Smashing the tiger: Wildlife in Hong Kong.

Tiffany L. Trent

The University of Montana

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SMASHING THE TIGER: WILDLIFE IN HONG KONG

by

Tiffany L. Trent

B.A., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1995
M.A., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1997
M.F.A., University of Montana, 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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The University of Montana

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Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

5-28-02

Date
China harbors some of the richest and most biodiverse ecosystems in the world. Fascinating and increasingly scarce creatures, including the giant panda, golden monkey, and tiger all inhabit or once inhabited its borders. However, with such a large human population and a strengthening economy, wildlife conservationists are faced with the immense challenge of protecting what little habitat remains and preventing extinction. The Chinese destructive bent towards wildlife in the form of traditional Chinese medicine and habitat alteration has long been publicized in the West, but there are indicators in traditional Chinese culture that suggest a more harmonious relationship with the natural world is possible.

This thesis is a personal inquiry into often over-looked issues regarding conservation practices in Hong Kong and China. Set in the New Territories and Guangdong, the quartet of essays explores the human connection with nature and animals and how Chinese people and Westerners interpret these connections. The essays also pinpoint essential differences between American conservation values and European/British values that challenge the success of wildlife conservation in China. For example, the final essay scrutinizes the British-led attempt to shut down all bear farms in China, especially in light of the possible effect on China’s wild Asiatic black bear population. In the final analysis, perhaps the best thing for Chinese wildlife and wild places is to leave them alone.
What should we say is the truth of the world? The miles alone in the pinched dark? Or the push of the promise? Or the wound of delight?

--American Primitive, Mary Oliver

This work would not have been possible without many people too numerous to mention, including the generosity of Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden. I also would like to thank my committee—Don Snow, Steven Levine, and Len Broberg—for their continued support through this endeavor. Special thanks also to my husband Jewel Andrew Trent, who began the journey with me long ago, and has been my dearest traveling companion ever since.

A little humor: “In a survey involving 961 personal interviews, more than 70% of respondents admitted eating exotic animals, the majority of those being men.”

--from Attitudes of Hong Kong Chinese Towards Wildlife Conservation and the Use of Wildlife as Medicine and Food
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INTRODUCTION

My husband and I lived in Hong Kong from November 2000-August 2001. There, I worked as Chief Editor/Senior Publications Officer for Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden (KFBG). It had long been our dream to live and work in China, and though we were more familiar with the northern culture of Beijing, we accepted the chance to relocate when it came. We share a deep interest in Chinese culture and Asian wildlife conservation, and are particularly disturbed at how rapidly Southeast Asian wildlife seems to be vanishing with little interest or study from North American wildlife conservationists. Though my husband’s concerns were largely from a conservation biology perspective, mine were with perceptions of Nature and wildlife in traditional Chinese culture, and how these perceptions might be used to benefit local wildlife. The Chinese destructive bent towards wildlife in the form of traditional Chinese medicine and habitat alteration has long been publicized, but is there a different story to tell? This is what I hoped to discover.

There were many things for which I was not prepared. Perhaps one of them was the extremely negative reaction of Chinese scientists to their own cultural traditions, which was most likely attributable to the Cultural Revolution. Another was the sharp contrast between my conservation ethics and those of my European (mostly British) counterparts. Perhaps this was the most surprising thing to me of anything I encountered. I had somehow expected the British, with their fame for the Durrell Trust and Fauna and Flora International (FFI), as well as their heavy involvement in World Conservation Union (IUCN), to have remarkably high conservation standards, perhaps even more so
than those we champion here in the States. I was often wrong in that thinking, and the last two essays show how quickly and sometimes painfully I lost my illusions.

This thesis is meant to raise questions about conservation practices in Hong Kong and China, especially in the New Territories and Guangdong. This is important from a regional perspective because these questions must be asked before any long-term plans for wildlife and resource management in Hong Kong and China are made. Current practices and motives must be examined. In particular, the shortsighted aims of animal welfare activists must be measured against those of wildlife conservation, and a choice must be made, lest the animals in these organizations' charge be doomed to extinction in the wild.

There are also global implications in the sense that we must carefully examine how we export our Western conservation values to other countries. Asia is rich in ancient, diverse species as many recent discoveries, particularly in the Vietnamese Annamites and northern Myanmar, suggest. It is clear that a huge wildlife sink is being created in these areas, with China as its major repository. Perhaps in light of that information, it goes almost without saying that Chinese wildlife and habitats are suffering. Based on past experiences in China, if we are to properly conserve and manage these ecosystems, we must find a means of integrating conservation ethics with cultural mores. Only when conservation comes from within can we surmount the challenges that currently overwhelm us in Asian and Chinese environmental conservation.
SMASHING THE TIGER

Regina says that when she and her husband worked in Korea, a ghost cursed them one night while they were staying with friends in a resort house. She felt cold and dark, and she huddled against her husband, praying for the ghost not to harm him or her son. But after that night, everything fell apart for them. She received a call from Hong Kong. Her maid had almost killed her son, who had been left behind because he had been constantly ill in Korea. For reasons the maid never quite explained, she had beaten the boy’s skull in, fracturing the cranium and causing brain damage. I have seen the scar hiding under the boy’s tuft of hair. It is wide and brown, a sourceless river.

Not long after that, the company at which both Regina and her husband worked abruptly closed its doors. Penniless, they returned to their ailing son in Hong Kong. Regina, like many Chinese Gen Xers, does not believe in many of the superstitions and folkways of her elders. But, at a loss to combat her bad luck, the long-reaching curse of that ghost, she consulted a Taoist priest. He told her that for every month of the year, she must smash a clay ox or tiger, beginning with a tiger and ending with a tiger.

She did it reluctantly, sometimes missing the date and having to start over. It was hard for her to do what was prescribed, for, as she says, she wasn’t sure it would really work. She felt ridiculous. Before the last tiger was to be smashed, she and her husband lost the last $4000 they’d managed to scrape together. She felt cheated, and for a long time abandoned the ritual. But, finally she worked up the courage, and went to the temple to smash her last tiger. She told the priest about the lost money, but he said nothing. After the tiger shattered, and the dust was lifting from the pieces, he said, “Your bad luck is gone. The money you lost is the final payment of your debt. You will
be troubled no more.”

It’s a rainy Saturday, and we are telling ghost stories in the Public Education Department office. I have already told mine. I try not to let my mouth drop open when Regina tells this story. She has always seemed sad and quiet to me; a grayness radiates through her tired eyes and black clothes. I have wondered why, but have never known how to comfortably ask such an intimate question. What is this sadness that you carry like an empty nest against your heart? She had hinted at it during our lunchtime walks when she told me of her son’s dreadful anger. The way he would terrify her by just falling down in the middle of the street, screaming, in the throes of a rage his small body could not contain. Now I can better understand why.

As I walk home in the afterclouds of rain and the buzzsaw symphony of cicadas, I think of the stories we shared. The banana trees remind me again of Regina, and something else she has said—that banana trees are a yum place (yin in Mandarin Chinese), a dark, damp, female place where spirits like to hide. Such an innocuous-looking plant, with its wide, green fronds hardly seems threatening to my untrained eyes. How little I know, how much I must miss. For to the Chinese, I too am a ghost, a gweilo—another foreign devil moving among deities, demons, and humans in this place between the heavens and hells.

Coucals, elusive, nondescript birds, yell at me from the bamboo thicket by the road. (The Chinese call them the seven-sisters bird because they always stay together in a loud group). I first thought they were monkeys, and peered breathlessly into the foliage trying to find the source of the loud, mocking whoops as I passed. I stop, as always, and
try to see them, but the sword-leaved foliage guards against my inquisitive stare. I have
sometimes contemplated what it might be like if these patches of bamboo were thicker,
deeper. Something growls within them. Something striped with shadow, with eyes green
as banana leaves in sunlight. I hear the huff of breath between wiry whiskers, and the
whispering of bamboo as he passes. His name is the sound of that breath. *Hu.*

But my dream tiger does not emerge, much to my disappointment and relief. The
last reliable sighting here was by an old woman in the winter of 1934. Returning home
from a hard day of cutting grass for weaving and thatching, the old woman felt something
creeping up behind her. She turned to find a tiger stalking her, moving through the
thickets by the village path. Prosaic as any country farmwife, when the attack finally
came, she beat the tiger soundly about the muzzle and head with her grass rake until it
fled.

Strange that she could be so bold in a country where the tiger was (and still is, to
some extent) revered as one of the primal forces of nature. The tiger is *yang*, male,
symbol of the wild element in nature, the vitality of the universe that stalks through life
on silent paws. So great is his power that his fearsome eyes were painted on shields to
frighten China's enemies, and embroidered on babies' hoods, shoes, and bibs to ward off
disease. The very bones of the tiger are believed to be imbued with power, and are still
used to cure most any illness. Seeking the tiger's speed, dexterity, vigor, or sexual
prowess, people consume its heart, eyes, and penis; grind its bones and whiskers into
poultices; or make jewelry of its claws to wear over their hearts for protection.

Such power has been the tiger's undoing. The animal most revered and feared
has been hunted to extinction in most of its former range. Its ghost is memorialized in

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1 *Hu* means tiger in Mandarin Chinese.
thousands of pleas for conservation. It has become a symbol of that which is rare and precious, of that which is weak and in need of human protection. It has become the ambassador for countless species, the yardstick by which policies are measured. Along with the giant panda, the tiger has come to represent the very heart of conservation efforts in Asia, most of which are promulgated by organizations in the West. Once, people throughout Asia had to protect themselves from the tiger. Now, it would seem, we must protect the tiger from ourselves.

But is the raising of such a standard simply the propagation of another myth, potentially as dangerous as that which promotes the use of the tiger as medicine? The dominant model of Western conservation has often favored focusing on a single species, usually when that species has already reached the brink of extinction.\(^2\) Data are collected, analyzed, and rigorously tested; elegant management plans are generated, refined, and finally (maybe) put into action. For some species, particularly game species, these plans may work well. After all, it was originally game that Western managers wanted to increase. (Such game management has gone on for thousands of years. The Chinese, in fact, practiced it in their imperial parks). However, we are less adept at increasing populations of species with little overt value, despite our attempts to claim their intrinsic worth. We have even tried farming species like the tiger to take pressure off their counterparts in the wild. But domesticated tiger lacks the natural vitality of wild

\(^2\) Certainly what is mentioned here is not the only form of Western conservation; there are many types, methodologies, and practices. It is interesting to note that at its inception, conservation, as defined by Gifford Pinchot, meant the greatest use of natural resources for the largest number of people. This was an idea directly in opposition to preservationist values like those of John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club. Eugene Odum, one of America's pioneering ecologists, defined conservation in 1971 as having two aims—"to insure the preservation of a quality environment that considers esthetic and recreational as well as product needs; and, to insure a continuous yield of useful plants, animals, and materials by establishing a balanced cycle of harvest and renewal" (qtd. in Harsay 158). In modern times, it would seem, conservation and preservation have been amalgamated, most likely to the detriment of both philosophies.
tiger, and this, coupled with the tiger’s carnivorous nature, tends to set people against conservation just for conservation’s sake.

Are we doing something wrong? Such a question is difficult to answer, particularly when people’s efforts and good intentions are at stake. But perhaps it is time for us to ask such a question, and to reconsider whether or not the conservation methods that have been exported to Asia are actually working as conservationists intended. Perhaps nowhere in Asia is such reconsideration more necessary than in China. While ostensibly the Chinese government and its people have paid remarkable attention to conservation in the last decade, it has often not transpired as many Western conservationists might wish. About his experiences with panda research, George Schaller muses in his 1984 book, The Last Panda, “I had fumed impotently, caught in the intrigues of a society shaped by the Cultural Revolution which although it was officially dead was not yet buried. It was a shadow world of manipulated facts and evasions...I felt myself disoriented and lacking, inadequate to handle this project. In my previous research I knew where I was going and why; I had control. Not here.”

Just as in Schaller’s time in China, the wildlife trade is still a brisk business, perhaps even more so since the opening of markets and the upswing in the Asian economy. These events have provided people with more money and the leisure to enjoy it. Deforestation still occurs at an alarming rate, with habitats shrinking and becoming more and more isolated. Habitat alteration also progresses on a vast scale—the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the largest dam in the world, under construction on the Yangtze River, is a case in point. These changes, worrisome as they are, have a historical context. China has practiced massive land alterations throughout her long
history. (It should also be pointed out that the West has done its fair share of habitat
destruction and alteration in the past, if Europe and the U.S. are any indication). But
unlike us, moving ever forward with the great Western Expansion, the Chinese have
stayed put. For five thousand years, they have lived in Zhongguo, the country at the
center of the world. They shaped and molded their land, believing in the inexhaustible
nature of the universe and the power of the vital force known as qi to nourish all things.
Though their empire expanded and contracted over the millennia, they maintained their
center, even to the point of building walls around it to keep other people out.

It is also worth noting that alterations like the Three Gorges dam and other such
modifications have increased during the last century. As China and so many other
“developing” nations like it have encountered the science and logic of the West, they
have been confounded by the tide of cultural and economic woes that follow in
colonialism’s wake. Stephen Kellert argues that, “...[E]nvironmental destruction
in...Eastern nations largely reflects the Westernization of these countries...[B]ecause of
the ‘intellectual colonization of the East by the West...all Asian environmental ills...are
either directly caused by Western technology...or aggravated by it’”.

The price, as has been seen in China, has been enormous, not only economically and culturally, but also
psychologically, spiritually, and environmentally. They have cut themselves off at the root, drifting like ghosts on the breast of their land.

But just as Westerners will never be able to escape their colonialist and
imperialist roots, the Chinese cannot escape their philosophical or metaphysical roots,
either. And this terrifies them. Their shame at the destruction of their nation by civil

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3 Kellert, Stephen R. 1996. The Value of Life: Biological Diversity and Human Society. Washington,
strife has engendered a fierce need for China to succeed, to become a world power, perhaps even to dominate her erstwhile oppressors. To do this, the Chinese have taken the West's most powerful strategies for success—commerce, industry, and technological innovation—into service. They do not want to be shamed again by what they have come to perceive as the Four Olds—old ideas, old customs, old culture, and old habits. Anything that smacks of the spirit is suppressed; anything that might be perceived as less than scientific or economically motivated is shelved, tabled, buried. Thus, they have embraced a science without ethics and an economy without foresight, a mirror of what many in the West are beginning to realize is the painful price of our ignorance—that is, the destruction of ecosystems upon which our very lives depend.

In the realm of conservation, this engenders such disasters as the project to save the South China tiger or the giant panda. With the panda in particular, removal from the wild for artificial insemination breeding programs and other "scientific" studies (including now the cloning of the panda) has led to continued decline in wild populations and loss of habitat. Though Chinese officials have been advised that protection of the bamboo cloud forest was the most important aspect of panda conservation, they still choose to capture and place pandas in intensive programs, either out of rebellion against what they deem as the overbearing demands of a post-colonial West, or in hopes of proving their ability to achieve scientific feats that the West has not tried.

