

Eileen Pun
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2015-2016 Scholarship Winner Report

It is with great pleasure that I send my report highlighting my experience as an LUTSF scholarship awardee.

My project took place between **28th July 2015 – 17th February 2016**, where I travelled to the P.R. China with the main body of my work taking place in the following locations: Wudang Shan, Hubei Province; Chengdu, Sichuan Province and Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province.

My work as a writer and movement practitioner engages creatively with many aspects of Chinese culture, therefore, my original project had a number of training and research aims. During the planning stages, I was fortunate to receive a writing award and invitation to participate in a writing residency; both supporting my interest in China and the interdisciplinary exploration of movement and poetry. The purpose and length of my project therefore expanded to include the following aims, all of which were successfully met during my travels.

- 1) To refresh my own training and teaching skills through study in courses at the Wudang Taoist Kung Fu Academy and review Taiji fundamentals, learn Taiji swordplay and health preserving Qigong.
- 2) To inform my poetry pamphlet, a collection based on the translation and responses to the poet Du Fu's poem, *'A Song of Dagger Dancing to a Girl Pupil of Lady Gongsun'*. The work engages the true historical character, Lady Gongsun a famous dancer during the Tang Dynasty.
- 3) To access several academic libraries, translation assistance and scholarly support.
- 4) In addition to my main aims, to attend a wide range of cultural events, notably: dance & martial arts performances, Chinese opera, calligraphy exhibitions, literature readings and film; Promote artistic exchange and seek to create long-term cross-cultural relationships; Respond creatively to my environment, record and share my experiences.

One of my biggest highlights was preparing and presenting my poetry seminar, 'See Poetry Move' at the English Poetry Studies Institute at the School of Foreign Languages at Sun Yat-Sen University. The seminar provided an interdisciplinary approach in relating to poetry through movement principles. Movement, in all of its various forms (from travel or migration; dance or sport; the motion of a calligraphy/artist's brush) as a practice of transmission - the mind's wishes into its realised gesture or action. I was able to share a range of contemporary poems and participants were able to explore and discuss the transmission of meaning and decipher a poem's 'movement' through language, shape, content, and context. There was also the option to take part in a few 'out of your seat' exercises, which was responded to rather shyly! Although I have previously presented martial movement workshops in the form of community classes, this was a first for me from the perspective of a writer/poet and what I hope will become a more central aspect of my work as a freelance writer.

I am so pleased that this project has been able to reach a number of artists across various disciplines. At the beginning of this year, Writers' Centre Norwich - a well-respected literary organisation - commissioned me to write a blog about my experience, thereby reaching a large community of writers and authors.

My own movement practice has also taken great developmental leaps and this learning will be integrated into my community-based movement and health classes. The outcomes will also have an impact in the long term, as I have been able to progress my translation and poetry work significantly. The future publication of my pamphlet, I hope will leave an artistic legacy of my travels and showcase its significant, interdisciplinary aspects. Throughout all of my communications regarding this project, I have made sure to mention my award. LUTSF will be recognised throughout any related outcomes, such as a forthcoming documentary regarding the Inaugural Sun Yat-Sen International Writers' Residency, the first of its kind in China.

I am deeply grateful to the LUTSF committee for the award. It has already made a great impact, on myself and others, in taking my interdisciplinary work with greater seriousness. Although my project was atypical, off-beat and ambitious in scope and travel time, LUTSF have been generous and open-minded about providing a supportive framework. I hope future applicants will take much heart from my project and feel inspired to widely explore their dance and movement passions.

Please find enclosed my report, with eight images, and a short video courtesy of documentary maker John Hughes. All media/information are ok to be circulated apart from the video clip. Please do not make public the video clip as no footage can be made public until the release of the documentary in late 2016.

With sincere thanks,
Eileen Pun

Three Seasons in China

By: Eileen Pun

Eight years ago, before I knew I wanted to write poetry, I travelled to China with the idea that I was still young and sound in body enough to really learn martial arts. I enrolled at The Capital University of Physical Education (CUPE) and lived in the Haidian District, a corner of Beijing with several universities and a pleasant student vibe. The backdrop of the forthcoming Olympics was energising, and I felt welcomed as people seemed to embrace the idea of China opening itself to the globe.

My daily schedule, which began at dawn was vigorous, exhausting and satisfying. I ate at the canteen at fixed times, socialised very little, wrote voraciously in my diary and always slept incredibly well. Outside of my studies and training, I joined a small, grass-roots poetry group and gravitated to places like, The Bookworm Library and attended their International Literature Festival (www.bookwormfestival.com).

