages ago," was all Guofeng had to say about it afterwards.

Zhong Yonglian now went to the police station, a scarf wrapped around her head. A member of the joint defence squad asked her what she wanted.

"I've come to report a crime."

"Name?"

"That doesn't matter." She cupped a hand around her mouth and whispered into her interlocutor's ear: "Guohua's back."

"Who?"

"The one who ran away after the gambling bust." She had another idea. "He's brought a woman back with him. I'm sure she's a whore."

"Thanks."

The police station only covered its operating costs through fines. Every one of the gamblers caught last year had paid up four hundred yuan, except for the absent Guohua. If Guohua didn't pay, people had begun to mutter after he ran away, why should they?

A few days later, the station sent a policeman, a driver and a member of the defence squad to catch their prey. Out they dragged Guohua, struggling like a snared rabbit. Xixi pursued them all the way to the car: "Why? Why?" she was sobbing, just like one of those women off the soap operas.

"Fuck off," the defence squad-man – who seemed to have styled his moustache on Stalin's – shouted back at her. Xixi began pounding him with her fists, screaming obscenities in her beautifully accented Mandarin. She bit hard on the inside of her cheek: right on cue, the tears came. "What right do you have to arrest him? Doesn't the law mean anything to the police?" Given only brief pause by her beautiful naivety, they carried him off in a cloud of dust.

When Wu Haiying came back from cutting pig fodder and heard the news, she fainted away, while Xixi squatted beside her, weeping. Observing them through her window, Zhong Yonglian smiled to herself. Serves them right, she thought. Serves them right, she repeated out loud, pacing about her house.

Half an hour later, Guohua returned, having somehow escaped his captors. Kissing Xixi

on the forehead, he ran upstairs to hide inside the grain measure in the threshing room. "Just tell them I've gone to the mountains," he said. By dusk, the investigation team had wheeled back round to the village. They barged into the Wu residence and began carelessly searching the place. "Where is he?" they barked at Wu Haiying, grabbing her by the collar.

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

Wu Haiying looked away.

"He ran off to the mountains," Xixi sullenly told them.

"Run away, has he?"

"That's what I said."

The man with the Stalin moustache flashed his torchlight directly at her. Closing her eyes, she bit her lip. Her face – skin pulled taut, eyelashes casting a long shadow over her cheeks – twitched.

"He's run off, has he?"

"That's what I said," she repeated, a little more boldly.

"Where's your temporary residence permit?" the man asked.

"I don't have one."

"You should have one."

"I don't have one."

"Then you're coming back with us."

"Why?"

He struck her, hard, with the torch. She crumpled to the floor. "Drag her out," the policeman said, and they started to pull her inert body by her high leather boots. Her face was a mask of despair: as if she were a fish on a chopping block eyeing up the gutting knife. Wu Haiying's relatives – who'd gathered round to watch – melted away home. But by the time the police had pulled Xixi into the yard outside the house, the clan had returned, brandishing brooms, poles, truncheons, even tobacco pipes. The police were surrounded and the beating began. The thin, reedy voice of the policeman tried to plead for calm, but it was too late. Eventually, a voice shouted at them to stop. The crowd parted to let the young master – the young master who had returned triumphantly home in a Buick, the young master who had taken refuge in the threshing room – through. Kitchen knife in hand, he charged into the throng like an avenger, plunging his weapon into the arm of the man with the moustache. Everyone closed their eyes, momentarily terrified by the new logic of the situation. Even Guohua seemed unable to believe what he'd done, pausing after he'd pulled the knife out. Only Zhong Yonglian – inside her head – screamed at him to go on: "Go on! Stab him again!

It'll be the death of you too!" Guohua stabbed him again.

There was no blood. No sound, even. The killing process seemed unbearably protracted, even to the victim, who grabbed at the knife, urging his murderer to stop using the back of the blade. Suddenly conscious of how humiliating his incompetence was, Guohua snatched up a wooden spear instead. Before he was ready to deliver the final blow, though, the three representatives of law and order struggled free from their attackers and scattered like terrified pack animals out of the village, disappearing along a dark maze of paths and byways.

The police never sent anyone back. A relative of Wu Haiying's in the provincial capital rang the Provincial Party Committee; the Committee had a word with Public Security, and Public Security cancelled the eighteen-strong militia detailed to the village. When Public Security told the local police to leave Guohua alone, Wu Haiying's relative agreed to leave Public Security alone. All the same, Guohua and his terrified beloved couldn't get out of the place fast enough.

The village's migrant labourers drifted back home for New Year, bringing marvels such as singing cards, golden mobile phones and smokeless cigarettes. Zhong Yonglian hung around the mouth of the village, waiting in vain for a glimpse of her son's tall form. She asked the other returnees if they knew where Guofeng was working; no-one did.

She went back to the county town to try Guofeng's mobile again; the number was out of service, the man said. Which meant, he explained, that no-one was using the phone any more: maybe they hadn't paid the bill, or maybe it had been stolen. Guangdong was full of motorbike-mounted pickpockets who'd mug you as they dragged you along the ground, sometimes for dozens of metres.

Exhausted by sleepless nights, one day she dozed off in a chair. She dreamed that Guofeng was a little boy again, but his face was bleached white, his voice barely a whisper. She ladled him out some porridge, stirred in some medicine and told him to eat it up. But Guofeng just stared at her wretchedly, shaking his head. Anxiety clutched at her heart. After she'd put the bowl away, she discovered that a vast squid-coloured creature was sprawled over the bed, its emaciated chest inlaid with fibrous tendons and bones, its limbs like flayed rabbit legs. Some of its heaving internal organs had been punctured, and dark blood was dripping down onto the floor. Now it was half-squatting, its right hand flat against the bed board, its bowed legs buckling as it tried to lever its exhausted body up, while the cotton quilt covering it slid off. Its enormous cobble-shaped head was almost hairless and featureless, except for a vast, panting, stinking mouth, armed with long, sharp teeth. As it struggled for breath, its cheeks inflated, then deflated. Swaying as if it were about to fall, the creature suddenly

reached out to grab her. She woke up. There was a cold ache to her wrist.