Yet, despite such attempts to throw off the trammels of culture, it is still there, lurking in the sociopolitical thicket. A traditional Chinese view of time is without beginning or end; all things are constantly in the process of being or becoming. This great transformation, or ta-hua as the ancients called it, was the vehicle of qi, the timeless
void through which qi blossomed ever outward, changing all things. In such a view, time is transformational, forever unfolding, a lotus opening petal by petal through the wheel of the seasons and the cycles of mortal life.

Thus, in a sense, nothing in nature is ever finite. Extinction becomes impossible, for all forms are impermanent and merge into one another, with endless qi constantly renewing and nourishing all things. For a culture that lived virtually isolated from the rest of the world for five thousand years, this makes perfect sense. Perhaps it also explains a deep subconscious reason why Chinese land managers and other officials seem unwilling to participate in strategies that address the finiteness of species and protect them for the future. Of course, economic incentives are most likely at the forefront of any and all such official policies. When you have over a quarter of the world’s population to feed, clothe, employ, and care for on very little arable land with few resources, is it justified in the eyes of the government and the people to set aside land which might provide these things? Even in the resource-rich West, we are still arguing these questions without resolution.

Such questions, however, are well worth considering in China’s present environmental plight. Although in the last decade or two we have attempted to promote our conservation objectives in China with the best of intentions, it may be the case that mistranslation of those objectives will ultimately spell the doom of many species and habitats we might have saved if we had only learned to work with the Chinese people rather than (as has often been the case) against them. For, just as there is precedent for massive environmental alteration in China’s history, there is also precedent for
connection with the totality of landscape in a way that the West is only beginning to apprehend. As Chang Tsai noted:

The fact that the things of the world, whether rivers or mountains, plants or animals, those with or without intelligence, and those yielding blossoms or bearing fruits, provide beneficial support for all things is the result of the natural influence of the moving power of qi. It fills the universe...It completely provides for the flourish and transformation of all things...From morning to evening, from spring to summer, and from the present tracing back to the past, there is no time at which it does not operate, and there is no time at which it does not produce. Consequently, as one sprout bursts forth it becomes a tree with a thousand big branches, and as an egg evolves, it progressively becomes a fish capable of swallowing a ship...4

Such belief in the modern era has been twisted to serve the transformation of the living earth into monetary wealth for the privileged few. Have conservationists in the West furthered this unwittingly by failing to see the consequences of our former imperialism and the possible mistranslation of conservation precepts? It is difficult to say for certain. But my own experiences in Hong Kong suggest that the answer may be "yes". However, if this is so, I do not feel that solutions will be found through the methodical or traditional approaches advocated by Western science or policy. By highlighting the tiger as something to be protected, we make him more vulnerable. By forcing our brand of science and logic on a culture, we annihilate that culture’s inherent power within its people.

We must seek for the answers in China's own traditions, blending these harmoniously with those of the West. We must smash the tiger, and release it back into its own context—into the jungles, rivers, and bamboo forests that he once called home. We must help the people to see that the healing they seek is collective, rather than individual. It will come, not from the scant power of powdered bone, but from the raw, unrefined power of ever-changing nature, stalking again through the world on silent paws.

Another bird, a nearby koel, begins the mournful ko-el, ko-el for which it is named, causing me to jump and almost lose my balance on the side of the road. The little old couple who always smile and nod at me pass, smiling and nodding, but staring at my strangeness. I look down where I stumbled and notice something clinging to the side of the concrete culvert that runs along the road. Golden-brown claws clutch the edge of the cliff. Something pushes out and through them, heaving itself out of the amber shell onto the road, its wings like wet and rumpled panes of glass, its eyes coral-red. A large brown cicada emerges from its nymph stage to join the symphony in the bamboo above. To the Chinese it is the symbol of new life, so revered that a cicada was placed in the mouths of the ancient dead to aid them in their transformation from flesh into spirit. I smile. May the great transformation continue.
Looking at the map of Hong Kong is definitely a lesson in geography. The city straddles Victoria Harbor. One foot rests on Hong Kong Island, and is called Central by locals; the other, Kowloon, rests on peninsula that juts from the mainland. Shaped like a rooster’s foot, the New Territories spreads two toes to the east and one to the west. Tsing Ma Bridge, the largest bridge in Asia, joins the spur of Lantau Island to the rest of the Territories. Over 250 islands scatter the sea around the peninsula like dropped feathers. Beyond the crescent of Central, former agricultural lands still preserve natural riches. Forty percent of Hong Kong’s land, in fact, has been placed in the country park system, and these parks transverse the rooster’s foot like links of a green chain. A traveler can hike the New Territories from end to end, crawling across the spine of the mountains, and never leave the park system if he or she desires.

When the first Europeans saw what would become Hong Kong, they were clearly unimpressed. “Early descriptions of Hong Kong all use words such as ‘barren,’ ‘bleak,’ and ‘bare rock’ to describe the landscape. All flat land was cultivated, and the hills were covered in grass, with a few scattered shrubs and stunted pine trees”. The only promising feature of the place was its deep natural harbor, which to this day has retained its status as one of the great shipping ports of the world. To the British and others who came, prospecting after the riches such a port brought, it must have seemed like an exile into hell. As John Thompson complained during the summer of 1873: “Books and paper

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become limp and mouldy, and the residents feel as in a vapour bath, reclining in their chairs and languidly watching the flying ants".  

But if the residents of Thompson's time experienced only sweat and a few termites, they could count themselves lucky. Hong Kong's position on the South China coast was perfect for the typhoons that came raging up from the South Pacific. In 1874, for instance, two thousand people were killed in a storm in which 35 ships were driven ashore and thousands of junks and sampans (boats of the native fisher folk) were sunk. In 1906, another typhoon killed 11,000 people, exterminating whole families, and sank 2,400 junks. In addition to typhoons, landslides, fires, outbreaks of diseases like malaria and cholera made Hong Kong nearly intolerable for its imperialist owners.

It must have been with a certain ironic glee that the Chinese witnessed such destruction time and again. From as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), the northern Chinese had shunned this place, believing it to be "riddled with malign spirits and bad feng shui". One Han official, banished to the region, wrote "of dark and interminable forests, the habitation of apes and monkeys", with "mountains wet with rain mist, so high that the sun was hidden". The Chinese emperor gave such forbidding and terrible areas to his enemies without compunction.

Hong Kong "...was ceded to the British much in the way the Greeks bestowed their horse on Troy—and with hopes of a similar outcome...Hong Kong was deemed

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7 Rossbach, Sarah and Master Lin Yun. 1998. *Feng Shui Design: From History and Landscape to Modern Gardens and Interiors*. New York: Viking, 100. Feng shui has been variously defined as the "Chinese art of placement", "the traditional Chinese system for determining favorable locations for settlements", and geomancy. It has been used for thousands of years by practitioners to align homes, temples, and other buildings in harmony with the flow of qi through the land. Literally, translated as "wind-water", feng shui is still practiced throughout China, perhaps nowhere so religiously as in Hong Kong.
devoid of beneficial qi and, indeed, the epithet was initially portentous. The Chinese must have smirked to themselves as the British made a bad landscape worse.⁹ The first settlement at Happy Valley on Hong Kong Island failed. But when the settlement was relocated so propitiously (and unwittingly) facing Victoria Harbor with Victoria Peak guarding the city from behind, Hong Kong blossomed into the financial empire of today.

Yet the landscape of Hong Kong was not always thus. What the ancient Chinese feared as dark and wild, modern scientists have come to praise as biodiverse and unique. The foothills of its mountains are under water because of the rise in sea level around 5000 BCE and, "...almost everywhere, distinctly different topography exist[s] side by side".¹⁰ Located just under the line of the Tropic of Cancer, Hong Kong exhibits features of more northern Palearctic zones, as well as tropical forests further south. Prior to the first major deforestation in the 1300s (under imperial edict), it was covered in lush jungles, comprised mostly of deciduous evergreens, like laurels, magnolias, and relatives of what North Americans would call a chinquapin. Mammals like the tiger, leopard cat, wild boar, barking deer, pangolin, rhesus macaque, and possibly even elephants and rhinoceroses thrived within these jungles. Its twenty species of amphibians still include such fascinating endemics as the Hong Kong newt and Romer's tree frog, and around 450 bird species can be seen throughout its dwindling habitats. Over 200 butterfly species, including the huge golden birdwing and the world's smallest swallowtail, the dragonfly swallowtail, make their home here.

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It is difficult to remember this whenever I am overcome by the fetor of Victoria Harbor as I survey it from the concrete and steel pier in Tsim Tsa Tsoi. Or when I pass the great shipyards, their cranes like steel-necked dinosaurs hovering over their prey. At night, Hong Kong’s financial empire, crowned by Sony, Toshiba, United, Canon, and Citibank makes an infinite day, an aurora australis of neon afterglow. The towers lean in, lean closer. I am pinned, trapped like some kind of wingless butterfly or beetle beneath their many eyes. I feel paralyzed by the fear they will fall down on me, that their solid heights are illusion, that they will shiver and obliterate the city in a majestic concrete and glass avalanche.

It is in the New Territories, in Pak Ngau Shek where I live and work at Kadoorie Farm that I feel safest. The Farm is located just in the center of the New Territories, hidden at the western end of Lam Tsuen Valley. Lam Tsuen basically means, “home of the Lams,” and has been inhabited by Lams and their relatives, many of whom work at the Farm, for at least 100 generations. Most are descended from indigenous groups (or groups basically considered indigenous depending on which authority one consults), especially from the group known as the Hakka or “guest people.” As part of their treaty with the Hong Kong government, each man is allotted a plot of land in his village. Most of them build houses upon that allotment, renting them out for extra cash. The houses are stacked pell-mell on hills and in valleys jumbled between concrete paths that often lead one. It seems such a disorganized mess sometimes that I am amazed whenever anyone actually manages to find my house, and I feel triumph when, tromping through hill alleys, I find someone else’s.
I remember how I’d been gently laughed at during a phone interview in March when I’d proposed educational games wherein children would need a flat area to run and move about at the Farm. “We’re on a mountain”, my interviewer had said. “But surely there are flat spaces?” I’d replied. But there are virtually none. The Kadoorie family, one of the wealthiest in Hong Kong, carved the Farm out of the conical slope of Kwun Yum Shan with the determination and help of hundreds of needy farmers and refugees. The entrance road to the Farm is so steep that I am out of breath in about five steps. The buildings perch on the hillside like birds that might be frightened away at any moment. Terraces step up the mountain for several hundred feet, but come nowhere close to clearing the summit 1,800 feet above.

It was the heat I noticed first, though. I come from a valley where the Blue Ridge Mountains hold the heat and humidity in an impregnable bowl. Summers are often miserable. But they are nothing compared to Hong Kong. Immediately, when I step out of my air-conditioned flat, I am drenched in sweat, and I suddenly find sympathy for my European forebears in their hoop skirts and tweed jackets. Such heat engenders storms that tear the moisture from the air in torrents. My first Hong Kong rain sounded like grease sizzling in a pan. I went out into it, onto the wide roof above my flat. The rain was hot. It was astonishing, so strange that I walked around in it barefoot until I was soaked, assimilating the lack of coolness, the drenching of my shoulders in the heat of the living, exhaling mountains.

Everywhere I look is botanical luxury, some of it native, most not. I am still startled by the recognition that many of the giant ferns sprouting from the ground, trees and rocks even, are sold as anemic houseplants back in the States. Bird’s-nest ferns,
staghorn ferns, sword and maidenhair ferns—all a dizzying variety of verdant shapes. Orchids grow like vines on palms, blooming common as daisies in shaded potting sheds. Taro, often sold in the States as “elephant ears,” grows wild, its huge leaves soaking up the sun like green umbrellas. People eat the sweet tubers of taro rather like Americans eat sweet potatoes, and at Christmas, the local McDonald’s sells fried taro pies.

Pineapple plants, mandarin orange, banana, and papaya trees cling to the terraces on the heights; vegetables like lettuce, leeks, tomatoes, and cucumbers grow on the garden terraces below. In the 50s, much more grew here, including chickens and pigs. These, along with crops and the skills to husband them, were bestowed by the Kadoorie brothers upon the refugee and local farmers who were without means to sustain themselves. Special breeds of chickens and pigs, the Waichow and the Fa Yuen, were developed here specifically to withstand the climatic conditions of the region. Their descendants and close relatives live on the Farm as remnants and reminders of its roots. Recently, however, the Farm has adopted the new mission of conservation. How ironic when I visit the raptor rehabilitation center, and hear the chickens cackling just across the curve of the road.

My first tour was a breathless climb in a dented car to the top of the mountain. The road twisted impossibly up, and I watched as the valley receded into a waiting green net. My guide, Judy, took me past Orchid Haven, where orchids were propagated in the sun-dappled damp, and the Butterfly Garden, a spot on the hillside that had been cleared and re-planted with nectaring plants to attract Hong Kong’s butterflies. We ascended to the Twin Pavilion, which lifted from a jutting ridge just opposite the peak of Kwun Yum
Shan. The pavilion had been built to memorialize the Kadoorie brothers in traditional Chinese style with steep, peaked roofs and hewn timbers, already giving way to moss.

Another ridge loomed behind us, that of Tai Mo Shan, the tallest and largest mountain in the New Territories at 3,141 feet, and the originator of many of the Territories’ streams and rivers. Terraces ripple across its heights like old scars, remnants of a tea plantation that had once flourished there. Incense milling was also once big business. As late as the 1950s, Tai Mo Shan’s summer flood drove eight mills in grinding incense trees into powder for joss. G.S.P. Heywood wrote: “A dozen little houses perched on the sides of the valley, each with its water wheel busily turning...The atmosphere is thick with fragrant dust, and through it you can dimly see great stone-headed hammers pounding away at the aromatic wood.” Folk wisdom has it that the ancient boulders of Tai Mo Shan “...have locomotive powers and...pursue any adventurous traveler who attempts to mount their sides.” The tea plantations and mills are gone now, perhaps chased off the ridges, I like to think, by vengeful boulder spirits.

The ridges of Tai Mo Shan unfolded to the southeast as we went on to Kwun Yum Shan. Kwum Yum, the bodhisattva of mercy and compassion (known as Kuan Yin to the north) captivated me with her quiet statue in a little grove. Nearby were ancient altars where people had climbed the summit to worship her for hundreds of years. The lush vegetation results from air forced through “the intricate joint system” of base rock up to

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12 Ibid.

13 A bodhisattva can perhaps best be likened to a saint. In the Buddhist faith, they are people who have reached enlightenment, but have denied it, in order to aid other beings. Kwun Yum will not enter nirvana until all beings have achieved the same bliss.
the summit at higher temperatures than the surrounding air. Judy urged me to put my hand in one of the openings to these vents called hotpots, which Sir Horace Kadoorie playfully referred to as “air coming from the dragon’s nostrils.” The air stirring against my fingers was warm. I imagined the mountain’s hollow insides, swirling with steam and dripping with water.