Eventually, these small connections landed me a job in revising translations for the New World Press. In fact, I did this work remotely with the expectation that I would join their Beijing offices the following year. The plan was: return to the UK, amass some savings and within a year, begin living, training, and working in China's capital city.

These plans never materialised. After I returned to England, my life took an unexpected direction. Like many unfledged writers, I had been a casual diarist and simply wrote for leisure. Somehow, in another geography, my musings whilst in China felt *loaded*. I was overcome by a keenness to push my own writing in the way I had pushed myself physically. Fast-forward slightly and I was thanking my lucky stars to be a 2010 Writers' Centre Norwich Escalator Prize Winner. Fast-forward a little further, and I am fully relocated to England's heart of Romanticism, Grasmere in the Lake District.

Sometimes, I wonder after the me that went back to Beijing. Naturally, she became superbly trained, fluent in Mandarin and careered in the fast-growing Chinese publishing industry. Deep down, I know that things went the way they should have. I'm a softie, I'm still trying to master the English language, I have a strong affinity to the outdoors, and the pace that suits me best is slow, real slow.

Nevertheless, I haven't let go of the memory of a well articulated sequence, pivot or kick. There isn't really a match to these satisfactions, expect perhaps in poetry. Say, the way I feel when I manage to write something that strikes me. The frustrations too are a bit similar, most of the time there is just self-correction, calibration and ache. I've struggled to find a way to connect these art-forms, mostly it feels too idiosyncratic, too eccentric.

Last year, I expressed this yearning in an application to The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund LUTSF (www.lutsf.org.uk):

As a mature practitioner I must admit that I feel a certain physiological pressure to prioritise the development of my own movement practice. As a poet, I have been working on a sequence based on a dancer in Chinese history, Lady Gongsun. These are based on translations from the Classical Chinese poet Du Fu. A segment has already been published in the important anthology of new British poetry, 'Ten, The New Wave' by Bloodaxe Books. Not only do I feel this project will determine my path as a poet, it will also inform how effectively I can advocate art across disciplines as transformative and enriching - experiential values I deeply believe in.

In the spring of 2015 I received news that my LUTSF scholarship application was successful. A short time later, I also found out that I had won a Northern Writers' Award (www.northernwritersawards.com). Holy green lights! This was exactly the permission I needed to bridge the poetry that I had found, with the kungfu (skills) that I had lost. I composed a project that would span over six months, ambitiously covering: training in Wudang Shan (mountains in Hubei Province); a visit to the DuFu Research Centre and Thatched Cottage in Chengdu (Sichuan Province); taking part in a writers' residency (Guangxi/Guangdong Provinces); and connecting with many scholars and artists, wanting my work to be as researched, informed, rigorous and creative as possible.

I arrived into China in July last year, at the peak of Beijing's hot summer and spent two weeks visiting old haunts, friends and making new contacts. During this time, I returned to CUPE, staying in a building that neighbours my old dormitory. With the support of Zhang Changnian, Department of Martial Arts and Dance (my previous Taiji teacher from my time there as a student) and Zhang Xueli, an excellent and diligent translator/interpreter; I was able to execute my travel, training and research plans for the forthcoming months. Unbelievably, my bank account was still valid, money from my editorial work - all those years ago - still available. China had welcomed me back.

Wudang Shan is a place that has captured the Chinese imagination for hundreds of years. It is steeped in legends, Daoist temples and stunning landscape of lush, tree covered mountains. Certain regions of Wudang and its monasteries received UNESCO World Heritage status in 1994 and can trace a long lineage of philosophy, martial arts and spirituality. This particular fusion is the reason it is considered one of the birthplaces of Taiji, a history that contains its share of heroes, hermits and outlaws.

Considering my Romantic leanings, I'm not at all surprised by how at home I feel in these surroundings. At the martial arts school, I have a love-hate relationship with the rusty bell that dangles from the courtyard tree, constantly chiming us into training (discipline) and meals (carrots) in alternation. During these hot, two and half months I learn the extent of my physical regression - my rigid Western body.

The mornings began with internal qigong, focusing on leading a circulation of air and energy through the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, combined with spine warming exercises. This was followed

by warm-up exercises and a curriculum of basic training. These include: stance work (for strength), waist work (for coordination, directional flexibility), limb work (for reach, balance, relaxation) and jump work (for plyometrics, aerial spins, landing techniques).

During the second daily session, training would progress into combination work, weapons training and learning taolu (forms). Slightly more relaxed than the morning sessions, students would work in groups of those studying the same forms and encouraged to learn at one's own pace. I was pleased to learn a number of new forms including: Five-animal Qigong, Wudang Taiji Jian, and Bagua Zhang.