Rushing over to her daughter's house, she found her son-in-law playing cards in the sun.

"I still haven't heard anything from Guofeng. I had a horrible dream: he'd grown wings and a tail, and he was dripping blood." Her son-in-law said nothing. "Will you go and find him for me? Can't you see how worried his sister is about him?" The son-in-law glanced at her, deciding not to say whatever had been on the tip of his tongue. "Please. You're his brother-in-law, and he's my only son."

"How am I supposed to find him?

"I'm sure you can think of something. I'm begging you."

"China's a big country. I don't even know what province he's in."

"I know you can find him. You young people are so clever. Bring him back for New Year. He can do what he likes after that. I'm sick and worried: I just want to see him."

Her son-in-law stood up. Zhong Yonglian suddenly clung to his knees, her face wet with tears. "I'm scared he's dead."

"What the-... All right," he agreed, spotting his wife approach.

"Swear it."

"I swear."

After taking five hundred yuan from Zhong Yonglian, her son-in-law spent a day in the provincial capital then came back, the money unspent. He'd bumped into Li Yuanrong from the village over the way, he lied, who'd had a letter from Guofeng saying he'd be back in a few days. When Zhong Yonglian refused to believe him, he rang Li Yuanrong who told her himself that "Guofeng'll be back soon. He's on a job that pays a thousand a day – he's trying to earn as much as he can before he comes back." A few days before New Year, a villager called Guoguang – who'd been working in Guangdong – came back and corroborated Li Yuanrong's story. Guofeng was in the factory next door, he said, and had been on overtime the past few days. They were paying him several times the going rate – four hundred yuan a day. Guofeng had asked him to pass on the message that he'd be back on New Year's Eve.

"How is Guofeng?"

"Still not much of a talker. He's grown his hair – like a poet."

Zhong Yonglian knew why Guofeng was so desperate to earn money. Every New Year's Day, migrant workers back for the holiday converged on a temple in Yu, a nearby village, to play cards. The bets started off at a few hundred or a few thousand yuan, then quickly escalated to tens or hundreds of thousands. Most of them gambled away all the money they'd worked so hard to earn all year, then borrowed a bit of cash to buy their train ticket back south. Last year, Guofeng had cleaned up for the first four days, then lost

everything on the fifth. He'd come home, red-eyed, eaten a bowl of rice porridge then left.

On the morning of the last day of the lunar year, Zhong Yonglian stewed chicken, goose, beef and pork, prepared the vegetables and made beancurd soup. By midday, the food was all cold, but still she waited, like a woman expecting her lover – too fragile with hope to go out and look for him herself. She was waiting for him to rush in and call out her name; she was waiting to turn and smile at him.

"Guofeng."

"Mother."

Those two words were all she wanted to hear. But as the sun sank and the dust on the road congealed, nothing disturbed the New Year quiet – the village was silent, except for the muffled crackle of children setting off firecrackers. Darkness fell, as if a bucket of ink had been dropped over the village. Zhong Yonglian sat on her threshold, weeping.

At eleven o'clock, when every other household had bolted its door, and Zhong Yonglian herself was about to lock up for the night, a pair of headlamps glowed weakly on the horizon. She stiffened as they approached, clearly headed in the direction of the village. Eventually, she allowed herself to grow excited. She began to jog towards the light; then accelerated to a sprint.

The van drove right past her.

She sat by the roadside and began to cry, her body aching, the soles of her shoes broken by stones, her knees grazed from a fall. Her son wasn't coming home. But just as she had abandoned all hope, the van turned around, returned to the village and stopped outside her house, the engine still running.

She ran home.

Guofeng emerged carrying a cheap bag that he dropped to the ground while he took two hundred yuan from his trouser pocket and gave it to the driver. He was as impassive as always. Picking up the bag, Zhong Yonglian asked the driver if he wanted something to eat. He drove off without an answer.

"Why are you so late?" she asked.

Guofeng seemed impatient: "I've been on a train for the past day and night and I couldn't get a car to take me back from town."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"I'll heat some dinner up for you."

"I'll have some rice porridge."

"Porridge, for New Year?"

"I already told you."

Although weak, his voice was still commanding. "I'm tired," he said. "Tell me when it's ready." He walked off to the bedroom and lay down on the bed, his eyes closed. When she was finally sure he was asleep, Zhong Yonglian pulled the quilt out from under him and covered him with it. Empty with relief, she set about making the porridge. She washed the pot, rinsed the rice then added the water. She knew that her son liked his porridge as thin as broth: the clearer and blander, the better. She twiddled impatiently with the gas. She lifted the lid on the pot to see if it was done: after the steam had cleared, she discovered the rice in the ladle was still hard. When it was at last ready, she ladled out a big bowlful. She carried it into the bedroom, not even minding how hot the bowl was, and called out to him. Beneath the quilt, his breathing was barely audible. He moaned faintly.

"Sit up and have some porridge."

He didn't respond. She sat on the edge of the bed, waiting. He must have travelled thousands of miles on the train, and it was at least another sixty from the country town. She gently tucked the quilt in around him. Heavy snow began to swirl about outside the window. The snow is falling, she thought; my son is fast asleep. The world is at peace.

She called out to him again: "Feng."

Again, there was no answer.