We walked on the path that crowned the brow of the summit. Judy pointed me to the north, to the Pearl River delta and China. I stared at the haze a long time, trying to make sense of the land I saw. Beyond the glimmering towers of Yuen Long, the ancient lookout of Castle Peak, past the curve of Mai Po Marshes and across Shenzhen Bay, the mainland hovered. The outer vision of the bright yang land, its steep mountains green at the knees and bald at their summits and the curve of the distant shore, compelled my gaze. Below my feet, the deep and inexhaustible yin of the mountain gave rise to the Lam Tsuen River, to the roots of trees, the insides of things. I stood silent, awed, balanced on the curve of that which the ancient Chinese called the Way.

In my first days at the Farm, everything fascinates me, but I am particularly intrigued by a news story about a village called Wu Kau Tang. Scientists from the Farm’s South China Biodiversity Team have recently surveyed the village in an attempt to keep it free of development. Hong Kong Baptist University, in association with other companies, had hoped to turn the village into a center for traditional Chinese herbalism. The plans, drawn out in the article, included a large, luxurious spa complete with suites of rooms for massage and treatment, classrooms, and conference areas. Chinese herbalist

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15 Ibid.
masters would live on site to pass on their knowledge. On the surface, it does not sound like such a bad idea. But Wu Kau Tang is also reputed to be one of the most biodiverse villages in Hong Kong. Rare birds, dragonflies, and butterflies abound there.

The village also has one of the oldest and largest feng shui woodlands in Hong Kong. Feng shui woods are a tradition dating back from before the Song dynasty. Usually situated at the back of a village, a feng shui wood should optimally be shaped like a horseshoe, protecting the settlement with its green embrace. In ancient times, these groves were worshipped and propitiated as minor deities; no one would dare to harm them, for who would want to destroy the health and fortune of their entire village by doing so? However, there is evidence that cultivation on a small scale did take place inside some feng shui woods. Useful plants like traditional medicines; fruits such as longan, carambola, and wampi; and bamboo and incense trees were all deliberately planted and tended by villagers.

Feng shui woods often exhibit the highest variety of species per unit area of land of any Hong Kong habitat, suggesting to some botanists that “the present day feng shui woods are relics of an earlier continuously forested area which has been fragmented by the impact of human settlement.”

All the feng shui woods that survive today appear to be secondary, having probably originated from a combination of planting and secondary succession, but descriptions by nineteenth-century botanists suggest that some of the larger woods present then may have included remnants of the primeval forest...There are now no forest patches that are entirely primary, but many include a topographically protected core area containing poorly dispersed species not found in secondary forest and some individual trees that

16Barretto, G. Personal notes written in 1978.
appear to be very old, suggesting that such areas were probably never entirely cleared...\textsuperscript{17}

Sadly, many people of the younger generations no longer believe in the benefits of \textit{feng shui} woods and raze them without a second thought. Notes from Mrs. Gloria Barretto, one of the founding mothers of Kadoorie Farm, suggest that even as early as 1978, she and others were attempting to organize a Feng Shui Woodland Action Group to try to mediate the rapid loss of these precious forest remnants. When I asked her if that group was still extant or if it had accomplished anything, she replied that nothing had come of it. If Wu Kau Tang has one of the oldest \textit{feng shui} woods, then I definitely must see it, for it will probably not last much longer. Despite the quashed plans for the herbal school, the \textit{feng shui} wood might actually be in gravest danger from its own villagers.

It surprises me when my husband Andrew and I are invited to hike with some of my Chinese co-workers on an early summer day. Generally, the Chinese do their own thing and the \textit{gweilos} do theirs. I have heard them talking for some time excitedly about TrailWalker, the 48-hour charity hike held every year that crosses the New Territories from east to west on the backs of its mountains. Several hikes had been planned to help the Kadoorie Team get in shape for the event, including a hike around Plover Cove Reservoir. Would I like to join? So, the Chinese characters that had been written on the calendar are changed to English so I can read them, and we agree to meet Regina at Fanling at 7 a.m. on Sunday.

By the time we get on the bus to Luk Keng, we are swamped and dizzy with diesel fumes. Regina says that Luk Keng means “Neck of the Deer,” and I imagine such a place, a fertile hill country of ferns and moss. On the way, Porsches pass us, nine in a row. All of us swivel and squirm to get a look at these men, these disgustingly wealthy men out for a Sunday race, swerving in front of oncoming traffic and cutting in front of our bus because they can. But a woman in a red Lamborghini outdistances them all.

We catch up with them when we arrive at Luk Keng. All the cars are parked in a shiny, curving line, and their drivers shout loudly at the tables of the Happy Restaurant. Our hostess greets us with broken teeth and Princess Leia buns. We eat French toast, Hong Kong-style with peanut butter smeared between two pieces of bread. Luckily, the waitress gives us maple syrup rather than the standard condensed milk most use as a topping.

When we start off, the day is already stagnant with humidity, the edges of everything white and dull in the heat. It begins as a flat walk around the coast, always on paved paths. On an island called A Chau just near the Happy Restaurant, we have our first bird siting. Great egrets wade the shallows, poised to snatch anything that catches their eye. My fellow hikers, all Cantonese except Andrew, watch these birds with great interest and reverence. A Chau is the last great egretry in Hong Kong, a place where hundreds of birds come to nest every year.

Recently, many green groups have been concerned because an invasive South American vine, *Mikania micrantha*, is taking over the island, choking the trees and covering precious nesting habitat. Kadoorie Farm, along with Worldwide Fund for Nature, deals aggressively with the problem by doing several weed pulls per year. Much
media attention has been paid to this dilemma, as mikania threatens to obliterate all of Hong Kong’s remaining forests with its green net. I think of the irony of this, remembering the kudzu that has become part and parcel of the symbolism of the southern U.S., and the many other Asian weeds that have plagued the Americas. How much more destructive, though, in a subtropical climate is an American vine with such great reproductive potential?

As we move along the coast, a city stares at us across Starling Inlet; its immense skyscrapers look as though they’ve been painted between bay and mountains. There is nothing remarkable about it, except that somewhere in that water lies the border between Hong Kong and the mainland. Andrew and I lag behind, trying to look at each little thing—the sea roaches that skitter away across the pebbly beach at our approach, the metallic emerald carapace of some long-eaten beetle, a pale, bloated eel we fish out of the shallows, dead of things we cannot guess. We work hard to identify the butterflies—the glassy and chestnut tigers (which despite their names, are nearly identical in appearance, and look like blue-dyed monarchs), the dark crows, and opal-spotted punchinellos.

We hike up over a hump of land that hugs the coast and find ourselves walking beside shrines to the dead. They look out from the hillside, perched there like outposts of another world. Tall grass obscures most of them, but some extend their arms into low walls around large concrete circles. From my rooftop, I have seen such tombs extending the length of the Lam Tsuen valley, stretched like the posts of some spiritual fence across the knees of the mountains. Twice a year, families come to honor their dead by sweeping the stones and burning incense. I had likened this tradition in my mind to laying wreaths on graves at Christmas or Easter. But my friends Idy and Louis explain that it is much
more than that. I ask why the tombs are like that, what the huge circles are for. Louis answers softly, “The circles draw the feng shui out of the air and land. They give it back to the people.”

“So, they act kind of like funnels, channeling the energy back to their villages?”

“Yes,” Idy replies. “And the more important a person was, the bigger his circle, the greater feng shui he returns to the people.” She pauses to look at the graves. “That’s why they are placed on the hill, to send the energy down to the people.”

“And during the grave-sweeping, the people receive energy back from their ancestors when they bring them offerings?”

“Yes,” Idy says, smiling. Then she is off, ahead with her friends who are laughing and chattering in loud, fast Cantonese.

We pass the tombs, but I think about them a long time. This land is alive with spirits. Every hillside bears some monument to the dead. But death, so frequent and sudden, is clearly not something you talk about here. It hangs in the air, creeps along the ground. It is never a sinister presence. It is just constantly reminding you of itself. It is everywhere, the only fixed thing in this impermanent world. Yet the spirits of the ancestors transform death into life, protecting villages from harm and giving beneficial qi to their descendants. In some way, then, nothing and no one can ever truly be lost.

But ensuring this perfect harmony is a tricky business. For all graves, houses and other buildings, a feng shui master must select the sites before the ground is turned. W.J. Blackie remarks:

To do so, without making the necessary checks and precautions, would be to invite disaster for descendents and, in the case of houses, for their residents. Graves in particular are chosen with great care. Geomancers often
I recall my own little village, Pak Ngau Shek, with its houses stacked willy-nilly on hillsides and ravines, and realize there must be a logic operating there that I can barely see and comprehend even less. The houses are aligned, not necessarily to physical landforms as in the West, but to a spiritual geometry that takes long years of practice and study to understand. I think of my brush with comprehension on Kwun Yum Shan—\textit{yin} and \textit{yang} merging, and now \textit{feng shui} is the third dimension, connecting it all in a vast web of ever-transforming \textit{qi}.

I could only imagine the disastrous consequences of an ignorant Westerner entering into such a place with his notions of mechanistic linearity and strict duality. Apparently, the fundamental ideas underlying \textit{feng shui} and \textit{qi} were often "all too profound" for \textit{gweilos} to grasp. The missionary Arthur H. Smith in his 1899 \textit{Village Life in China} wrote:

\begin{quote}
It is customary in Western lands to speak of ‘laying out’ a city or a town. As applied to a Chinese village, such an expression would be most inappropriate, for it would imply that there have been some traces of design in the arrangement of the parts, whereas the reverse is the truth. A Chinese village, like Topsy, ‘just growed,’ how or why, no one knows or cares. At some remote and generally unascertainable time in the dim past some families arrived from somewhere else, camped down, made themselves a ‘local habitation’...and that was the village. It has a street, and perhaps a network of them, but no two are parallel,
\end{quote}

\footnote{Blackie, W.J. 1971. \textit{Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association Report 1951-1971}. Hong Kong: Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association.}
except by accident, and no one of them is straight…

Western cultural insensitivity survived into the last century. In 1961, a villager on Lantau Island had a feng shui site called the Dragon’s Vein in his backyard, a powerful source of qi for his entire village. A gweilo came along and decided to build his house over the Dragon’s Vein. As his workers dug the foundation, the great hole cut off the flow of energy to the rest of the village. Livestock sickened, and refusing to eat, died. The villager complained to his district official. Charms were said to the gods and the hole was filled in; according to all accounts, the village situation improved once these rituals were completed.

Ironically, these days, however, more and more Westerners are beginning to tap into feng shui. Every building in downtown Hong Kong is arranged according to feng shui principles, and woe unto the corporation that decides to flaunt tradition! Many feel that the bad fortunes of the owners of the Lippo Center, one of the tallest and most ostentatious buildings in Hong Kong’s Admiralty district, are directly attributable to ignoring the powers of feng shui and qi. A new school of feng shui has even arisen in the West, modified to better suit Western tastes and inclinations. It may be a start in acknowledging cultural traditions thousands of years older than our own, but to use feng shui simply as a form of trendy interior decorating misses the point. At its most elemental, feng shui is a way of being with the land, attuning and aligning oneself and one’s dwelling place to the natural energies of the elements. It is the recognition of

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subtle yet vital forces that Western culture has denied and subjugated for thousands of years. It might be in our best interests, rather than attempting to twist or purge such folk beliefs from Chinese culture in the name of science, to cultivate these cultural mores in conservation aims.

Yet, young Chinese scientists, trained in Western ways, loathe such “superstitions.” At my first staff meeting, I was interested to hear one of the Chinese scientists discussing the case of Long Valley, an ongoing environmental battle between the Mass Transit Railroad Authority and green groups throughout Hong Kong. MTR would like to place a spur line directly through Long Valley, which is home to many of the remaining freshwater wetland bird species in Hong Kong. “They want to bring in a feng shui master to testify to the validity of their spur line,” the scientist fumed. “Can you believe they use such superstitious nonsense?” But despite his protests, I could see how the MTR was wisely trying to appeal to its customer base by using folk traditions to assure its legitimacy. Might we get even farther with conservation if we appealed to the public in a similar way?

Such thoughts spiral in my head, backgrounded by the din of my companions’ conversation, until we turn inland at a small, mostly deserted village. There, alongside the trail, a young woman and her family sell drinks and hard, brown pudding to hikers. Our mates eat it with relish while we drink water and munch on out-of-date Powerbars. We peer in the windows of the village’s abandoned school. Clearly, someone has learned some English—the word ‘fuck’ is traced in the yellow dust. Next to the schoolroom, the

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22 This is not to say that alteration of land forms does not take place according to feng shui principles. If deemed necessary, a series of low hills blocking qi might be removed to strengthen a village. But generally if a location is perceived to have really bad feng shui, it will generally be left alone or abandoned, as the Han emperor was happy to do with Hong Kong during his reign.
village temple is still in service. New door gods and spring couplets have been posted this year and the altar bears fresh offerings. I take pictures, but feel somehow sacrilegious, as though I may have pointed my soul-stealer in the wrong place.

We pass through a bog of ferns, tangled with other unknown vegetation. All of these were once productive paddyfields. Since their inhabitants have left for better lives in the city, the fields grow only bracken. The old irrigation channels still exist, slimy with silt and offal, bringing water to and from nowhere. The decrepit heart of the village fronts these fields, shored up by mikania. Some of the houses proudly display years on their brows—1954, 1962. A thin, old Hakka woman disappears around a corner. In so little time, almost an entire village has expired. Yet its descendants still visit, year after year, bringing offerings to the ancestors who gave them life.

We hike up into the hills then, passing through denuded hillsides, through trees not more than thirty years old. When we stop, I notice Regina has no water and force her to take some of ours. But she would have said nothing if I had not. We rest for a while.

Signs point us either higher into the hills, or into a descent obscured by green. I have been listening for birds or other wildlife, hoping perhaps for sight of a boar or leopard cat, but with my friends' merrymaking and the heat, my hopes departed. The hills seem recently regenerated from fire or from clear-cutting, the trees even younger than those I know in Virginia. I try not to feel disappointed at this—the China I have always envisioned towers like the mountains and pines of an ancient landscape painting. I long

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23 Door gods and spring couplets are posted on doorways throughout China at the beginning of the New Year. The door gods are posters of protective gods, who usually bear weapons to chase off evil demons and bad fortune. Spring couplets are short poems written in beautiful Chinese calligraphy that celebrate the new year, and may be wishes for good fortune, prosperity, or many sons. Modern couplets often have wishes for good scholastic success and feature characters like Snoopy, Winnie-the-Pooh, or other such Western cultural icons.
to see the mist-wreathed heights of bamboo forest, or the twisted trunk and graceful
needles of native pines. But, apparently, such things disappeared into memory long ago.

Passing down from the hills, though, I glimpse the beauty I have been seeking. I
stop, awestruck, though our friends race merrily onwards. In the distance, green islands
rise like faces out of the gunmetal water. They look like the perfect habitation for pirates,
and I smile to remember the story I read yesterday, one of the myths of how Hong Kong
got its name. Supposedly, a female pirate named Heung Gong once haunted these shores,
claiming their incense, pearls, and salt for her own. In the haze, I can almost discern the
fluted sail of a junk hiding beyond that unexplored shore. We stay for a long time
looking over the barely-breathing trees until, afraid of losing our only guides, we move
on.