The evening sessions, only one hour (instead of two) was not compulsory. This was a good time to pursue partner work or sparring, review lessons, or engage in standing meditation. I did sometimes attend these sessions, due to my interest in standing meditation. Mostly, however, I liked the quiet, solitary time. Giving some of my energy towards keeping a diary, writing poetry and working on my pamphlet. It was in those moments that I would often feel as though I had two masters - martial arts and poetry. I was keenly aware that in a few months I would take a hiatus from martial arts training in order to pursue my literary interests and wanted to feel equipped.

CHENGDU

By: *DuFu*

*Sunset makes even my travel clothing
A little brighter; I have covered
Many roads and now arrive in a new
World for me; meeting new people,
Unable to say if ever I shall see
My old home again; now the great river
Flows east, never halting, as indeed
My days of wandering have been; [...]
Always there have been travellers,
Why should I lament?*

Translated by: Rewi Alley
Foreign Languages Press

With my heart set to visit The DuFu Research Center and Thatched Cottage, I didn't need any extra reasons to visit Chengdu. However, its reputation as an exquisite centre for art, poetry, tea houses, pandas and 'delicious food', make it a welcome foray into a city. Nevertheless, the visit is a research trip and I wilfully keep myself focused on the reasons I am there. I need help to better understand Du Fu's work, and I want to connect with contemporary Chinese Art in some way.

After getting in touch with a number of arts related organisations, Catherine Platt, manager of the Chengdu Festival (BLF) and Liu Yutong, musician and event manager of the Chengdu Bookworm took it upon themselves to make me feel welcome and organise local introductions. One of which included a wonderfully dynamic afternoon with Zhao Mi, a well known calligrapher, painter and visual artist. We shared ideas about martiality, experimentation, the practice of art itself and the hope that we would extend our meeting into future collaborative work.

I'm able to emerge myself in the happiness of thinking. When I'm painting, there's a complex feeling of love and hatred. There are even moments where I have thoughts of escaping, and that is the ultimate of my emotions. Zhao Mi, Artist

There is much too much to write here about how my visit allowed me to get a bit closer to Du Fu in my own work, or to convey the richness of conversations over tea and meals. I left Chengdu with

renewed sense of purpose about my translation work, poetry, and very welcome new reading material; *Du Fu Selected Poems* from Foreign Languages Press and a copy of *MaLa, The Chengdu Bookworm Literary Journal*, Issue 3.

Taking part in the inaugural Sun Yat-Sen International Writers' Residency (18 Oct – 16 Nov) was pivotal, dividing my time in China neatly in half. Professor Dai Fan, the programme director - also a writer - met me and my partner at the Guilin train station in Guangxi Province after travelling over a 1000 km with all our belongings. I thought we must have looked a rabble, but if she thought so, it appeared she didn't mind. She was sleek and articulate, efficiently sweeping us into an organised car towards Yangshuo and explained the residency (a first for me) in great detail.

Fifteen writers, as well as two documentary makers from eleven countries took part in a month long residency over three main locations in South China. These figures don't, however, give the correct sense of the territory that we covered, nor the number of people with whom we interacted. Translators, student volunteers, invited artists, academics, members of the community and the bureau of tourism joined at various points throughout.

The first phase was set in Yangshuo, a popular eco-tourism destination, surrounded by beautiful karst mountains. Choosing between, privacy for head space or, cultural activities (meeting mountain singers, musicians, calligraphers, painters to name a few) for stimulation was difficult, but possible. I had the annoyance of my laptop charger breaking, and needing plenty of solitude to write in long-hand and compensate for the inefficiency. Nevertheless, the setting was conducive for falling into interesting conversations, and the sharing of experience and craft. This shared link was particularly helpful to me <http://www.philipgraham.net/2013/10/how-can-you-tell-the-writer-from-the-dance/>, giving me courage and material for my poetry seminar, *See Poetry Move* that would take place the following week in Guangzhou.

The second phase took place in the garden-like campuses of Sun Yat-Sen's main campus, Zhuhai Campus, Xinhua College and Wuyi University where the residency had morphed into a conference. Here, more international writers joined the group. The number of ambassadorial students (all bright and heartwarming) grew and our timetable was packed with panel discussions, talks, seminars, workshops, readings, community presentations, tours, ceremony and banquets.

The discussions grappled with difficult issues, raising questions about censorship, the politics of publishing, identity, diaspora literature, feminism, language and the subversive. Of course, this list is not exhaustive. It was great to find ourselves stimulated, slowly drifting out of the lecture halls still talking about what had been discussed and exchanging reading material such as this article in the *New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/09/travels-with-my-censor>.