She drew her face close to his: "Feng," she said softly, "sit up and have something to eat before you go to sleep." Now she was worried: his face, when she felt it, was as cold as ice. She put her hand in front of his nose: he was hardly breathing. She shook him, she tugged at him. His hand fell out of his sleeve, and she pushed up the material to grab hold of his wrist. It was as if there was nothing left to grab.

After a moment of paralysis, she burst into tears.

She might as well have been holding a dead fish. Her fingers were slippery with stinking, decaying matter. Her thumb gouged into her son's destroyed wrist, straight to his hard white bones. His arm had rotted purple – aubergine-purple. She pulled up his wool shirt: his torso was the same, his chest crisscrossed with purple, canal-like veins. When she tried to lift him from behind, his head hung down as if detached from his body; a rank, chemical odour belched out of his open mouth.

Three minutes was enough for the doctor in the country town. "Your son's body has been destroyed," he told her when he emerged from the ward – he seemed angry about it. "Everything: organs, skin, bones. He rotted to death." She rented a car to bring Guofeng back to the village and quietly buried him.

After the spring had come, an ambitious intern from the provincial legal aid

centre came looking for her. Zhong Yonglian – her hair now completely white – gazed uncomprehendingly at him as he explained concepts like lead poisoning, maximum workload and health and safety. Changing tack, he tried an analogy to help her understand Guofeng's death: think of the chemical warfare plants that the Japanese built when they invaded China – the place your son was working in was much more poisonous. Zhong Yonglian simply walked away, shaking her head.

"I just want to help. It won't cost you anything."

"No."

"Are you going to let your son die for nothing?"

"I don't need your help." She made her way over to her neighbour's house – ever so slowly, as if she were convalescing from an illness. Seeing Zhong Yonglian sit carefully down on her stone threshold, Wu Haiying brought a stool for her to sit on. "The ground's too cold to sit on."

"I was wrong about the chicken."

"Shush now."

Wu Haiying squatted down and stroked Zhong Yonglian's hand. The tears ran silently down Wu's face, while Zhong stared stolidly into the middle distance – like one of those socialist realist statues of the revolutionary martyrs. A migrant labourer who hadn't yet left for the south was playing an American pop song in one of the houses near the mouth of the village.

Everywhere I'm looking now,

I'm surrounded by your embrace.

Baby, I can see your halo,

You know you're my saving grace.

You're everything I need and more,

It's written all over your face.

Baby, I can feel your halo,

Pray it won't fade away.

They sat there, listening.

Translated by Julia Lovell

Dreamworlds

Gu Qian

In the afternoon, heavy rainclouds began to fill the sky.

Zhou Ji lay down on the bed, switched on the reading lamp and picked up a book. Cloudy days like this one made him feel downcast and unable to muster the energy to do anything. After reading for a while he was overcome by tiredness, so he switched off the light and drifted off to sleep. He had not expected his nap to be so delicious; it felt like the best sleep he had had in years, dribbling as he did on to his pillow. What's more, he had a wonderful dream.

In it, he was a young man in the prime of his life, and he met a lovely young girl, not too tall, but of strong, sturdy and shapely build, wearing a blue-grey jacket. Her face was a little square, with long eyes capped by delicately curved eyebrows and hair falling messily about her shoulders. They were instantly attracted to each other, exploring each other with a meaningful glance here, a movement there; it all gave him such pleasure. But he was too shy and lacked the courage to reveal his true feelings. They walked together, side-by-side, he with his hands stuck into his trouser pockets and his arms locked at his sides. But she forced her hand between his arm and his body, prying it up bit by bit until she had him firmly in her grip. He was both surprised by, and grateful for, her move. He glanced at her and she turned to look at him with a mischievous look in her eye. Later, in a large room packed with people talking loudly, jostled by the crowd, they eventually managed to link hands. Still later, they began to talk but for some reason she grew furious, tears welled up in the corners of her eyes and she turned and walked off. She threaded her way through the crowd and left the room. At first his feet remained rooted to the ground, but then he started wildly shoving people aside in a rush to get outside. It was raining and there was not a person in sight. By

now extremely anxious, he did not know which way to go in search of her. And he'd only just realized that he did not know her name. Why, when they had become so close, had she not told him her name? This was the most puzzling aspect of the dream. But whatever happened, he knew he had to find her, she was the most important thing in the world to him. Just as he was about to do what was necessary and stride out into the rain, he woke up.

He was woken by his mobile phone ringing on the pillow beside him.

It was already dark outside and he could hear the dripping sound of light rain. The rain in his dream, it seemed, had not been an arbitrary detail. He felt gloomy and disappointed; how nice it would have been to finish the dream, he thought. He was really enjoying it, everything about it had been so vivid, had touched him so deeply that he was reluctant to leave it behind. If the dream had carried on, he thought, how would it have ended? Impossible to predict according to the dream's own logic; or perhaps one should say lack of logic, as it certainly did not follow the logic of the real world. But still, what might that unpredictable ending have been? He speculated, but none of his guesses could have been the dream's actual outcome, they were only the predictable and rewarding endings that occurred in real life. The interesting thing was that he had only recently experienced that kind of rewarding ending. Or more precisely, someone else had had an unfinished dream to which he had provided a real-life ending.

* * *

The previous month Zhou Ji had accepted an invitation to give a lecture about modern American literature at another university (Zhou Ji is an associate professor in the Chinese department at our local, most famous, university).

The lecture was scheduled for two in the afternoon but Zhou Ji's flight did not arrive until midday. He ate a simple meal at the hotel and rested a short while before heading to the lecture hall. Zhou Ji enjoys a considerable reputation in the academic world, his many publications are extremely influential, so there was quite a crowd who had come to see him that day. Indeed, the lecture hall was full.