Something long and green darts across the pink stones under my feet. I jump
backward, my legs cramping painfully with the force of my fear. I’ve heard of how the
bamboo snake, unlike other snakes, does not flee from intruders. Instead, it will wait,
invisible in the underbrush, growing increasingly agitated. Often the last hiker in line is
the one who is struck. The venom is not fatal, but excruciatingly painful. The Farm’s
executive director had been bitten once and spent three days in the hospital, wishing he
had died instead. But fear, as it often does, drove out reason. My husband notes that the
snake we saw was long and thin and lacked the telltale orange or red tail tip of the
bamboo snake. A greater green snake--absolutely harmless. He rolls his eyes at me as he
continues down the trail while I, full of visions of pirates and deadly reptiles, try to
massage away my aching charleyhorse.
We enter Lai Chi Wo, the next village, from the back, coming down the hills into cool ferns and taller trees. Fallen roofs and freestanding doors intimated the village proper. I enter the rows of buildings on tiptoe, feeling as though I desecrate something holy again. Everything is as though the villagers had all just left, washtubs and rope, old water hoses, even an ancient grinding stone, all look as though their owners will return any moment. Idy, Louis, Amy and Regina all go to the water pump and dampen their handkerchiefs, patting their sweaty foreheads and necks. But I am afraid to do it, afraid I’ll disturb the peace.

We wander up and down the rows of houses, half-hoping to meet someone. But there is no one. Some of the houses have brand-new metal doors, and are locked and barred. Others caved in long ago, perhaps termite-eaten or looted. In one, we find a loft above the living area that reminds me of some frontier cabin. I half-smile to think of the little Hakka in pioneer bonnets, rather than the traditional black-fringed straw hats the matrons wear. But my smile fades when we enter the temple next door and find it as devotedly maintained as the first one. Someone in the New Year hiked out here to bring their ancestors food, wine, and incense. To someone, this place is their origin, the heart of their world, a spiritual and genetic root from which they draw life and energy. How sad these places must be, I think, when finally no one comes.

We make our way out through the village gate into a large, paved square. To one side, an ancient banyan tree gives shade from the pounding sun. Its aerial roots are thick as elephant trunks, tangled as tentacles. To our left is another, larger temple to the gods, and I go in eagerly, unsure whether pictures are appropriate, and whether I should bow
before approaching the altar. A red wall reflects bad feng shui (and curious eyes) from the holy place. We step around it into the atrium. On each roof ledge, crumbling ceramic figures depict scenes from famous tales. Regina says these are quite ancient and hard to find in most temples, and I feel lucky to have seen them.

The main chamber is flanked by two wings on either side. The largest altar is of course dedicated to General Kwan, God of Enterprise, War, and Literature. Any business or village with any sense takes Kwan-Ti as their patron, as he encourages increase, prosperity, and fair trade. Most often, he is depicted as seated in judgment or standing, holding his kwan-dao, a wickedly curved blade mounted on a long pole. He is usually shown with a reddish face and long black beard, with wide eyes under beetling brows. There are also statues of the Ghostcatcher God, Cheung Kwan O, who rounds up ghosts and sends them packing. His face is black, the color of loyalty, and his eyes are wide and wild.

Kwun Yum sits in repose on her lotus leaf in another alcove. This is one of her most familiar aspects, wherein she appears in a hooded white robe, the vase of the morning dew resting gently on her palm. Other depictions can also be found, of the protectress who bears a thousand arms, carrying the treasures and weapons of the gods in her opened palms. Or the woman who stands on the back of a dragon, with her attendants, a boy and a girl, perched on a unicorn and a fish, at her side. Aside from Tin Hau, the local sea-goddess of the fisher folk, there is no more worshipped deity in Hong Kong. And yet what strikes me most about her, what has always struck me most, is that she is not truly a goddess. Rather, she is a bodhisattva, a human being who has achieved enlightenment, but withholds herself from it in service to all other beings.
Kwun Yum can dispense mercy and compassion because she was able to overcome death and attachment. Her father was a king who, when he recognized the signs of her virtue, repudiated her. Eventually, she was forced to flee her home, and resided in a cave on Fragrant Mountain where she fasted and meditated unceasingly. When her father at last fell ill due to his own malice, a monk informed him that the limbs and legs of a person of virtue, ground into a fine powder, would cure him of his ailment. “You know such a person,” the monk prompted. “Such a one is your daughter who lives within the Fragrant Mountain.” The king sent the monk to her, and Miao Shan (her earthly name) gave her limbs willingly. They were taken back to the king who was miraculously restored. The king and his court rode to thank his daughter. But when they came to the cave, they found not Miao Shan, but Kwun Yum, She of the Thousand Arms and Eyes, who sees the suffering of the entire world. And though she was offered enlightenment, unlike the Buddha Kwun Yum chose to stay in the world, enduring until all beings achieve nirvana, and the suffering of this world is ended.

When we return to the courtyard, an old Hakka woman appears, offering us drinks and other refreshments. The rest of us wait while Idy and Louis retrieve the drinks from the woman’s house. When they return, they chatter excitedly, passing the ice-cold drinks around. As the Coke slides down my throat, it is as though I am drinking Kwun Yum’s nectar poured down from heaven. But apparently Cokes are about the only modern convenience to be found here. Idy is incredulous as she says, “You know, that woman, her clock stopped. And the last calendar page reads 1988! Time stop in 1988 and we didn’t know it!” She laughs, but there is a bit of fear mixed with the incredulity. To
most Hong Kong people, time down to the second matters. Everyone is constantly on the
move, on foot, by bus, by train, by car, by mini-bike. Even the smallest delay in time can
ruin an entire, usually jam-packed appointment schedule. And people usually have at
least three calendars on their desks. To lose track of time and date are totally
inconceivable to them.

But to the ancient Chinese, time was certainly neither linear nor as definitive and
mechanistic as it has become in the West. As Tu Wei-ming notes:

Many historians have remarked that the traditional Chinese
notion of cyclic change, like the recurrence of the seasonal
pattern, is incompatible with the modern Western idea of
progress. To be sure, the traditional Chinese conception of
history lacks the idea of unilinear development, such as
Marxian modes of production depicting a form of historical
inevitability. It is misleading, however, to describe
Chinese history as chronicling a number of related events
happening in a regularly repeated order. Chinese
historiography is not a reflection of a cyclic worldview.
The Chinese worldview is neither cyclic nor spiral. It is
transformational. The specific curve around which it
transforms at a given period of time is indeterminate,
however, for numerous human and nonhuman factors are
involved in shaping its form and direction.24

It pleases me to think of that old woman forgoing the Western dictum of the
Gregorian calendar to return to the truer and wiser time of her forebears. Time for her
must grow like a tree, unfolding its roots like the banyan into the courtyard, sinking into
the earth and reaching towards the sky. And in such a flowering of time, for one
moment, her time and my time crossed like questing limbs, seeking the life that moves all
things. If time were as predictable and linear as my ancestors would have me believe, my
meeting with this woman would not have been possible according to all my plans. But

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there it was, a moment when time mysteriously sent forth its shoots in search of something, and blossomed into another thing even more infinitely precious.

When we leave Lai Chi Wo, we enter a grove of twisted trees, which resemble live oaks of the southeastern coastal U.S. Somehow we are back at the edge of water. Huge dragonflies with orange-infused wings zip between sunlit shallows and shadowed land. To the right of the path an ancient altar nestles at the curving root of a tree, its stone characters engraved in moss and lichen. An offering bowl, hand-hewn from a single chunk of stone, stands close to the path.

"You'll like this," Idy says. "It's a shrine to the tree spirits here."

"And this grove is sacred to them?"

"Yes," she says.

With that, she is off again. The others begin fantastic feats of climbing, a bunch of kids on a giant jungle gym. Andrew and I walk carefully into what must be the village's feng shui wood. The leaves skitter out from under me, and I cannot figure out why or how, until I peer closer in the gloom and see they are crabs—thousands of tiny fiddler crabs. They scatter in every direction as we move closer to the bay. Through the dimness, we see thickets of mangroves.

While the others play, we leave the grove. It feels like we are leaving giant abstract sculptures, or the erupting fossils of prehistoric creatures. Not too far down the path, though, we come to a fork. Having no idea which way to go, we mill around, looking in the mangrove marsh for signs of life. Thousands of tiny purple and green
crabs creep away from us. A huge black crab, the size of a large Dungeness, lumbers out
from beneath a sunken cardboard box to another hiding place. We talk about him in
amazement, about mangroves, until the others catch up to us.

They soon outdistance us, but we find them up the trail, bunched together, talking
animatedly and staring through their binoculars at something on the opposite bank. I peer
in that direction, but see nothing, then notice a pile of dung wrapped around a tree
branch. Louis passes me the binoculars. Then the coils come clear, and the large,
wedge-shaped head resting on top of them. The dappled muscle flashes in and out with
the Burmese python’s slow breathing. I have seen this snake many times in zoos, pet
shops, and reptile enthusiasts’ houses. But I have never seen one in its own context, in
the habitat that gave it birth. I have never imagined standing freely on a forest path,
divided from this powerful reptile only by an irrigation ditch. And though this is a
youngster, we have several monsters on the Farm, the largest of them over fifteen feet.

The miracle of it is that I probably would not have seen it, not knowing what I
was looking for, if Louis had not so kindly pointed it out. And it makes me wonder about
how our bodies are shaped by the lands of our birth. I am a child of gentle mountains and
valleys, strong oaks and the dazzling maples of autumn. I know how the movement of a
deer looks through the matrix of twigs. I know the sound of a squirrel busily burying an
acorn. I would see the line of a black snake long before it had to raise its head and rattle
its tail in the leaves. But in Hong Kong, I am defenseless, my senses wide open,
programmed for nothing. My eyes do not know what shapes to seek, and so are delighted
by and constantly missing things by turns. I am a child, mesmerized by the strange
leaping bugs that zoom over the concrete in hordes before my feet, or the blue admiral
butterfly that flashes its azure semaphores on the stream bank. Every distant hoot or odd cry is a monkey. Every giant white bird that flies a crane. I have no knowledge but the stereotypes that are already in my head.

But perhaps it is not only being born of a land that attunes one to it. Chinese culture is rich with seeing the potential in things blossoming out of time. All things are constantly in the process of becoming, all things can become more than they presently are. Thus, what my eyes first saw as a pile of dung wrapped around a tree branch became the snake it truly is. But perhaps even more importantly in traditional belief, the snake has the potential to become even more. Tu Wei-ming again:

Humanity is the respectful son or daughter of the cosmic process...Human beings are thus organically connected with rocks, trees, and animals. Understandably, the interplay and interchange between discrete species feature prominently in Chinese literature, notably popular novels. The monkey in Journey to the West came into being from an agate; the hero in the Dream of the Red Chamber or the Story of the Stone, Pao-yu, is said to have been transformed from a piece of precious jade; and the heroine of the Romance of the White Snake has not completely succeeded in transfiguring herself into a beautiful woman. These are well-known stories. They have evoked strong sympathetic responses from Chinese audiences young and old for centuries, not merely as fantasies but as great human drama. It is not at all difficult for the Chinese to imagine that an agate or a piece of jade can have enough potential spirituality to transform itself into a human being. Part of the pathos of the White Snake lies in her inability to fight against the spell cast by a ruthless monk so that she can retain her human form and be reunited with her lover. The fascinating element in this romance is that she manages to acquire the power to transfigure herself into a woman through several hundred years of self-cultivation.25

Just as there is no true division between past, present, and future, there is also no

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division between fantasy and reality. Or rather, these distinctions, when placed in the context of traditional Chinese belief, simply do not hold water. I am reminded of how Maxine Hong Kingston’s award-winning book *Woman Warrior* was criticized for its tight interlacing of “fantasy” with “reality.” Professors did not know whether to teach it as novel or memoir. Surely you didn’t mean that you actually rode a dragon up a mountain and learned to fight from a crane? critics asked. But Kingston’s depiction of her life was true to her culture, to its lack of such distinctions, and its belief in the interconnectedness of space and time, human and nature, reality with mythic truth.

We come at last over the hills into Sam A Chung. It is yet another way station, a house offering food and drink to weary travelers. Groups of hikers rest outside the makeshift restaurant, lying on grassy banks under the few shade trees, drinking Chinese beer and rice wine. One woman offers us berries as we examine her husband’s backpack. He has installed a fan in the top and hooked it to a solar unit, thus keeping the back of his neck cool as he hikes. Others step into the clear to talk on their cell phones, their voices rising and falling in all-too-familiar Cantonese phonespeech. Everywhere the contraptions of modernity are strewn along the path. People take pride in their shiny new things, careful not to scuff their hiking books, drinking out of immaculate, petite Nalgene bottles, wringing out bright bandanas that are obviously new. After so many abandoned villages and silent fields, such contact with things I associate with modern Hong Kong is jarring. People speak to us, seem surprised by us, the gweilos hiking in the backcountry with friends. Or maybe I like to think of it that way, that we are special, unique, that we alone have done this. But I have seen no other white faces today.
Outside the restaurant, an old man cracks snail shells on a rock black with age and shiny with slime. These are the delicacy of the house—these African land snails, an invader that has found favor in Cantonese cuisine. I am mesmerized by the sound of his little hammer striking the chisel, the precise way he shatters the shell and flings the intact, naked meat aside. He sweeps the shells off into a pile and the whole process starts again. He works against a chain link fence, squatting on concrete. The pile is so huge that the shells have fallen between the fence and the concrete, tumbling down the embankment on which the house sits.

The others order food and drinks. Having devoured our peanut butter sandwiches earlier, we are nonplussed by the greasy bowls of noodles, the chicken feet, and pickled vegetables that turn up on the table. I drink lemon Coke with enthusiasm, squashing the lemons to pulp at the bottom of my glass with my straw. I have three before Regina finally cautions me that this is not good to drink, that it does not have good effect on the body in such strong sun. Sheepishly, as always with her remonstrations, I decline a fourth when the waitress offers one.

When we leave Sam A Chung, the wise decision is made not to continue our entire circuit around Plover Cove Reservoir, but to strike inland and come faster to our endpoint at Wu Kau Tang. It's strange the way the gods grant wishes. I was surprised to find my secret desire had become my destination without my realizing it. I envision the village in all its wonder—a place so wild that its residents disappear into its bamboo groves like the coucals I rarely ever see. So, deeper into the heart of these hills we go. Mountains march alongside, and I fear their terraced slopes, that Idy and Louis will have
some mad urge to run up and down them until midnight. (They had all gone on a “wild camp” once, as they like to call it, working all day, and then hiking all night. “The fireflies—so many! So beautiful!” Idy said. I like to imagine her that way, surrounded by the blue-green stars of fireflies, hiking resolutely through the jungle dark).

