**WP**

For me, every artwork is a kind of journey, where the process, the experience of the journey, plays a large part in the final manifestation. This journey began in the most tragic of circumstances twelve months ago when, on the first day of the summer term, I was told that one of our most ambitious students, Mavis Qu, had been killed in a car crash in Swansea the previous day. We met her devastated parents a few days later, a businessman and a lawyer. Neither of them spoke English. From my experience of living and working in China on an artist’s residency in Shanghai I guessed that, as good Chinese citizens, Mavis would be their only child, and she was. At her funeral I took the risk of reading out, in English, a poem from the T’ang dynasty. Far from being offended they were interested in my choice of poem and appreciative that I’d tried to ‘think Chinese’. So this started an intention to make a work that would honour Mavis and also aspects of Chinese culture and heritage.

The willow pattern design, so popular in England for centuries, is not really Chinese at all, but an English invention based on traditional Chinese designs. The ‘willow pattern legend’, telling the story of the design, is a complete fabrication that is essentially racist in its distortion of Chinese values. Blue and white ceramic processes were invented in China in the 9th century and then ‘stolen’ by a French missionary in the 17th century.

Tea drinking was also invented in China and is still considered a very refined experience there, a long way from the black tea drinking that has become part of everyday life in the UK, with milk and sugar. The texts on the floor here are based on a 9th century poem by Lu Tong called ‘Seven Bowls of Tea’, where he praises and celebrates the subtleties of drinking tea.

My Shanghai residency involved me living in one square mile of Xuhui District, where I seldom saw another Westerner. In my patch there were parks, schools, a university, apartment buildings, a migrant community, a large station, markets, polluted rivers, traffic and an impressive recycling centre. In the process of developing ideas for this project I became gripped by finding the photo of the woodpile, of how much is being revealed in one image; and then with the idea of recreating the woodpile. The video sequence and the other large photo were obviously taken at the same time, but reveal slightly different realities: the sleeping driver, the frozen moment of the throw. The ceramic sequence in the video was filmed at Shanghai E-Arts, where I was living, and was one of many digital projections that they were marketing.

I worked for a period with a local primary school and the small photo near the top hat shows one of my interventions, introducing the children to the Western concept of recycling, and taking them as a group to this nearby recycling centre, which they had no knowledge of. The signs they are holding say ‘Heroes Of Recycling, We Salute You’. The literate workers were very appreciative, the illiterate ones looked on.

The only high quality online photo of Mavis shows her wearing a top hat visiting a London fashion store. I have included this here, and the nearby upturned top hat is filled with tiny pottery fragments dug up, while gardening, from a single garden in Norfolk by Liz Falconbridge, director of the Kings Lynn Arts Centre. Most of them are of the willow pattern, showing just how much a part of our social history this design became.

Essentially, this installation is about cultural perception, the universal qualities of materials and people.

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Visiting Arts

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