He talked for two hours, with half an hour at the end for questions. The students asked their questions one after the other and he answered each in turn. A young woman in the front row asked a particularly in-depth question. During the lecture this woman had listened attentively, even making notes from time to time. She couldn't be considered particularly young any more, perhaps around twenty-six or twenty-seven, and was of average looks. "Hemingway and Carver have lots of things in common, but what makes them different?"

she had asked. Zhou Ji paused to think and answered, "Simply put, in my opinion there is one major thing that differentiates them. Hemingway has more humanity and Carver has nearly none at all. What do I mean by that? Well, we can sense Hemingway's emotions from his writing, whereas that is very difficult to do with Carver's work." He paused before adding, "But I prefer Carver." There was no need for Zhou Ji to add this postscript, and in fact it was directed only at the student who had asked the question. He felt that he ought to give such a bland-looking but industrious and clever girl an answer that was not only academic but that also had a personal quality, something like an equal exchange between friends. He was only sorry that he had reserved only one sentence to convey his appreciation for her.

After the lecture finished a crowd of students formed a rabble encircling Zhou Ji with a barrage of questions, some even asking him to sign his books. Eventually he was rescued by the director of the Chinese department, the man who had invited Zhou Ji to give the lecture. The director accompanied him to the hotel so that Zhou Ji could rest before the evening meal which would be held in the hotel restaurant, and in which the leadership of the literature department would join in welcoming their guest.

After the director left, Zhou Ji sat on the sofa in his room and smoked a cigarette. He didn't feel tired in any way so he decided to go for a walk outside. He left the hotel and walked to a nearby basketball court where some male students were playing on half the court. Zhou Ji stood watching for a few minutes from the sidelines before taking off his jacket and hanging it on the stands. He turned to the boys, who had split themselves into two groups, and said: "Count me in." Whenever Zhou Ji was not too busy he would go the university sports field and play basketball with the students. Despite being over forty his regime of regular exercise kept him in good shape, with no trace of an expanding waistline.

On the court he was absorbed in blocking passes, catching, making jump shots and block shots, and was soon drenched in sweat. Suddenly, he realized that there was a young woman standing by the court watching them, seemingly following him most closely. He thought she appeared familiar and when he looked a little closer he discovered that it was the woman from the afternoon's lecture, the one who had asked him the penetrating question. Zhou Ji made another basket and then said: "I'm done, I can hardly move." He grabbed his jacket from the stands and walked towards the young woman.

"Professor Zhou, you play very well," she said.

"Not as well as you ask questions," he replied.

"I was only able to ask that one because I've just finished reading your book."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes. More than I like Carver's books."

"Sounds like you're mistaking the pupil for the master. What's your name?"

"Lu Hong." She explained that she was about to graduate from the Chinese department and was specializing in modern American and European literature. He asked her where she was from, where she'd gotten her undergraduate degree and who her current supervisor was, adding some advice when he discovered that she was going to apply to a PhD program after graduation. As they were talking someone called Zhou Ji's name, and he turned to find the director of the Chinese department approaching them.

"I've got to go to dinner," he said. "It was nice to meet you. See you again."

"Professor Zhou," she added quickly, "I still have some questions I'd like to ask you, but I don't know when you leave. Do you have any time to speak with me?"

"My flight is tomorrow midday," he said. "I might have some time in the morning. But not necessarily, as the director of your department wants to speak to me too." He saw a trace of disappointment appear on her face. "Come see me then, I'll make some time," and he gave her his room number.

The next morning just after eight Zhou Ji was lying in bed wrapped in his quilt watching the news on the television when his room bell rang. Zhou Ji asked who was there and a young woman's voice came through the door: "Professor Zhou, it's Lu Hong."

He was surprised; he hadn't expected that she would come so early. He told her to wait a second, leapt up, dressed himself, pulled open the curtain and went to the bathroom to wash his face and comb his hair. He opened the door. Lu Hong was standing in the doorway wearing a pink tracksuit, her cheeks flushed; she must have been exercising. She looked slightly alarmed as she smoothed her sweaty fringe with her fingers. "Sorry, Professor Zhou, I' ve woken you up."

"No, not all," he said, "I woke up long ago, I was watching TV." He let her in and closed the door behind them.

Still looking uncomfortable, she sat down on the sofa. "I was worried you'd be busy this morning so I came early."

"I usually get up early," he said, "it's just that I had a bit too much to drink last night so I didn't sleep well."

"Oh yes, you can't have eaten breakfast yet Professor Zhou." She put a plastic bag on the coffee table. "This is our most famous local snack, crab butter dumplings. They've just come out of the steamer so they're still hot, try them." She opened the bag, inside which was a yellow plastic box and a pair of chopsticks wrapped in paper.

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry yet. I'll eat them in a bit." He sat opposite her on the bed. "You're very thoughtful."

She did not reply, as if she had not heard what he had said. This made him feel somewhat uncomfortable so he stood up. "Let me get you some tea."

She told him not to bother, she didn't want any. But he insisted and put a cup on the table beside her. He then turned and folded his quilt and made his bed.

"Professor Zhou," she said as he sat back on the bed, "I've got something funny to tell you. Last night I had a weird dream."

"Really?"

"And it was about you."

"What about me? Tell me all about it."

"Never mind, it's too boring."

"Tell me, it doesn't matter."

"You won't laugh at me?"

"How could I?"

"Okay."

Her dream started in a dark mountain village with no lamps as she searched high and low for a place to stay. She arrived somewhere with a pool in which the moonlight was reflected, surrounded by an ink-black forest filled with lots of people carrying lit torches. She followed them until suddenly they all disappeared and only she remained. Lost, she wandered alone, falling over several times. Tired and scared, she walked in desperation until eventually she saw lights, a city. Eventually, she arrived at a hotel and rented a room for the night, relieved and happy. She washed in hot water then put on her pyjamas and stood before the wash basin, looking into the mirror slowly combing her long hair.

