

Castles in the Clouds

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I am a bit of a dreamer—anyone who knows me can tell you that. Building castles in the sky suits my right down to the ground; when it comes to the practical details, however, I'm far less assured.

I had to pinch myself repeatedly (mentally, at least) when I first turned up for work at the Research Centre for Translation in 1998. It was like a dream come true. Walking into the Institute of Chinese Studies, the one thought in my mind was that this was the place where *Renditions* was published, the magazine that had beguiled, enlightened and inspired me so much when I was still an ignorant undergraduate bumbling and struggling through my painful early years of Mandarin.

I quickly fell in love with the physical surroundings of the Institute. Who could imagine a better building to work in, organized around a fish pond and open to the skies? That fine pool—an elegant composition of water, rocks and colourful shimmering scales—was a great aid to problem-solving. In moments

of frustration or fatigue, I would leave my first-floor office and stand overlooking it, watching how the gold fish and the white fish and the darkly-coloured fish swam in schools past one another, while in my mind nouns and verbs and adjectives would swirl in slowly merging patterns as I groped after the most satisfying arrangement.

To me, the Centre was an ideal environment for the aspiring translator. The gleaming metal thermos I found every morning at my door was a tangible symbol of all my hopes for the day ahead, a day measured out in teacups and so many sentences read or checked or written; that simple discipline gave me so much calm and quiet and order.

Of course, other parts of the CUHK campus were less reassuring, but they left me with unforgettable memories. I was, for instance, regularly terror-stricken by lunch-times at the pool-side canteen. After queuing outside to pay for my order of vegetables, rice and vitasoy, I would inch forward in an enormous crowd which did its best to squeeze single-file down the short, narrow stairway to the kitchens. Here, when my turn came, I would announce my order in garbled Cantonese to the generally daunting cooks, point to the cauldrons of food behind them if necessary, and hope like hell that I was understood. I was grateful beyond words when I found myself past the stampede with a plate of what I'd asked for in my hand!

My living conditions were also beyond all expectations. Before I arrived in Hong Kong, I had imagined myself living in some cramped shoebox of vacant space, distracted by crowds and endless noise. In reality, I found myself in a Spanish villa in the village of Cheung Shue Tan within easy walking distance of work and close to the magical hills of Tai Po Kau. Although I don't know what a *cheung shue* (camphor tree) looks like, I was certainly surrounded by an abundance of plant life, as well as streams and unexpected wild things. One night, returning late from a shopping trip to Shatin, I discovered a crab on my doorstep, waving one white-tipped claw at me in the light of a waning moon. In the warmer months, a flower-covered slope opposite the window where I had my desk was transformed into a living butterfly exhibit that constantly renewed itself with an array of the most extraordinary insects.

Apart from such spectacles in nature, I was also intrigued by some of my human neighbours. The balcony of my first-floor flat overlooked a small, irregular plot of land cultivated by a mysterious old woman who collected all sorts of odds and ends. Once I saw her dragging long planks of wood that she'd picked up from somewhere to reinforce a fence. I still remember the striking, contemporary scarecrows she made out of discarded dolls, plastic bags and other material she hoped would be effective in her relentless war on the local bird life.

This diversity in my home life was well and truly mirrored in my work at the Centre: I had never been made to read so many different kinds of Chinese in my life. During the last months of my final visit late in 1999, I was reading quasi-classical Chinese and imagining myself to make sense of what I absorbed! I'm sure I wasn't the first person to be pushed beyond his or her (self-imposed) limitations by the demand of work at the Centre. Inspired to recklessness by this atmosphere of all-rounded accomplishment, I was even foolish enough to attempt the translation of a short story by the incomparable Eileen Chang. I have no doubt that this is the most difficult piece of writing that I have ever attempted to translate, and it was only thanks to the over-generous assistance of more than a few individuals that saved me from making a complete fool of myself. Perhaps this experience gave me one of my best lessons during my time at the Centre—professional humility, and the courage to ask for help when you need it, are indispensable qualities for a translator to have.

In *Walden*, Henry Thoreau makes a statement that fits well with my days working on *Renditions*. 'If you will build castles in the air,' he writes, 'Your work need not be lost. That is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.' Although I continue to build cloud-castles of the unsteady kind, I know that my experience at the Centre helped me lay at least the start of a serviceable foundation. ☒