We climb up and down, come to a slough where the tide has receded and left mud flats scarred with shells. We tiptoe over, cracking mollusks under our boots. Here we can see the mangroves beginning their work. Seeds have fallen and thick, green shoots push up. Most of these areas around Hong Kong are gone. Once the defining coastal habitat of Southeast Asia, unspoiled mangroves are rare indeed. What life has gone with them, I’ve no way of knowing. But I see how life clings voraciously to them—the crabs, the egrets, tiny fish, insects, even. Like so many other wetland plants, mangroves provide safe harbor to animals and filtration for riverine systems. Some Hong Kong researchers have started studying how modern sewage treatment systems can be modeled after the mangroves to naturally purify wastewater. But I wonder as we walk across the slough, if the mangroves will be around long enough to serve as models for anything.

We pass more abandoned villages on the way to Wu Kau Tang. In my utter exhaustion, I begin to imagine uses for them. The last one becomes an elaborate commune where people from all over the world wear dusty brown monk’s robes, pray to Kwun Yum, and are staunch vegetarians. They allow Burmese pythons to enter their houses as they wish, and give up all modern conveniences. They do not need cars or mobile phones. They have never heard of IKEA or Wal-mart. They will all become Taoist immortals, a village of sages without calendars or clocks.

By the time we reach Wu Kau Tang, the idea shimmers before me in the air,
tangible as the heat. It is the possible paradise I have evolved through all the deserted villages before. I've ceased talking, ceased humming, ceased almost anything except the incessant walking. I hate to drink because that means I have to stop. We are going there; we will stop there—where dragonflies buzz on jeweled wings too numerous to count, where kingfishers and shrikes perch more abundantly even than in Long Valley.

But like the bamboo snake that had morphed into a harmless greater green, like the pile of dung that had become a python, Wu Kau Tang is also not what it seems. We enter it as we did Lai Chi Wo, from behind. If we enter through the feng shui wood, I am not aware of it. The village perches on a low mound of land surrounded by reeds. Most of the houses are decrepit, dilapidated, hunched over every habitable inch of land. One new pink house with a huge chrome moon-gate dominates the village. Its paved courtyard, surrounded by high salmon-colored walls, is enormous for a Hong Kong village house. But it looks empty. My eyes are drawn to this house, as though it has charmed me into seeing nothing but itself.

We cross a stream where a three-legged dog weaves among picnicking families, stealing their food. Children race toy motorboats on the creek. There is a parking lot strewn with trash, and two vendors under tents selling food and cold drinks. We sit on folding stools, drinking and waiting for some form of transportation to come. Old men and women sit nearby, playing cards and gossiping loudly. Idy says they are complaining about the village headman and the land laws. As the population in Hong Kong continues to soar, many people wonder how village land claims will be honored. With the old folkways dying out, modern villagers will not stint to destroy their feng shui woods for the sake of building a few more houses to collect rent.
I feel sad that my paradise, so carefully nurtured since my first day at the Farm, has been shattered. But what has it been shattered by? I am put in mind of Li Ruzhen’s words from *The Destinies of Flowers in the Mirror*: “Thus, while contemplating one’s environment may be a source of engendering feelings, it may also be that one’s surroundings arise from what one is feeling. Nothing there is that is not made so by the heart-mind, nor can in any degree be forced to be otherwise.” Perhaps I expected more than this place can ever give, a paradise of immortals that exists nowhere on this earth. Judging from what I’ve seen of the rest of Hong Kong, is my disappointment deserved? This village balances on so many possibilities. One, in the form of the herbal spa, has thankfully already been erased. But other potential plans equally as dismal for the natural environment are surely in the works. Land use planning for the long-term future of this and other such villages throughout Hong Kong is perhaps more pressing than any other endeavor.

Twilight curtains the surrounding land with ethereal color. The large pink house that so drew my eyes fades into darkness. Bats emerge, their mouths open to the sunset. Signs of good luck and prosperity in Chinese folklore, they are often depicted on house doors and windows. They are favored because they have the ability to glide between day and darkness. They slide between the worlds, owing allegiance to neither, but children of both.

I look more closely, not at the village itself or the distressing signs of civilization, but at the land. In the distance, the high bare mountains collect and dispense the energy of sky and earth. Near the back of the village, I see the fringe of feng shui woods opening in a dark embrace. I passed through them without noticing, so intent was I on
getting to my destination. Before the village, a stream meanders, cycling qi through its gentle shallows. It is as though I stand again on Kwun Yum Shan, yang above me, yin below me, qi binding all together in one endless exchange of life, death, and time. This is why Hong Kong needs its wild places. A neon skyline can never replace what the land teaches us. Somehow, though, we must learn to live in the balance of both the primordial dream and industrial nightmare. When it is time to leave, I stand and bow three times to the darkness, and no one thinks anything of it.
OUT OF STOCK: THE BIODIVERSITY MARKET

“I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Ch’u that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?”

—Chuang Tzu, as translated by Burton Watson

It’s been a long time since I’ve had these dreams, but for weeks, virtually the same scenario repeated itself. The location might change—gray-faced skyscraper, museum, warehouse—but the inside is the same. Monoliths of glass, open to the ceiling, are backlit with sharp yellow light. The creatures within are indiscernible, their shadows twisting and bending behind the glass. The floors tilt and slide, and there is the feeling that any moment now, the glass will shatter and all these monstrous creatures—giant squid, whales, sharks, sea turtles—will slide out across the floor in one great flood. I feel as though I am suffocating in the agony of their captivity, all these creatures I cannot see but feel all around me. Back then, I felt this as a foretelling, but I chalked it up to hypersensitivity, a condition that drives many museum curators to unemployment.

On the winter solstice, Andrew and I walk through the Mong Koko crowd, crushed into absolute smallness. We are still in the first month, and I am still open, my heart naked to the city, my mind raw. My co-workers Amanda and Paul have brought us here, for what I no longer remember. Markets take up whole streets and I see them all—the fish market, the produce market, the flower and bird markets. In each shop, a multitude. Vast cubes of glass literally stuffed with living beings. Acrylic boxes full of marine creatures in a long row with plastic bags and nets, a saltwater aquarist’s salad bar. And everywhere, bags, baskets, trays and boxes, full of water, full of creatures, their gills
pulsing, fins flailing, eyes darting. Some on their sides gasp and die in their own element. An electric blue koran angel nips at its roommate, a flame angel, in a 4-inch cube. Seahorses cluster like grapes around the solitary bit of gorgonian coral in their tank. Ten lionfish lie together in a shallow, floating colander. Sea anemones deflate and outstretch in only three inches of water, piled on top of their softly stinging cousins. So many, so much that it is painful to believe these creatures actually live.

I cannot close my eyes, or else I’ll be swept away in the tide of human beings. The smell of barbecued tofu makes me want to gag, or is it all the death that hides in the back alleys? We walk through one of them and I turn my head away from a man twisting a screaming chicken’s neck, only to see three Triad-types holding two Chow dogs in position as they breed in the near dark.

You aren’t prepared when you first see an endangered species for sale openly on the market. I realize as we stalk around the markets of Mong Kok that I almost hope to see something, some rare and wondrous creature. What will happen if I do? Will I buy it, shout in incomprehensible English at the smiling, glassy-eyed shop-owner? I discover now what I would do. Nothing.

We find them in a shop that mostly sold rodents—bunnies, hamsters, mice. Above them, a rabbit lies on its side, slowly dying of heat exhaustion or dehydration in its plexiglas box. Paul points them out to me. Two young ones, crowded together at the back of their box. *Cuora trisfaciata.* Three-lined box terrapins. Also known as the golden coin turtle, the *gum chin gwei* for all the golden coins one of them can bring. They’re not much to see, really. I suppose I’ve been seeking some kind of sparkle, some

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26 The Triads are the Chinese mafia.
glitter, to entice me to understand their value. These are young and pale, their heads more the color of baby food than gold. "How much?" Paul asks in Cantonese.

"Eleven hundred," the shopkeeper replies. Paul turns to me, his eyes and face still. In that silence, I read the words we will not say aloud, even though they most likely wouldn't be understood. Wild caught.

Some turtles have a certain way of looking at you, a slow side-glance upward. In that gesture, you can read the edda of two hundred millennia, a long poem drawn out and inscribed on the scutes of the hard shell. The look these turtles give us isn't the heart-wrenching stare of a dumb, furred beast. It is a minute, sure intelligence, a set of accumulated data that have been tanking around the planet for longer than we naked, soft-skinned humans have even been able to walk. There's nothing complicated about being a turtle, really. And there's nothing cute about it either. Carrying one's house aloft is a constant danger; living under armor does not make the battle any less real when it comes. It's a shame that a hard, bony plate and stinking feces or musk is often a turtle's only defense against us intrepid primates. One pluck from the stream bank, as in the case of these two, and two million years of evolution is headed for the stew pot.

I stare at them a long time. "You want to buy?" the shop-lady asks, still smiling. I desperately want to say yes, but I keep staring. Neither of the turtles returns my gaze. They belong in mountain streams, high in the jungles of rolling mist. They are as out of place as the wilting sea anemones, the giant water bugs hanging in plastic bags, the corals pulsing in rhythm with the reef they've lost. A curious looseness fills my limbs. I am looking directly at a dying species. In zoos and museums, perhaps the loss is muted. You can trick yourself into believing this is an animal with purpose and educational
value. This animal, you can say to yourself, will live out its natural life in comfort, cared
for, cherished by thousands of kids and educating hundreds of people. The words
“endangered species” become a dull knife; have nothing to do with you or how you live.
You can read signs about how the people in Asia or Africa or South America use these as
wedding fetishes, or cook them for their meat. You can read about it. You can drop in
your donation and go home.

But here is the word made flesh. On sale, plain as day, neon price tag. I am
looking straight at the cause. And, still, I can do nothing but stare and wish I had not
seen it. I want to blame the owner, castigate her for selling a protected species. Some
people have found cunning ways to deflect the law, shipping three-lined box turtles in
from Guangxi to Macau and having them processed into an herbal jelly dessert there, a
tonic dessert that supposedly aids the liver, lungs, and throat. Since “you’re not allowed
to breed, buy or kill those turtles here,” as the owner of Turtle Essence Shop noted in a
March 2001 interview with HK Magazine, he ships them “to Hong Kong as a cooked
product.” When asked if he was worried that the turtles might be endangered, he
replied, “No, they are very common in Guangxi, and we even have live ones crawling
around our Macau shop. But maybe those concerned with that sort of thing should not
eat our pudding.” Looking at this shop owner, I doubt if she even knows much more
about these turtles than their miraculous curative powers or their high dollar value. Even
if she could be educated about their plight, would she care?

I am caught in the dilemma that many conservationists face in Asia. Buy the
turtles and rescue these individuals, increasing demand and putting more turtles on the
market. Don’t buy them, and know for certain they and their genes will die, and the
species will have lost again by just that much. It is a foregone conclusion that these two
youngsters were headed for the pot. Not only are *gum chin gwei* renowned as the key
ingredients in herbal turtle jelly, but they are also famed for their cancer-fighting ability
in traditional Chinese medicine. Boiled for twenty hours with over twenty proprietary
herbs, golden coin turtles are the elixir of life. A dying man will pay a pretty penny for a
dying turtle.

I have walked past shops selling such remedies, lurid and beautiful displays of
turtle shells in their doorways. Usually, they are mounded on a pedestal, with fake mist
flowing out of the empty shells. Red lights cause the mist to glow like a fine spray of
blood. The turtle was one of the four creatures present at the beginning of the world,
according to Chinese belief. It is also believed that a turtle carries the earth on his back;
that a turtle, by its very shape represents the perfect union of heaven and earth. These
neatly stacked shells with their hollow throats turning outward are gutted lands,
emptiness in place of balance.

We don’t understand turtles, really. We’re only beginning to see the possibilities
they might have; our learning is as slow as continental drift. We know that turtles may be
excellent pollution indicators because they accumulate toxins in their shells. By looking
at their shells’ chemical composition, we might be able to tell which toxins and pollutants
are present in the environment. (Ironic that, even as many Chinese believe these
creatures prevent cancer, the truth could be just the opposite, due to all the toxins they
harbor in their bodies).

We’re just beginning to understand the crucial roles these animals may play in
their environments. Turtles and their eggs, of course, are important food sources for
many animals including crocodilians, carnivorous mammals, fish, and even humans. But they also may be valuable for the vital ecosystem service they provide as scavengers. In Australia, for instance, M. B. Thompson "...conservatively estimated that the three species of Murray River chelid turtles he studied may scavenge at least 180,000 metric tons [of carrion] per year. This is only a rough estimate, but it suggests the magnitude of the role of river turtles in nutrient cycling."\(^{27}\)

Unfortunately, at least 37 of the 90 or so Asian species of turtles are critically endangered. In recent decades, scientists fear that this number has actually doubled, because of the drastic increase in consumption, as markets have opened and many Asian countries have recovered from economic crises. Eating wildlife has become fashionable, an enjoyable pastime for the newly-rich. And turtles, with their host of supposed medicinal properties, as well as the relative ease of capturing and shipping them, are an excellent choice for exploitation. China has almost depleted all of its natural populations of turtles; a walk in Qingping market in Guangdong reveals mostly non-native species, suggesting to scientists that the net has been flung wider to accommodate the people's relentless hunger. Now, places like Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia are feeling the scourge, their habitats sucked clean of any and all species that will draw a profit. Members of the U.S.-based Turtle Survival Alliance noted that in places where they visited in June 2001, no turtles could be found where they had been abundant only five years ago.\(^{28}\)

\(^{27}\) Klemens, Michael, ed. 2000. *Turtle Conservation*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 135. Interestingly enough, there has been great interest along the Ganges in boosting the natural populations of Indian softshell and Indian flapshell turtles there, as they play an important role in consuming human and animal remains, thus controlling harmful pathogens.

\(^{28}\) Kurt Buhlmann, Hugh Quinn, and Paul Calle. 2001. Personal communication.
When we leave the shop that night, we do what is most natural after a day of work and shopping. We duck into a Thai restaurant to eat. After we order, the table is so full that we are juggling plates and chopsticks, banging elbows trying to get at everything. Giant prawns swim in flaming soup. A pineapple has been artfully carved into a casserole dish for rice, mussels, and octopus. Scallop shells stand up from the spiny yellow fruit like ears. Chili beef with basil, eggplant curry—all these we down between gulps of beer. I try to surface back into normalcy, to laugh with Paul when he makes fun of the restaurant menu, which includes (among other things) “bloccory with three things.”

But I feel like I am stuffing angelfish and turtle into my mouth. Lost life is riot everywhere. I can feel the street pushing in through the door. The pink and green arrows of the prostitutes’ dens light with the oncoming night. When we walk back into the crowd and the stink of dai pai dongs with their tofu and fishballs, I feel the pavement sliding and tilting. People are still cruising the saltwater salad bars, seeking the frilly fins and lacy entanglements of all that dies there. I expect to feel the flood swirl around my toes, spilling gasping creatures across my feet. As we walk back past the shop where we saw the turtles, I see the woman removing the dead rabbit from its cage.