"At that moment," she paused a moment as if in order to emphasize the importance of the next part of her story, "in the hazy, steamy mirror I saw a man's face. I was surprised but not scared. At first the man's face was fuzzy but it became clearer. I examined this man's face carefully and discovered that it was you, Professor Zhou. You looked serious, you were standing behind me in your pyjamas, also looking in the mirror. You reached out and took the comb from my hand and then started slowly brushing my hair. Then, then I woke up. When I came in here I realized that this room is exactly the same as the hotel room in my dream."

"And I'm the same person as the man in your dream?"

"Of course you are."

"But it seems that you didn't reach the climax of the dream."

"No, I didn't, but of course when it was time for my morning run I woke up."

"If the dream had carried on, what would have happened?"

"I also want to know the answer to that, but unfortunately I woke up."

"Do you really want to know?" he asked, with a slight smile.

"Yes, why wouldn't I want to know?" She also smiled. Her flushed cheeks burst into a lustrous glow.

"Let's see if we can finish your dream, and see what happens. What do you think?"

"Okay, but how will we do that?"

He stood up and said, "Come with me."

He took her to the bathroom and stood her in front of the wash basin, facing the mirror. He picked up a plastic comb from the basin and gave it to her. "Here, let's act it out. Comb your hair just as you did in the dream." She obeyed, and began slowly combing her hair, her eyes fixed on him. "Don't look at me, look in the mirror. At this point I appear behind you, take your comb, and start brushing your hair. That's what happened in the dream, right?" She nodded, and allowed him softly to comb her hair. He combed very carefully, even brushing the hair at the front of her face back behind her ears.

"Then I woke up," she mumbled.

"You haven't woken up," he said into her ear, "let the dream carry on."

She closed her eyes and her head slowly tilted back until it was resting against his body. He stopped combing her hair and started kissing her face, and took her into his arms, pulling her closer and closer. Later, on the bed and still in his arms, she raised her head and asked softly: "Is this the end of the dream?"

"Yes. Did you like it?"

"Yes."

* * *

Zhou Ji picked up the mobile phone from his pillow.

"Why did it take you so long to answer my call?" The sweet sound of a woman's voice came through the phone. "What are you doing?"

"Hi Lan Mei," he said. "Sorry. I don't know what happened, I just woke up. I was in the middle of a dream."

"Then I should be the one saying sorry, taking you away from your nice dream."

"Ha ha. What made you call?"

"I miss you. I'm coming to see you."

"Really?"

"I'm coming on a business trip, I'm already at the Sheraton. Have you got plans for this evening?"

"No."

"Then why don't you come now, we can go for a meal together."

When Zhou Ji stepped outside it was raining more heavily than he had realized, the ground was already covered in puddles, and light shimmered on the wet, fallen leaves of the parasol trees. It was late autumn and the cold wind was soaked with drizzle. He could not stop himself from trembling. He pulled his collar up and he ran on tip-toes towards his car.

It was the after-work rush hour, and with the roads jammed it took him more than half an hour to drive to the Sheraton. He parked and walked into the brightly lit lobby before calling Lan Mei's mobile. She told him to take the lift up to the restaurant on the top floor, she was waiting for him there.

He came out of the lift and was directed to the restaurant by a waitress in a green qipao dress. Inside it was warm, quiet, and gently lit. There were not many customers. He looked all around until he spotted Lan Mei sitting by a table close to the window, waving at him. He walked over and she stood up to greet him. She was still as beautiful as ever, at almost forty she looked more like thirty. Her slender figure was dressed in a purple woolen jumper, she wore just a light layer of make-up and her hair fell about her shoulders. "As charming as ever" he said, half jokingly.

They were old friends and had been for nearly ten years. For a while they had been very close, and had nearly become an item, but after she left for Shenzhen to start her own company (specializing in designing architectural models) things had petered out between them. The reasons were not so important, the important thing was that it had not impacted their friendship. Every once in a while they would call each other to see how the other was doing. Sometimes they would even meet, although that was rare – it only happened once or twice a year – but if it was not her coming on business he would go to Shenzhen to take care of a few things. If their situations allowed they would be affectionate, but there were absolutely no deeper emotions involved. They both thought this an ideal arrangement. He secretly congratulated himself that they had not, in the end, tried to make a go of it, otherwise things would have gone wrong long ago, he thought, and most likely they would not have remained friends. That was his experience at least. She had arrived in Shenzhen just in time for the large-scale construction boom so her design business had been a particular success. At the same time her love life had become rich and varied; she had had several relationships since moving and had even been married for just under two years. Every time she started something new she solicited Zhou Ji's opinion and he always gave his hearty approval.

Their food and wine arrived. She poured the wine and they clinked glasses.

"You're not going back tonight are you?" she asked.

"Of course not."

They ate and chatted. He asked how her business was going and how long she was visiting this time. He also asked her about her love life; it was something they always talked about.

"What about you?" she gently stroked the back of his hand. "Do you have a new girlfriend?"

He laughed but gave no answer, and neither did she pursue the question. This was their tacit agreement: never force the other. This was what made their time together so relaxed and happy.

At the end of the first bottle she wanted to order another.

"You're in the mood for a drink tonight," he said.

"I'm happy to see you."

"Naturally. Each time you see this old man, it means one less time you'll have to."