By the time of the final phase, the rejuvenation promised by the hot springs of Jiangmen was needed. The region is known for its Chinese overseas ties and internationally recognised museum-villages with UNESCO world cultural heritage status. These have become architectural reminders of the social and global history of Chinese migration, of which, my own heritage is a part. More conversations happen and more sharing of personal stories, show how our talks have become deeper, warmer. One such exchange led to this touching documentary <http://findingsamuellowe.com/>. Maybe this is because we all know each other better, or maybe it is to do with the fact that a lot of our conversations are now taking place in our bathing suits in hot springs – it is hard to tell.

There is a great deal more that can be said about the residency, and anyone with an interest about China, international literature and where these intersect might enjoy keeping abreast of the following: The School of Foreign Languages at Sun Yat-Sen University have written an in-depth article about the residency <http://flsen.sysu.edu.cn/news/news04/15660.htm>; *The Ninth Letter*, literary journal of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (www.ninthletter.com), will publish work by participating

writers in a forthcoming online issue; Radio New Zealand will also feature a programme about the residency on <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/voices>; A documentary is currently under production by film-makers Wei Donghua and John Hughes (www.earlyworks.com.au).

When I returned to Wudang it seemed to receive me coolly, but is not to be blamed. I left in one season and returned in another. My favourite street corner, usually busy with mahjong and card players had dwindled. The air was now cold, the light wintry.

After taking part in the residency in the south of the country, I realised my focus shifted from my own development towards my professional development. During this phase of my training, rather than taking part in the larger general class, I opted for smaller private coaching classes of up to four students. For me, this made strategic sense and helped me to progress my own teaching skills. Contrary to the previous training, the class was bilingual, and in my case, with an English speaking coach. These classes were intended for practitioners interested in teaching or coaching. Whilst my earlier training heavily focused on memorisation of techniques, developing flexibility and strength through basic routines, this training engaged us with theories, application of techniques and meditative aspects of training.

As the academy is rooted in Daoist philosophy, great emphasis was made on maintaining harmony between the 'human and heaven'. I realised that this concept is not only prevalent in the Wudang style, but important to all Chinese Wushu (Martial Arts). Although this sense should be developed intuitively, I came away with a small, yet effective set of guidelines (at least to me) with which to measure the harmony of my own movement and those of my students.

- a) **To use one's body and energy fully.** By embracing this attitude, rather than consciously or subconsciously 'conserving yourself', movements are executed with commitment - a conviction that touches both the practitioner and audience. There is also the surprising benefit of feeling more energised, rather than less energised by 'letting go of the stinginess'.
- b) **To remain present in each action through the eyes.** When the eyes closely follow each movement of the body, especially the hands - the ability to focus is continuously reinforced. This does not only make for a more connected experience for the practitioner, it also creates intensity for an audience.
- c) **To clearly bring out a movement's inherent rhythms.** All Wushu routines (all movement for that matter) is made up of contrasting movements, which is referred to in Chinese as the mutual interaction between Yin and Yang. By considering all movements in this way, the flow from one movement's limit into another, creates a more pleasing unity in both practice and aesthetic.
- d) **To facilitate coordination and prevent rigidity by steady breathing.** When one's underlying breathing is steady and under the practitioner's control, movements are executed with better coordination and with increased energy efficiency.

It was during this phase of training that I began to feel the initial stirrings of comprehension, and also the sense that I was only scratching the surface of what there is to learn. What I hadn't foreseen was that in about a month's time, the school would close for its winter break and everyone would disperse to their families and hometowns for the new year. The question, '*where will you spend your Spring Festival (Chinese New Year)?*' entered every conversation, and each time, I didn't know how to answer.

Eventually, the answer did come. An unexpected move to Shenyang, a large historical city in northeast China not far from Russian and North Korean borders. A teacher of Daoist philosophy and published translator, Hu Xuezhi was in search of an editor to help with a new and annotated translation of Chuang Tzu (Zhuang Zi); I was in search of help with translating my research material and getting better access to ancient Chinese language and Classic literature – a worthy exchange.

Reflecting now - having made good on this long-awaited return to China - mostly, I feel a deep sense of

gratitude to have had such an incredible and extensive opportunity. During these three seasons, I have had invaluable time and space for intensive training and writing, irreplaceable academic and translation support for my poetry pamphlet and have returned to the UK with concrete outcomes towards my professional development. I would urge anyone with a strong passion for the movement arts, with an interest in travel and other cultures to consider applying for the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship, it has been profoundly life-changing for me.

*** Please note, a version of this blog/article was published online by Writers' Centre Norwich, February 2016, with acknowledgement to LUTSF.**

<http://www.writerscentrenorwich.org.uk/threeseasonsinchinareflectionsbeforetheyearofthefiremonkey.aspx>