I do not look for the turtles. I do not want to see them. I turn my eyes forward to the crowd, resting my thoughts on black-globed grapes, spiked durian, pink and green dragonfruit. I want to ignore the strange creatures swimming through my mind. None of the things I’ve learned has relevance. I have thought of the knowledge of endangered species as some kind of magic armor. But saying the words means nothing. The hope which I had not even realized I carried, the desire “to make a difference” as the cliché goes, starves softly within the cage of my ribs.
But what is stranger and even harder to quantify comes months later.

On a rainy spring night, we attend a farewell party for two of the Farm’s student translators. Bearing cookies and roast duck, we step out of the rain to warmth and light and Tiger. She is fascinating, this flame-haired Scottish veterinarian. She is married to Henry, a Cantonese who works at the Farm. Their darling girls, ages seven and five, float around the house in boxing gloves and fairy wings, picking on Regina’s son.

The consummate hostess, Tiger moves through the dark-haired crowd, offering drinks, food, and (later) hashish with equal verve. Tiger has been working part-time at the Farm, though her own busy veterinary practice is located just down the hill in Tai Wai. I have been intrigued ever since my first few encounters with her, with the elegant way she holds a cigarette, the ripe sexuality she flings about her like a transparent yet alluring cloak. She is an aficionado of hard living—hard drinking, hard loving, hard work. My admiration for her is nearly boundless, particularly for her staunch feminism and animal welfare activism in the face of Hong Kong’s overwhelmingly chauvinistic and utilitarian society.

When some of the men say they are going to the stream, Andrew and I decide to sit it out, too lazy to walk up and down the steep slope. We munch on cashews and shrimp chips, while the girls for whom we are supposed to be having the party cook furiously in Tiger’s ample kitchen. More co-workers arrive, bearing even more food. Among the more amusing cultural faux pas I make during the night is my mistaken pronunciation of the name of a particular kind of pudding. Called “horsebean pudding” in English, it’s usually served in thick, white blocks, dotted with the yellow
"horsebeans". *Ma lai* pudding is correct, but I say *mah lah*. This leads to a flood of laughter, which even catches the attention of the men, who sit in a corner, peeling lychees and popping the opal-white fruits in their mouths almost as fast as they talk.

They attempt over and over to explain the word to me by its etymology—something about wearing improper clothes at funeral rites—but I eventually understand that it means someone is disgusting, has no class. A pervert. It is a light insult, the kind of thing to be laughed over, and they do so until they are dusky in the face, and I am bright red with embarrassment. "Henry," they say, "now he is *mahlahtlohs,*" and he turns, his bright, bleached blonde head shining like a lamp, smiling and saying, "Yes, I love woman, all woman!"

"See!" they shout. "Disgusting!"29

Tiger, poised on the couch beside my husband, begins teaching me more and even naughtier insults in Cantonese, until I am shuttling back and forth between the only other *gweilos* in the room and the Cantonese, repeating for their amusement the words I learn. Tiger brings out her stash then and offers me a smoke. Her voice rises and falls with mellow conversation and laughter for some minutes before she blows smoke away from me, and says, "You know, they found a *gum chin gwei* down there at the stream."

The nebulous laughter of the room focuses onto one deadly serious point. She continues, "I saw them, just the other day, swimming around, following each other. Mating, I guess." She smiles.

"What did they do with it?" I finally find space to ask.

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29 Even later, I figure out that *mahlahtlohs* are synonymous with the American redneck. Months later, we eat at a restaurant where the food is cheap and good, but where few of my co-workers will eat because of all the *mahlahtlohs*, i.e. construction and other blue-collar workers.
“Oh, they brought it back,” she says. “It’s out in the garage in a bucket. They’ll take it to the Farm.”

I am disturbed. I remember the two young turtles in the market. My unrest grows until I push out, “But...”

She looks at me sharply. “If we didn’t take them, someone else would. They sell for US$1500, you know. You think anyone else around here who saw them would just leave them there? This way at least they can go somewhere where they’re safe.”

I can tell she is getting angry, so I say nothing more. Clearly, to her this is a desperate situation that calls for desperate measures. There is no time to consider any options, because to her there are none. Once again, I feel fairly caught, as helpless as I’d been in Mong Kok. More so, because these people are fast becoming my friends. “Can I see it?” I ask.

“Have Henry show it to you,” she says, blowing another cloud. “But keep it quiet—not everyone needs to know.”

So, I find the smiling mahlahtloh and he takes me out to the garage. The turtle is in a bucket, half-covered by a wooden plank. He moves the wood, the gold bracelet flashing at his wrist, and brings the bucket out into the dim light of the patio. The turtle is so large that I inhale its damp musk in unabashed surprise. It fills the bucket, and is certainly unable to turn around. The three stripes gleam on its rain-shellacked shell. Only the golden tip of its nose shows evidence of its head. It is a breeding adult, most likely a female. I stare down at it, realizing its incalculable worth to its species. My colleagues know it, too. But how differently we perceive the best way to safeguard such ecological investments.
The turtle should be left alone, free to follow its evolutionary destiny, hidden in plain sight in the middle of that heavily populated hillside. I imagine its fate at the Farm, the concrete walls and pools of the captive breeding facility. It seems ironic that my co-workers have done what they so often decry—removing a turtle from the wild without permits or permission, like the turtle trappers who often raid traps at scientific study sites, who ruthlessly strip turtles from Hong Kong’s mountain streams as fast as they can. How different are my colleagues’ actions? They have removed a turtle from its breeding population, from its food source, from a habitat in which it was obviously flourishing. They will take this turtle to the Farm for breeding as part of a larger plan to remove the entire Hong Kong population of three-banded box terrapins from the wild, even though there are currently no data for *C. trifasciata* to suggest such a strategy.

Many turtle biologists lament such an interventionist approach. As Michael Klemens of Wildlife Conservation Society notes, “One must often pose the question, when data are not sufficiently conclusive to support an intervention on behalf of turtles, what are the risks of acting with incomplete data versus the risks of inaction? This...should be tempered with a recognition that there continues to be an overemphasis on interventionist management, including captive breeding, translocations, and headstarting.” Many people are quick to begin such programs because they generate publicity and make people feel like they are doing something meaningful. But these management strategies often fail to address the complexities of turtle biology. For example, population numbers are often not as important as population age structure. It is very easy to destroy a population by removing even a few reproductively active adults. An alarming instance of this was documented by Garber and Barger “...who observed

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that a population of wood turtles (*Clemmys insculpta*) protected in a restricted access watershed collapsed shortly after the area was opened to recreational use. The population decline apparently occurred solely because of modest, occasional removal of turtles by recreationalists.\(^{31}\)

Other issues arise with captivity. It is well known that turtles are notoriously delicate. I had worked with turtles myself as a museum curator, and knew of the slow and often undetectable way in which turtles can waste away. Their armor can be their weakness; their slow-growing shell makes it very difficult to spot illness until it is far advanced. Furthermore, even if the turtles do not contract fatal illnesses, they often contract pathogens in captivity that may be dangerous to wild populations if future reintroduction is the ultimate goal of such programs. The introduction of upper respiratory tract disease (URTD) to wild populations of various tortoises in Africa, the American Mojave Desert, and in Florida has been attributed to release of captive-bred individuals into wild populations. I do not think that the fate of an entire population, reputedly the largest and healthiest extant wild population (according to my colleagues) of three-banded box terrapins, should rest so squarely on the Farm facility, despite its well-intentioned keepers.

There is also evidence to suggest that even if all other factors are successful, the final release in and of itself may ultimately be a waste of time. Not much is known of turtle behavior, but it has recently been found that they are social in ways that have never previously been acknowledged. Until now, turtles have been thought of as largely solitary animals, coming together only to breed or seek similar resources, as in the case of

communal basking on river rocks. They are generally aggressive to outsiders and will drive off interlopers in their perceived territories. More recent behavioral studies suggest that “…turtles are capable of individual recognition and that familiarity may mediate aggressive behavior.” To place “foreign” turtles in an already established population may do little more than consign them to wandering from their new habitats ultimately into death.

How much better it would be, I think, to protect the habitat in which the turtles live—those tumbling mountain streams with their infinite variety of fish, crustaceans, and insects, their ferns and trees and trailing creepers. To remove a species about which we know next to nothing in its native habitat in hopes of its protection misses the point of conservation. Though Tiger and many others assure me the removal is a safeguard, a stopgap measure to ensure the turtles’ survival, it seems more a question of human peace of mind, reaction to an almost self-indulgent guilt. Looking at the turtle, I can see it does not need us, is perfectly self-sufficient. It probably, if anything, would prefer (if such things could be attributed to it) to be left alone.

Henry closes the lid and we go inside. The rest of the party is a blur; I am too unsettled about the turtle to laugh anymore. The next day at work, I ask what has been done with it, and my voice clearly carries my flustered feelings. I am assured that the turtle will be returned to the wild, that they had just taken it until the rains were over, to keep it from washing downstream into unsafe places. It feels far too much like a well-designed bid to placate my fears, to soothe me into silence and forgetfulness. And as

usual, I do not know what to do. Should I raise a fuss about one turtle, upsetting my colleagues and the hard-earned balance I am slowly establishing? Should I continue to watch and wait, giving myself time to better understand? Call it cowardice, but I choose the latter. There is nothing I could have said that would have made any difference.

But the idea continues to bother me. Why do my colleagues feel so certain their intervention is ultimately beneficial? In the end, it seems to me, the result is the same. When a population is removed from its natural habitat, extinction in the wild still occurs (albeit a planned one), and habitats are poorer and weaker for it. I wonder if there is ever a time when such removal is warranted. Most of the scientists and fauna conservation officers I work with seem to think the time is now. And perhaps they are right. When only one turtle turns up in a population study where 250 traps have been set, in addition to the fact that obvious poaching is taking place in the study area, then perhaps the time for study is past. But the slow generation time and high failure rate of turtle reproduction, coupled with their delicacy in captivity, throw an uncertainty factor into the equation that seems, to my mind, to elevate rather than decrease the risk of removal.

On another spring day, when the rains have subsided into the afternoon thunderstorms of summer, I go to the rescue center on some banal errand, mostly just to get away from my desk. A couple weekends previously, a huge shipment of turtles was confiscated at the airport by the AFCD. Thousands of them had been jammed into bamboo baskets, which had been tied shut with bamboo cord and labeled "seafood--crabs" for shipment. There are hundreds of different species from all over Asia, most ailing or dying due to injuries, malnourishment, and the crowded conditions. The Farm
has housed as many of them as it could, but its facilities are ill equipped to deal with so many all at once.\textsuperscript{33}

Tiger holds a softshell turtle in the air, shooting it full of pink liquid with a syringe. She dispatches the turtles quickly, saying nothing. There are at least five different species scattered on trays and buckets across the table and floor. She puts down the one she just injected, and picks up another pierced completely through its body.

"Often when they find them," she says, "they just stab them with a stick and drop them into their baskets. Saves having to bend down and pick them up. Like garbage." Though her tone is cool and clinical, I can see the anger burning in her normally laughing eyes. It is like an inferno, that anger, and I've come to see that sometimes such fires blind.

The suffering in the room makes the air close and nauseating. I wonder if anyone purposefully means to do this to other creatures. I want to think they don't. I want to think that the only reason someone does this is because he or she is trying to survive. In economically depressed countries, as many Southeast Asian countries are, doesn't it make sense that people try to use every resource possible to survive? But so often, survival looks startlingly like cruelty. And how much of this is really necessary? I have seen photos of the "turtle dogs" of Myanmar and Cambodia trained to sniff out turtles and dig them from the leaf litter. Paul has also shown me a cleverly devised bamboo spring trap that Southeast Asian natives made that would catch virtually anything, at no cost to their makers.

Tiger goes to check a slide for parasites in the next room, and I decide to let her get on with her work. As I leave, I see that my movements have startled the turtle I

\textsuperscript{33} On Dec. 12, 2001, the Farm was swamped with an even larger shipment. The largest shipment ever confiscated in Hong Kong, the number of turtles ranged above 10,000 with a total value of over US$500,000.
thought was already dead. He raises his head and flippers. He seems surprised and
determined, as though he was just been dozing on the river bottom when someone pulled
him up from his rest and plunked him down on this tray, and he is calculating how he
might return to the mud again. I watch for a moment, wanting to tell Tiger that this one
is not yet dead, but unwilling to interrupt her work at the microscope. Then the effort
becomes too great, and the turtle’s head stretches onto the tray like a wrinkled, useless
trunk.

I go outside. The last sun glimmers on the raindrops in the trees. A three-lined
box terrapin has come out of his hiding box, and I would almost say, frisks around in the
dried leaves of his enclosure. He cranes his neck sideways, looking up at me with a black
eye. I am put in mind of something I read the other day, another thing Klemens said:

In 1993, I chaired an international conference of tortoise
and freshwater turtle specialists, land managers, and policy
makers to discuss the emerging problem of global turtle
decline and to facilitate the exchange of information and
technologies. The impetus for this conference was
severalfold, but one of the driving forces was the
realization that approaches and technologies that had long
been discarded in the United States as ineffective were
being exported and promoted overseas. In one Asian
country, a U.S. agency-funded program was promoting the
removal of turtles from the wild to be captively bred in
local zoos, even though ample opportunity existed for
habitat protection and nonmanipulative techniques. When I
asked personnel of the U.S. agency sponsoring this
program why they advocated this approach of last resort as
the first line of response, I was advised that this program
was what the host country wanted, and it was better to do
this than to do nothing! Is doing something, no matter how
ill advised, better than doing nothing? Is the quid pro quo
for heightening concern for turtles to hasten their trajectory
toward extinction? Surely, we are capable of doing better.
It seems altogether odd that a society as rich as Hong Kong with so much of its land in the country park system cannot devise some better means of conservation. Would it not be easier simply to provide more security to protect the turtles in their native habitats? Poachers were caught red-handed once during the turtle trap surveys conducted by the Farm. With the stiff penalty of over US $1000 and jail-time delivered to more and more offenders, why would anyone risk the loss? Yet we seem psychologically incapable of following the path of least resistance. And while the markets are flooded with a tangle of turtles, fish, and other wildlife, forests, oceans, and streams are squeezed dry of life by poachers and conservationists alike.

What a universe of unanswered questions rests on your back, I want to say to the turtle. What a vast conundrum hides under that small, striped shell. But before I open my mouth, he turns his attention, slowly and determinedly, back to the ground between his feet. And I walk back up to my office, remembering how it was once believed that turtles carried the world on their backs. Can we carry them now on ours? Surely, oh surely, we can do better.
THE MOON BEAR AND THE MONKEY KING

Letting species be creates abundance.

---Vandana Shiva

Wedged between a Hardee’s and an apartment complex, I await the bus to
Guangdong with Tiger, Henry, their children, and two of our Farm translators. Tiger
must take supplies and money to the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) Bear
Rescue Center in Panyu, and we’ve decided to make a weekend of it. I find it hard to
believe that any bus crossing the border will stop here, but soon, despite my misgivings,
we are handing the driver our tickets and carrying our tiny complimentary bottles of
water to our seats. At last, I am going to China, that dragon that breathes its mystery over
the border, driving the northern wind through the trees.