Slightly stunned, she replied, "Don't tempt fate like that." Her mood seemed to have changed suddenly. She raised her glass and quietly took a sip. Then she turned to look out the window. The rain was getting heavier and heavier, a curtain of rain hung over the window and lights danced in the distance.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." She turned back and slowly said, "Let me tell you a story. Two weeks ago I went to the expo in Shanghai. The afternoon I was going to leave, just I was checking out of my room about to head for the airport, for some reason I started thinking about my first boyfriend. You remember, I went to Fudan University in Shanghai. He was in my class and he stayed in Shanghai after graduation. I really wanted to call him but I didn't have his number. We haven't been in contact since we graduated and broke up, but I thought of one of our classmates that I'm still in touch with - he was the class monitor - and I thought he would probably have it. I called him and he did. So, I called the number he gave me."

She raised the glass to her lips and drunk some more wine before continuing, "When he heard it was me he was really excited and asked me at once how I was. I spoke for a couple of minutes and then I said that I was about to leave Shanghai. He said it was such a pity and could I stay for a couple of days as he was on the motorway on his way to Hangzhou for business and wouldn't be back until the following day. I replied that we'd have plenty more chances to meet and that I had to get to the airport. After checking in I went to the waiting lounge and sat down to wait to board. I hadn't been sitting there long when my phone rang,

and I heard a strange voice on the other end. He said he was a traffic policeman on the motorway between Suzhou and Hangzhou and that he had just come across a car accident. A man driving a limousine had been killed. The scene was so horrific he couldn't find the dead man's identification, only his mobile phone. In order to discover this man's identity he dialed the last number he had spoken to. That's why he called me."

She fell silent. After a while she said: "It still feels like it all happened in a dream."

Translated by Anna Holmwood

Driving Deep into China

Liu Zheng

In 2006, *Oracle Bones* was selected as a finalist for the U.S. National Book Award. Ultimately it did not win, but the author, Peter Hessler, should not be the only one to feel disappointed. *Oracle Bones* contains the essential elements to elevate Hessler to fame – the book covered the U.S. bombing of China's embassy in Yugoslavia; it talked about preparations for the Beijing Olympics; and it touched on that Square with 'strong political connotations'. Even if the content, which was full of symbolism and convenient political labels – perhaps the style best suited to a *New Yorker* Beijing correspondent – did not manage to penetrate deeply under China's skin, it was the only proper way to attract a large Anglo-American readership.

By contrast, *Country Driving*, published in the U.S. in 2010, is more natural, unadorned and restrained. On the whole, it skirts the dirt of politics, dealing instead with issues that strictly speaking aren't considered to have traditional news value. Hessler relentlessly explores China's depths, where the silence is so profound it is deafening. It is precisely because he uses no convenient labels or signposts that the essence of this book, which was originally written for the English-speaking world, can perhaps ultimately only be appreciated by a Chinese readership.

After reading reviews of this book in *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, The Economist* and more than a dozen other media, I felt that I might as well not have read them at all. When you first pick up *Country Driving* there's the danger that you might mistake it for a book about driving culture or a "road trip" book. One by one, those foreign book reviewers fell into this trap. Peter Hessler himself participated in setting it up. At a lecture for the Asia Society in the U.S., Hessler selected some Chinese driving test questions, featured in the book, and turned them into slides for the talk. For example:

352. If another motorist stops you to ask directions, you should

- A not tell him.
- B reply patiently and accurately.
- C tell him the wrong way.

The U.S. audience saw this and burst into laughter. Civilized people are generous and, in situations like these where a little goodwill isn't going to make anyone uncomfortable, they laughed, finding humor in the overly-analytical eastern mind. Nonetheless, this kind of humor which stems from cultural differences, however innocuous, is still shallow and, ultimately, unnecessary. On the whole, it distracts from the focus of the book. Its flippancy dilutes *Country Driving*'s deeper undertones. I don't believe that I am totally incapable of understanding and appreciating humor. Hessler's deadpan sense of humor, the so-called dry sense of humor, is clearly evident, but shouldn't we expect all American non-fiction writers to have this sense of humor? The difference between Hessler and those other now well-known travel writers is not Peter Hessler's sense of humor, but rather the degree to which he gets entwined with Chinese people, on both a practical and an emotional level.

Indeed, once the car has completed the long, dusty journey that is *Country Driving*, it would be better described as the thread rather than the theme of the book. It's a little bit like a necklace: the focus should be on the beads that make up the necklace, rather than on the string that holds them together. If everything that is written about the car is nothing more than the lid of a trap then what is this book really about; in other words, what exactly are the beads that form the necklace? This question is not as easy to answer as it might first appear.

From a structural point of view, the three sections of *Country Driving* – The Wall, The Village, and The Factory – seem to be in balance, but actually there are enormous differences between the points of departure and the degree of emotional investment in each one. The first part, Hessler's expedition along the Great Wall, is written using a similar architecture to that of *Oracle Bones*. Both books employ symbolic Chinese cultural objects as a medium, hoping to use these to measure the evolutionary pulse between the ancient and modern, and add the dimension of time to observations on China. The problem is that these over-simplistic attempts cannot find an echo in the realities of contemporary China. In fact, as Hessler heads west along the ruins of the Great Wall, his experiences lack consistency because his route is mechanical and pre-determined. At Genghis Khan's tomb he encounters three inebriated cadres who had been at a luncheon banquet and observes them as they tenaciously try to bargain with the ticket collector at the door; at a cheap hostel for truck drivers in Gansu province he learns that in an upstairs room there lives a "post-Soviet version of Sister Carrie" – a Russian prostitute; and at a roadside restaurant in Zhangjiakou he meets

a female boss who claims to be the "United Sources of America Inc., Deputy Director of Operations."... and while these may still be considered interesting snapshots of contemporary China, they have no essential connection with the Great Wall. If Hessler were to arbitrarily choose another route from Beijing to Gansu, he would be just as likely to encounter many of the same things. The Great Wall, this important symbol of Chinese culture, is already entirely disconnected from the realities of today's China. *Country Driving* expresses this point fully and convincingly, but surely it's not worth spending 100 plus pages doing it?