Evening falls quickly. The lights of so many towns blur into a vast megalopolis
from across the New Territories to the border. We disembark at Lo Wu, show the guards
our visas, and return to the bus on the other side. Strange that visas are required to travel
from one part of the same country to another. Hong Kong and the mainland are close as
clones and different as species. As we cross the Pearl River, Tiger tells me about gangs
who kill people and throw the bodies in front of passing cars to stop the motorists and rob
them. After a long week of work, I am too tired to think much about crime or victims. I
feel a strange wonder creeping into me. I am in China; this is the beginning of the long-
awaited dream.

We arrive at Panyu at 10 p.m. Fortunately, Regina owns a vacation flat here and
has invited us to stay for the weekend. Another mini-bus ferries us across what I think at
first is a town, but discover is simply the giant resort itself. After alighting, we wander in
the dark past condos, townhouses, and flats that seem immense in comparison to their counterparts in Hong Kong. Glass and gilt hide the concrete. Tiny immaculate lawns sport manicured trees and shrubs. We come to a vast roundabout that looks more like an arena for a chariot race than a road. At last we find Regina’s flat, spacious in comparison to the cramped flats of Hong Kong. While the others go to eat dinner and get foot massages at midnight, I shower and crawl onto my pallet on the floor, senses overloaded. I cannot imagine such a place housing a rescue center for bears.

The heat is already steaming off the pavement by the time we leave for breakfast. In the plush, poorly-air-conditioned clubhouse, we pass mirrored rooms full of prancing ballerinas and starched karate students. A pink handwritten sign points toward the “Feet Massaging Area.” We enter an echoing entrance hall. Its domed ceiling arches over the dazzle of light thrown from the vast chandelier. Artificial flower arrangements grace marble and chrome alcoves while a player piano tinkles its tunes from the middle of the floor. It feels like a spa of the ’20 or ’30’s. We seem painfully underdressed in our already sweaty t-shirts and shorts.

Breakfast is dim sum—steamed pork buns, vegetarian buns, Peking rolls, glutinous rice dumplings, lotus seed rolls, and strong, steaming tea. The table is round and white, one of thousands in a vast concert hall, through which vacationers, pensioners, and wait-staff move in the ceaseless dance of hunger. Beyond the arching windows, the land is flat, punctuated by buildings until the heat haze makes all things indistinct. I reach across the table for a bun, which I then clumsily drop in someone else’s plate. All the while my mind works against the portrait of a parrot above a vase of silk flowers in
the lobby. It seems patently false, placed here more out of some Chinese perception of
my expectations than for its beauty or appropriateness. It signals a desperation to cater to
the West that I do not want to see.

At last, fearing the sun, we depart down the mirrored elevators in search of a cab.
We separate into three groups. Like many cab drivers throughout the world, ours claims
to know where he is going for the sake of the fare, though it soon becomes evident he is
as clueless as we are. We drive on giant freeways that seem bound for nowhere. In the
distance, beyond the banana plantations, a vast factory looms. I get a glimpse only of
what traditional houses here might be—raised on stilts, thatched and sided with palm
fronds, eaves protruding like the prows of ships or the horns of stag beetles. Tiger says
they are like the houses of Thailand. I watch them rise in little clusters across the
uninhabited parts of the landscape, see the cantinas where patrons sit gaming in the heat,
see them because the walls have been removed to allow the nonexistent wind full access.

We cross a bridge into a village with concrete block houses and yards like those
in the New Territories, though they huddle more pitifully in the openness. Along the
wide shoulders of the road, villagers thresh rice, spreading it to dry, beating it until the
seed husks fly up in clouds. They will eat that, I think, with all the dust and oil and
poison of the road. They are making the best use of a thing that otherwise avails them
nothing. In this village, a man on a moped agrees to take us to the bear rescue center. He
leads us in the right direction, and soon we pass into green—farms crowded with
bananas, papayas, and ducks. A few low hills with spindly trees rise out of nowhere.

The sanctuary itself is small compared to American standards, but extremely
impressive by Chinese standards. Six concrete-floored cages form an indoor semicircle.
There are balls, ropes, toys—trappings I normally associate with primate enclosures or pet kennels. Steel half circles—bear nests—rise from the floor on sturdy legs. Steel ladders lead up to them. Doors can be raised that allow the bears access to a couple hectares of grass and pools. The bears come eagerly to us; they are familiar with guests and the goodies they bring. Tiger pours a jug of honey into one bear’s flapping lips and long, curling tongue.

I hang back, comparing. I saw my first American black bear in the wild last summer when I attended a routine trapping check with my husband. He was part of a research team doing a ten-year study on black bear populations, and his team allowed me to tag along. The bear they anesthetized and dragged from the culvert trap was a ragamuffin, a leggy, small-eyed beast that resembled a large dog more than the fearsome creature I’d had in mind. The Asiatic is much more imposing and comical at the same time. Where its cousin is trim and smooth, the Asiatic is thick-maned, sporting tufts of fur around its head that make it look perpetually surprised and bristling. Its nose is much longer and more mobile. Its claws are similarly long (though this could also be due to these bears’ perpetual captivity). And, fed on honey and apples, these captives are also much larger than the starveling American black bears I saw.

We go out to an observation platform that spans the width of the outdoor enclosure. The old keeper chases the bears out, yelling and prodding as if they are recalcitrant cows. We wait with buckets of apples, which we rain down on them when they arrive. Some we throw into the pool, and the children are delighted when the bears wallow in after them. One tufted bruin squats in the scummy water like a Taoist sage, gnoshing on the apple between his paws as though it’s the peach of immortality.
It is hard to reconcile this image with what I know of bears in general. American bears often are imbued with mysterious, sometimes frightening, powers. Many Native American tribes thought them sacred because they could walk on their hind legs—two-legged like humans and birds—and were therefore a nation of powerful beings whose motives were often incomprehensible to people. Marriages were possible between human and bears, according to Iroquois, Sioux, and other legends, but they were often fraught with misfortune. To love a bear meant to give up one’s humanity, and those who did so often regretted such a choice.

In China, I can find scant reference to them in myth or legend. Yu, the great engineer, once took bear shape in order to perform his awesome feats of dam and canal building. When he forgot to change back to human form one day, his wife fled from him and turned herself into a stone, refusing to have anything further to do with him. But this story speaks more to the great physical strength of bears than any real mystical or spiritual significance. Bears are mostly thought of as nuisances, pests that wreak havoc on crops and beehives. Their willingness to steal their food rather than come by it through honest labor (despite their strength) is seen as laziness, and bears are therefore symbolic of sloth and indolence—qualities which are traditionally reprehensible. I am certainly convinced of these bears’ laziness. They lounge around, moving only to gather up apples or treats, and then only slowly.

But then I remind myself where they come from, and feel perhaps they’ve earned the right to loaf. They are refugees, fortunate survivors of some of the worst bear bile farms in China. Bears have been used in China for medicine since 3500 BCE. Practically every part has some use, from fat to spinal cord. But it is the bear’s bile that is perhaps in
The first prescription for bear bile appeared in the seventh century. It has been variously used to treat bacterial infections and inflammations, cancers, hemorrhoids, conjunctivitis, asthma, and serious liver ailments such as cirrhosis. Recently, it has also become popular in shampoos, lotions, creams, and liquors—a sort of animal aloe vera. Many TCM practitioners note, however, that bear bile should really only be used for serious ailments or fatal diseases, and should certainly not be dispensed in luxury items like those mentioned above.

Though many TCM practices often seem dubious to Western scientists, there is proof that bear bile contains a substance that may have medicinal value. Bears are the only mammals to produce ursodeoxycholic acid or UDCA, which has been used to dissolve gallstones in human beings. Bears are also unique in that they exhibit no bone loss despite four months of torpor every winter. There is much to suggest that their mysterious mythologies in some cultures are reflected in an even more mysterious biology.

In 1984, China created bear bile farms ostensibly to protect wild bear populations and supply the ever-growing market with bear bile products, while at the same time giving needy people some means of livelihood. Prior to this, the only way to retrieve the precious bile was through killing a bear and extracting its gall bladder. By 1996, there were 7,370 bears in captivity, some of them the offspring of those collected from the wild. Chinese scientists insist that “…captive bears maintain a self-sustained breeding population in China” and that “collection for bear farms seems to produce no significant
negative pressure on wild bear populations. In fact, Chinese scientists point out that hunting pressure in North America on the American black bear has had significantly more impact on that population than collecting for Chinese bile farms has had on the Asiatic black bear. Whether this is the case is for statisticians to decide.

The methodology for extracting bile is, by Western standards, abject cruelty. Bears are kept in metal squeeze cages for the duration of their lives in captivity—a span of five to ten years in comparison with thirty in the wild. The bars may become so tight that folds of skin and fur press through them, causing permanent deformity. Without proper abrasion, claws become twisted and ingrown. Faces, noses, and paws are often abraded of fur, sometimes down to the bone. Most of the animals, because of the psychological trauma of being so confined, rock constantly. To my husband, who visited the main bear rescue center in Chengdu, the most devastating experience was entering the room where newly received bears were kept. Fifty bears in their separate cages rocked from side to side in a mad cacophony of squeaking, rusting metal. “You would not want to hear that,” he said. I am still glad, as I look at these bears in the overpowering sun, that I did not.

But the confinement is only one part of the equation, serving the larger purpose of easier bile extraction. In former years, bears wore an iron casque, rather like a corset or halter, around their torsos, in which a collecting bag hung snug against their abdomens. This bag was connected to a tube that constantly drained bile. Bears were anesthetized once a week, and the bile bag was changed. Today, the Chinese government sanctions a collection method called “free-dripping.” This involves creating a hole in the gall

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bladder and suturing it to another hole in the abdominal muscle and skin. Abdominal mesentery is wrapped around the junction to prevent leakage. A farmer inserts either a stainless steel tube or rubber catheter through the site to extract the bile once or twice a day, and this keeps the wound from healing over. Other methods are also used, but are considered illegal by the Chinese government. In most cases, such deliberate damage to the gall bladder causes gallstones, inflammation, and severe peritonitis from leaked bile and infection.

Chinese scientists and policy makers claim that if bile farms did not satisfy the need for bear bile, poaching and hunting would most likely drive the Asiatic black bear to extinction. Each year, every bear milked in bile farms produces the equivalent of 30 wild bears, which must be killed for their gall bladders. According to bile farm supporters, since a farm bear has a productive period of anywhere from five to ten years, each captive saves at least 150 of its wild kin from certain death. Multiplied by the number of bears in bile farms throughout China, this number rises to over one million wild bears saved, more bears than are thought to exist in the wild today. “Anyone who discusses bear conservation and bear farms in China must face up to these [sic].”

But for many Western conservationists, bear farms are very difficult to “face up” to, and there are divisions, particularly between Europeans and Americans, about how bear conservation should proceed. The differences stem from perception. As an American, I have found that I perceive bears (and animals, in general) totally differently from my European counterparts. I am accustomed to the idea of bears as wild beings.

35 From Gail Cochrane, DVM. Personal communication.
They are not teddy bears; they are not Winnie-the-Pooh. They are ragtag hibernators—musky, powerful creatures that stand on two legs and possess an intelligence all their own. They are themselves, haunting cold mountains and summer streams. I do not condone sport hunting, but they are wildlife, and should be managed as a population, not as individuals.

One has only to look at the Animals Asia Foundation (AAF) website to see the opposite view. AAF, in cooperation with IFAW, runs both rescue centers in Panyu and Chengdu. AAF experienced a recent triumph when they reached an agreement with the Chinese government to put the worst bear farms out of business, with the eventual goal of shutting them all down. On the website, bears are referenced in anthropomorphic terms that would make most American scientists blanch. There is much talk of freedom and fulfilling the bears' "dreams." Jill Robinson, AAF's British founder, speaks of her visit to a bear farm, during which she snuck into a basement full of caged bears: "At one point I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder and turned around to see a female moon bear reaching out through the cage. Without thinking, I took her paw and, whilst gazing into sad, dark, unblinking eyes, made a pledge that one day I'd be back to set her free." On the donation pages, patrons are encouraged to:

...[G]ive the bears their greatest gift of all— the gift of freedom. Your donation will pay for the release of one bear: from the initial surgery to remove the crude catheter from his stomach, to patient physiotherapy and integration with members of his own species, through every stage of the sanctuary construction...to freedom. Proudly name your own bear, which will be recorded on a plaque at the sanctuary, and know that, because of you, the bears are finally where they belong; from farms to freedom.
Heady stuff, this. Powerful—the stuff of Dian Fossey and Digit. Reading it and seeing it, hearing the firsthand tales of the bears’ suffering, certainly has made me want to do all I can to help. I am impressed with Jill and her team, many of them my friends, who undergo hours and weeks of mental anguish themselves helping these bears through surgery and into recovery, raising funds for their care, building sanctuaries to house them. I wish deeply that I thought their good intentions are the solution to the problem. But, stubborn as I am, I cannot seem to shake my fear for China’s wild bears, nor my gut instinct that the good intentions of AAF are often misguided.

Many of the bears that AAF has received are mysteriously missing paws, even entire legs. It was not hard for a researcher like my husband to identify these bears’ source. The wild. Such bears had obviously been victims of leg traps or cable snares. Though bears in farms are now supposed to be captive-bred, it’s clear that many aren’t. But what is unclear is how many. And, since there are no reliable population estimates for Asiatic black bears in China (China says 50,000; World Wildlife Fund says 15-30,000), it’s impossible to know what percentage of that population finds its way into squeeze cages via the state-supported bear farms. Recently, we have been told that six more bears were received in Chengdu, all wild-caught, four with front paws removed or damaged by snares. As we climb down from the bear observation walk, I cannot help but ask the rescue center’s keeper. “What about populations in the wild? Is anything being done for them?”

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37 Dian Fossey was a naturalist who spearheaded conservation for mountain gorillas in the Virunga Mountains of Africa. Digit, her most beloved gorilla, was killed by poachers, most likely in retaliation for Fossey’s overbearing methods. Dian herself was eventually murdered.

38 Fan and Song are adamant that the population estimate of 50,000 bears is scientifically accurate. In fact, they note rather defensively that, “There was a guess of 20,000 on the population for Asiatic black bear in China...This estimate was made from an emotional guess rather than scientific information...” (11)
He looks at me quizzically. "The wild?"

"Yes," I say. "Wild bears. Are there plans to put these bears back in the wild or to breed cubs from them that will be returned to the wild?" I am worried at first that I have spoken too fast or with too complex a phraseology, but he understands.

He nods and his brow creases a little, and I already know the answer before he says it. "Every bear that comes in the center is neutered. It causes less trouble. We don't plan to return them to the wild."

"But..."

Questions swirl, but an impatient mini-bus driver has been waiting for over half an hour to take us to the Xiangjiang Zoo. There is no time for more questions, and I do not want to say anything that might make these people feel their work is not respected or necessary. I do not say anything to Tiger, for it is already obvious to me that she feels this work is vital and morally correct. She often spends her only free time from her practice with the bears, traveling to China to operate on them. Hers is a popular viewpoint, practically the status quo among British expatriates and the Chinese colleagues they influence. As veterinarians and animal welfare activists, they are concerned more with the animals as individuals than as populations. The management of animals as natural resources, of populations as links in a living chain of ecosystems, never crosses their minds.