Even though the objectives he sets up may not be practical, Hessler relies on his sharp observation to overcome limitations. The observations he makes, or more accurately, the observations he makes of society, are of two kinds – those that are evident and those that are hidden from view. For an example of the first kind, we can turn to the section where he discusses hiring a car from 'Capital Motors': "They never asked where I was taking the Jeep Cherokee. The rental contract specifically forbade drivers from leaving the Beijing region, but I decided to ignore this rule – they wouldn't figure it out until I returned the jeep with a loaded odometer. In China, much of life involves skirting regulations, and one of the basic truths is that forgiveness comes easier than permission." On the original English edition that I read on a Kindle, 59 people had already underlined that last sentence. Clearly, those readers were deeply impressed by Hessler's ability to grasp social norms and models. However, I am more interested in his more subtle observations, which cannot be upheld as judgments, or classified as aphorisms. While driving through Shanxi and Inner Mongolia, it becomes Hessler' s habit to pick up hitchhikers, who turn out to be mostly young women: "... girls who had left the village and were on their way to becoming something else. They were well dressed, often in skirts and heels... They wore... cheap perfume... Invariably they were migrants on a home visit. They worked in factories, in restaurants, in hair salons, and they didn't say much about these jobs. At first, I couldn't figure out why there were so many women because in fact the majority of Chinese migrants are male. But this wasn't a peak travel season... The people I met generally worked closer to home, in provincial cities or good-sized townships. For them, village trips were feasible, and women were more likely to make the effort, because they were attentive to parents and grandparents. When I asked about their packages, they said: 'Gifts' ." Actually, Hessler blends some explanation for this phenomenon into his narrative. For example, if we go one layer deeper we can analyze further. Firstly, the adult male labor force is extracted from rural areas and this causes a gender imbalance in the countryside; secondly, because of ethical considerations, some young female migrant workers choose to work at a location not too far from their home village; thirdly, the nature of their employment offers the women the chance to visit their families during those holidays other than Spring

Festival; fourthly, these women choose to walk at least a part of the journey back home because transport is inconvenient or because of economic considerations. Perhaps we could carry on and analyze this still further, right down to dissecting Chinese society to the most fundamental and microscopic level, but actually this is already deep enough. The observation of these female hitchhikers, seemingly unremarkable in itself, brings together and intertwines many significant and disparate facets of society, from the flow of China's migrant population, family ethics, working traits, to transportation choices. Because of this, it is very difficult for us to draw a simple conclusion from this observation. Compared with those sections where Hessler discusses why Chinese drivers drive so willfully or why parts of the ruins of the Great Wall are now buried under dirt, his observations of the hitchhikers is a much richer source of information for a Chinese urban readership. This is inevitably the result of a difference in focus between Chinese- and English-speaking readers.

It's inevitable that, while on the road and following a fixed itinerary, experiences tend to flash by; the traveler doesn't have time to build up close emotional connections with the people he meets along the way. However, once we get to the second part of *Country Driving*, the emotional intensity rises sharply. This is because Hessler chooses a fixed location and, with enormous patience, cultivates and maintains a relationship with the place. Later on, this relationship is turned rapidly on its head, with an intensity that probably even surprised Hessler himself.

In 2002, Hessler and an American female friend, Mimi Kuo, rented a country home in a village called Sancha in the foothills of the Yan Mountain range. Although it was only about an hour or two's drive from Beijing, it was surprisingly behind the times. Some of the book's richest and most lyrical passages come from his descriptions of Sancha. Among these is an entrancing paragraph, where Hessler recounts how he went picking walnuts with some villagers, lashing the trees' branches with sticks: "there's a beauty to the shifting sound and light: the whistling sticks, the fresh leaves floating through the air, the walnuts thudding heavily into the dirt. After it's over the trees seem to sigh – branches hum softly, still vibrating with the memory of the assault." However, such tranquility and harmony was to last for only a brief interlude. Just then, Hessler witnesses the petty wrangling of village politics; the enormous impact of the rising tourism on villagers' lives; and the intense effect of urbanization on the way the villagers thought. "It was all but impossible for people to keep their bearings in a country that changed so fast."

The story of Sancha revolves around a middle-aged villager surnamed Wei. This intelligent man, dissatisfied with his situation, employs a highly individualistic approach, seizing business opportunities, joining the Party, buying a second-hand car, and fighting for an allowance for his mentally-retarded older brother, although in this he is finally

defeated by the village party secretary. Hessler uses Wei and his family to paint an exquisite portrayal of the economic transition, social conflicts, the politics, customs, religion, and emotional relationships in China's rural north. From some angles, it can be regarded as an anthropological study. It's only when he is with Wei's young son that Hessler's feelings begin to seep into his writing, causing him to transgress the detachment required of an anthropologist. The little boy suffers from idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura and Hessler does everything in his power to help him. He consults with three U.S.-based specialists on the boy's diagnosis; asks Mimi Kuo to organize for a bed in a top Beijing hospital; and discusses buying blood for the boy via an American contact who works for a pharmaceutical company in Beijing. Hessler angers the doctor in the Beijing hospital by querying the safety of the blood. When he suggests that the blood should be tested for viruses, the doctor replies: "Believe me, you can't!" Hessler writes: "It disgusted me to hear a doctor say such nonsense." He shakes with anger. In the book's entirety, this is the only time that Hessler loses control of his emotions. From this, we can infer the depth of feeling between Hessler and this little boy. However, even more than this, at the exact moment he loses control, we are given the chance to read a realistic account of how an American would handle such a situation, and at the same time it allows us to see to what extent Hessler's outsider status influences the fate of the people he writes about. This child is very lucky, not only because there is a person who cares about his health, but because that person has the ability to mobilize resources which the average person cannot. The issue is that at that critical juncture, Hessler's first thought is to use his contacts instead of following the rules. Of course, such a kind impulse is understandable, even moving, but when Hessler mocks drivers on wChina's highways who do not obey traffic regulations, does he ever consider that there might be a deeper institutional background as to why Chinese people are unwilling to follow rules? In China, what determines whether someone decides to first use their connections rather than abiding by regulations? Why, at that critical moment, does Hessler fail to follow the sacred American value of integrity? These questions are more worthy of our serious thought than the spontaneous expression of one person's kindness.

If we say that the Sancha narrative is closer to Hessler's style in his first book, *River Town*, then *Country Driving*'s third part, namely the section that centers on Lishui in Zhejiang province, allows Hessler to really bring his strengths into play. On one level, he acts just like a novelist, choosing a base from which to build up close relationships with other people, and meticulously describing everything. On another level, he is like a journalist, traveling all around the area, capturing fragments of life in order to substantiate and enrich his partial understanding of the place and, to a certain extent, to build and perfect a bigger picture from these snapshots.

It is on the side of a road that Hessler first meets the boss of a private enterprise in Lishui specializing in making bra-strap adjustment rings. Thereafter he often visits the factory, eating and living with the staff. He gets involved with the factory preparations, the installation of equipment, the production launch, and the factory's relocation. His intense level of interest in the factory even causes the boss to go so far as to suspect at one point that Hessler is "an undercover competitor". Hessler gives his readers, as *The Economist* book review puts it, the chance to be "a fly on the wall" and observe their every move and word. Here, Hessler takes our breath away by recounting the subtle twists and turns of human nature and the different shapes and shades of that society. We cannot help but admit that this is the first time we have read such a profound depiction of factory workers in contemporary China.

Whatever way we choose to summarize this section, it is inevitable that we will sacrifice some richness of detail, and it's precisely that detail that is the most precious component of the narrative. I would just like to talk about what struck me the most, that is the alienation of workers from their work, and how work has become disassociated from the worker. Fifteen-year old Tao Yufeng, a female employee at the bra ring factory, is very nimble with her hands. She handles the bras' underwire. "She wore a thimble on her left thumb, and the metal clicked each time she inserted another wire into the spring. *Clickclickclickclick* – the sounds came steady as a metronome, as fast as I could count. One afternoon, I watched Yufeng prepare thousands of wires... often she worked 10 hours straight on a single breast size. She could answer my questions without pausing or looking up." Tao Yufeng says: "To be honest, I often have a peaceful feeling. I work alone and there's nobody to bother me. I don't think about anything in particular. If I try to think about something specific, then I don't work as fast. So I just try to keep my mind empty." It is difficult to say exactly how bad these working conditions are, but I feel that there is something suffocating behind the serenity. At a local artists' workshop which copies American and European paintings and exports them overseas, Hessler asks a female painter: "Did you like to draw when you were little?" She curtly replies: "No, I didn't like it one bit." Hessler writes: "She never painted anything for fun – when I mentioned the possibility, she looked at me like I was crazy... I asked which of her paintings she liked best, and she said, 'I don't like any of them.' She had a similar response when I inquired if she admired the work of any famous artists, like Monet and Van Gogh. 'I don't have a favorite,' she said. 'That kind of art has no connection at all with what we do.' " There is no more vivid expression of "alienation" than this. There has been a great deal of discussion on the many different costs incurred during the course of China's modernization, but one cost, the alienation of people, has seldom been raised. If emptiness is the result of modernization then what is the point of modernization at all?

Hessler paints many delicate portrayals of this emptiness in people's lives and in society. His conclusions are frequently so accurate that they are heartbreaking. "In a Chinese boomtown, though, it's all business: factories and construction supplies, and cell phone shops... entertainment options appear instantly but social organizations are rare. No private newspapers, no independent labor unions... Religion might flourish at the individual level, but institutions are weak... There weren't any law firms or nonprofit organizations. Police and government cadres were almost as rare... " Hessler points out that some Chinese people have become good at making plans and adjusting their lives "but it would take another major step for such personal lessons to be applied to society-wide issues," "often I sensed that China needed to reach a point where the middle and upper classes felt like the system prevented them from succeeding." Is China anywhere near to developing to this point? Do the middle and upper classes already have this feeling? Perhaps it's not difficult to answer this question; we just need to understand that it won't necessarily do any good to speak it out aloud.

The Pareto improvement may be considered the ideal model of social evolution. This is one where any change benefits at least one person in society and harms no one. However, China's many changes, especially those that have taken place in the countryside, are not the kind of changes to inspire optimism whatever way you look at them. They have harmed many people while the minority, who have benefited, don't live in the countryside. No one but the company bosses and the developers is clapping for joy, while the rural population physically shoulders these almost unendurable tumultuous changes. Who should be made accountable for these developments and provide proof of their legitimacy?

Sometimes Hessler can't help a certain dispirited tone: "In a drive-by town, I felt like a drive-by journalist, listening to sad stories before I got back on the expressway." The problem is Hessler can leave, whereas we cannot. When we read Hessler's book is it in order to comprehend this place, understand this place, change this place, or to say, don't let this place change in the same way?

Even if you know that in the Chinese translation almost three pages of content beginning with the second paragraph on page 194 has been deleted; even if you know that much of the book's language has been quietly made more moderate; even if you know that several of the sentences have been translated incorrectly; you should still be thankful that this book was published in China. Our first thanks should go to the author – Peter Hessler, a great China watcher and a long-time friend of the Chinese people. As for who is included and who is not included by the words "Chinese people"... I think you know.

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