No one should argue with the fact that bear farming is a form of cruelty that should not be tolerated, especially since there are alternatives to bear bile as a treatment. The Japanese have synthesized UCDA since the 1950s, and pills are available that are 99% pure UCDA. (A bear gallbladder may range anywhere from containing 15-30%).
Plant-based remedies are also available, and known to many TCM practitioners. Zhu Yanling, an ancient Chinese doctor wrote: “To take life for the purpose of extending human life is not in the service of life.” Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in the case of animals like the bears. Yet, there is still an abiding preference for wild-caught bear galls, with farmed bear bile as a lesser substitute. Ironically, it may be that belief in the power of the wild as embodied by the bears, will be their undoing, just as with the tigers.

But AAF’s viewpoint on how to manage the bear farm problem is just as problematic, for one essential reason. It refuses to see the larger picture, even to the point of denying death. As Gary Snyder noted, we must “…consider a ‘depth ecology’ that would go to the dark side of nature—the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite…[E]xcluding the forces of death and destructiveness somehow deprives the work of art of full participation in beauty”.\textsuperscript{39} It is very obvious that AAF has not considered ecology of any depth at all. Discussing this problem with other conservation organizations, like the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, raises a sharp contrast to AAF’s myopic mission. A protocol, drafted by WCS’ Director of Asia Programs and submitted to IUCN, calls specifically for the euthanization of animals in circumstances like those of the bears.\textsuperscript{40} If they cannot be returned to the wild, then their continued existence is pointless. Let the money that would be spent to maintain such animals in captive perpetuity be used to secure and maintain habitat and to determine how many wild bears we can still save.

My husband’s experiences at the bear rescue center in Chengdu certainly drove AAF’s lack of interest in conservation home for him. He had hoped to convince AAF


\textsuperscript{40} Dr. Joshua Ginsberg, personal communication.
that a population study might be an excellent focus, but he quickly saw that the organization was emotionally incapable of pursuing such work. When he showed AAF staff videos of American black bear research he’d done, which involved leg-hold trapping, darting, and radio-collaring for population studies, his audience was thoroughly horrified. They could not stomach the cruelty of the research to the individual and see its potential benefits to the entire population. Andrew didn’t even bother to mention the possibility of legal sale of already-harvested American black bear galls to shortcut the bear bile black market in Asia. Though it is a controversial proposal, some biologists like my husband, feel that it may make the best use of a part of a bear that has already been legally killed.\footnote{Again, this is an extremely controversial issue for a number of reasons, and I do not present it here as the only solution. Mostly, it is here as an example of how many wildlife groups are incapable of thinking outside their own boxes.} The sales generated could go back into funds for American bear management, and could potentially take the pressure off Chinese bears, which, despite Chinese protests to the contrary, are obviously still being poached. But the anti-hunting talk during mealtimes made it clear that AAF staff would be opposed to funds or support from such a source.

When Andrew further toured the facility, he was also gravely concerned about the sanctuary’s design. Since 500 bears will be housed at the sanctuary, and because there is little land, bears may sometimes be placed up to ten in a single enclosure. It is extremely unnatural to them to be in such constant close proximity to their own species. The Asiatic black bear, like the American, prefers to be solitary most of the year, except during mating. Fights in the sanctuary are therefore inevitable, but the keepers seemed extremely distressed when such activity ensued. The bears’ Winnie-the-Pooh image must
be retained at all costs, even to the point of sacrificing the truth of the bears' own biology.

Outdoor areas were available, but it was clear to my husband that the bears would make short work of these. There was great surprise when he mentioned this. "You must do more to protect the trees," he told one of the facility planners. "Asiatic black bears sometimes like to build nests in trees," he said, "and they'll destroy this tiny lot in a matter of weeks." But the man shrugged him off in disbelief. The fences also weren't designed with the protection of either bears or people in mind. It made for a potentially dangerous situation, he noted, especially if an enraged bear had a mind to lash out at a person. But again, the man shrugged him off. "Our bears won't hurt anyone," he said.

That idea was among the most disturbing to my husband. He watched Jill feed a bear from her mouth, holding the piece of apple between her teeth so that a bear could take it from her in a kind of ursine-human kiss. He watched the bears lash out at each other, at their keepers, time and again. Having worked with bears, he is aware of their flashpoint temper, their great need for personal space. He had seen one of his fellow researchers nearly killed by a bear in a leg-hold trap. Like any wild thing, bears are not predictable and deserving of our respect. To hand-or mouth-feed bears, to treat them like Disney characters or children, denies them an essential dignity. And these bears, psychologically traumatized as they have been, deserve perhaps more caution even than their cousins in the wild. The idea that they are to be sensitized to human beings to "encourage trust for the very same species that caused them pain" begs sanity.

The current situation may be better for these rescued bears as individuals, but the population in the long term could easily be harmed by AAF's practices. Since each
rescued bear is neutered upon arrival and there are no plans to rehabilitate or return them to their natural habitats, genes are irrevocably lost. And, since it's obvious that bears are still being taken out of the wild, there's no way to discern the fate of wild populations. It's as though someone has poked a small hole in a balloon, and the air is slowly leaking out. But is the hole small? Is the leak slow? It's impossible to tell. Meanwhile, bears that could determine the future of their species are rotting away in what amounts to a bear retirement home.

Unfortunately, however, we humans are much better at removing species from the wild than we are at returning them. Many of the bile bears have been in captivity too long to live on their own in the wild. Many are also critically injured, though bears with missing paws or legs can often survive quite well in nature. It's also unclear whether bear behaviors are entirely learned or instinctual, though recent findings with released cubs may indicate that young bears can learn to survive if they are given the chance. Something more must and should be done. Population studies are needed to assess the remaining populations of Asiatic black bears in the wild. Euthanasia criteria, like WCS' aforementioned IUCN proposal, should be adopted that would establish a triage system for the bears. For those that can be rehabilitated and released into the wild, every effort should be made to do so, including learning new techniques and methods. For those that are simply too ill or injured, they should be humanely euthanized with the promise that such needless suffering will not continue.
We leave the bears for the Xiangjiang Zoo, arriving in the worst heat of the day.
The zoo seems barren from the outside; we wander across the smoking pavement in
search of the ticket booth. Passing deserted stands that sell dried crocodile meat along
with fluffy bunnies and colorful pencils, we finally find the zoo safari bus. Our rumbling
coach takes us through rusting gates into enclosure after enclosure of animals of every
kind and description. In every cage, animals are so crowded that the effects of
overpopulation are visible on virtually every hide, in every missing eye or ear. When we
enter the African plains section, we watch a kudu give birth helplessly against a fence
while the members of our shuttle peer at her with voyeuristic delight. Ducks crowd and
fight with sheep; giraffes hang their tongues out over the heads of scrawny oryxes.

I am not used to this. I think of the North Carolina Zoo, where one must use
binoculars just to see the gazelles and elephants, few and far between in the distance of
their enclosure. When I ask Tiger why so many animals are crowded into such a small
space, she says, “Well, the Chinese feel that when animals are breeding, that’s a sign that
they’re happy. It’s a sign of success.” The look on her face, the low tone of her voice,
shows that she does not agree with this, either. Stress is obvious on the animals’ faces
and in their body movements. There is another word for endless growth. Cancer.

We enter the zoo proper on foot, taking our time around the wide ponds packed
full of black swans and other waterfowl I can’t identify. We wander through wooded
paths where zookeepers give bird shows to ear-splitting, Cantopop music while their
charges fly tiredly from post to wire and back again. It is not much different than many
bird shows I’ve seen in the States, except for the deafening racket of the music and the
announcers. But I wonder about the show’s message, if the keepers are telling their
audiences about the plight of these beautiful birds in the wild, or if this is just a bit of entertainment like any other concert or puppet show. I cannot understand their words, of course, so I suppose I will never know.

I am particularly chilled when we come to the chimpanzee exhibit. There, the chimpanzees drift around what looks like a bombed-out, indoor playground. Old metal picnic tables, swing sets, and seesaws are bolted to the floor. Chains, ostensibly for climbing, hang from the ceiling. The rusting, bare bolts and many of the playthings are obviously broken. Adjacent to this is a room very similar to a human children’s classroom, with blackboard, brightly colored letters and desks. Some of the chimpanzees wear diapers. During peak zoo hours, are the chimpanzees forced to sit in the desks like children? I don’t want to know. Their suffering is even more obvious than that of the other animals. They look at us with dull, crazy eyes, wandering from broken swing set to coiled chain. Is this all that is left to our wildlife? Are these concrete hells the endpoint of evolution? I turn away, speechless.

What do the Chinese truly think of animals? From much of what I have seen and heard, they seem insensitive to animals, and at worst, tyrannically cruel. In February of this year, a boy was caught at the Shanghai Zoo pouring sulfuric acid on an Asiatic black bear’s back “to see if they are really as stupid as people say they are”. How this would have proved the animal’s ignorance is anyone’s guess, although it certainly would assure me of humanity’s. Such random and senseless acts suggest an aggression towards nature that surprises me given the veneration and reliance on nature that abounds in Chinese literature, culture, and art. Chinese poetry expresses the cosmic principles of Nature, as
Gary Snyder notes in *Practice of the Wild*.\(^2\) How then can such a people be so blind to these self-same ideals?

Strangely, I have come to expect this dichotomy if not to entirely accept it. Puzzled by the dried crocodile meat I’ve seen for sale at the gift stands earlier, I soon find that the entire zoo is actually a crocodile farm. Tiger’s smallest daughter, Amber, loves the scaly reptiles, yelling in her sweet child-voice, “Look, Mommy, THE CROCODYLES!!” at every opportunity. Enclosures for them wind throughout the zoo, and each is packed with hundreds of the yawning, snapping beasts. Probably the only thing keeping the zoo afloat financially is the meat and hides sold from these animals. Farming animals in a zoo seems incongruous, if not patently hypocritical. But I also know that Western zoos can sometimes be little better, auctioning off their stock to game farms or collectors at private sales. Crocodiles do not inspire much adulation in most people; it seems to take an imaginative little girl like Amber to love them. But it is still disturbing to see a zoo openly flaunting its status as a slaughterhouse.

Bemused by all this, I observe Tiger at a nearby giant tortoise pen. The tortoise is huge, whether Aldabran or from the Galapagos, I am unsure. He wades toward Tiger on his stumpy elephant legs, stretching out his neck and watching her with eyes like wet obsidian. She puts her hand easily through the wooden fence, reaching to scratch him on his scaly neck. He stretches even harder to reach her fingers, and I would almost swear that the look on his face, if turtles can be said to have expressions, is one of pure delight. Amber and Cally giggle with pleasure at watching their mother giving a tortoise a good

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scratch as though he were a dog or cat. Other people come to watch. Tiger and the
tortoise quickly gather a photo-snapping crowd. I tense.

An old keeper suddenly emerges with a broom, stalking towards the spectacle in
squelching rubber boots. His blows land squarely on the turtle’s head and forelegs, while
he remonstrates Tiger in rapid Anglo-Chinese that I can’t follow. She stands, shouting
back at him while the tortoise pulls its head in as far as it can, blinking and snorting. “I
wasn’t doing anything!” she yells “It was all perfectly fine!” Henry appears from a
scouting trip to find food, and escorts his wife and the children away, trying to apologize
to the keeper at the same time.

I follow, helplessly ambivalent. It is beautiful to watch human and animal
connect thus, to see a human finally give what it appears an animal wants. It seems so
simple and harmless, a selfless reaching across the gap of species. Shierry Nicholson
writes that:

Identification with the wild Other, many would say, is precisely what may
allow wild things to be saved. The notion of an “extended self” or an
“ecological consciousness” speaks to this idea. If empathy and the sense
of self can be extended beyond our identification with human groups...to
the natural world, perhaps we can stop destroying nature. This broader
self that identified with the natural world would be an “ecological self”—a
self that identifies with greater wholes. We would then defend the larger
world of nature just as we would defend members of our own family. I
am part of the rainforest protecting itself, says John Seed, echoing this
idea.43

But such thoughts are intensely naïve. First, there are obviously many who do not
share such a view, like the old zookeeper, and who would reject any such notions
outright. And it is not humans that pay the price for the disagreement. At our present
level of immaturity as a species, how can we develop an “ecological self” without

anthropomorphizing everything? When John Livingston says, “...when I say the fate of the sea turtle or the tiger or the gibbon is mine, I mean it. All that is in my universe is not merely mine, it is me. And I shall defend myself,” not many understand the true significance of such a statement. It means not only defending the fates of the individual sea turtle, tiger, or gibbon, but also the fate of their species’ entire evolution, the entire ecosystem that shaped and is shaped by them. It often means leaving animals and ecosystems to their own devices. And doing that is often beyond our physical, spiritual, or emotional capabilities.

We pass onwards through an immense treasure trove of China’s wildlife locked in concrete and metal chests. Chinese giant salamanders crawl through a barren, shaded pool. An unidentifiable owl stares from a single branch bolted through the chain link. Two pandas stay within their concrete-floored room in the air-conditioning rather than risk the hot, dead yard of their enclosure. Across from the pandas, we stop at a columnar cage split by a chain link curtain. Two families of golden monkeys are housed in these adjacent pens, but at the moment, only one male sits out in the open.

Since my first glimpse of these creatures on the cover of Natural History magazine, I have feared them. Something about them looks evil--their flat, blue lips; their vampire teeth; their shaggy, golden pelts. They are some of the rarest and most elusive primates in the world. Living in the high mountains of Yunnan province, golden monkeys inhabit the lush evergreen oak forests of the heights and feed mostly off the lichen that thrives there. They are also known as ventriloquists; the sounds they make

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can sometimes appear to come from nowhere, confounding researchers and hunters alike. The male grooms himself without much interest while a youngster frolics near the holding area entrance. A female appears, but the male ignores her. This is typical of golden monkeys; part of the reason for their endangerment lies in their low reproductive rate. A female may spend the better part of a year wooing the male of her harem, presenting, grooming, and singing to him before he finally capitulates to a brief erotic interlude.

But when another, younger male emerges from his holding area in the adjacent pen, the male's disposition alters. He throws back his head, his mouth stretching and widening from blue to white, displaying a row of needle teeth. Though his throat does not move, a banshee wail rips the air. My ears ring with sound that comes from everywhere and nowhere at once; my senses reverberate with this primal scream. This is more than territorial showboating. It protests the outrage of this prison, this sentence of living death. It draws along its razor-edge the suffering of all those beings to whom we are deaf—the black bears, the giant salamanders, the scarred tigers, and crowded crocodiles. It opens a wound in me that is the sound of logged trees, dammed rivers, poached animals, polluted bays. As a member of the imprisoning species, I am now imprisoned, and, like a dog tormented by a siren, I want to howl with grief.

But, suddenly, it ends. The echoes die into the heat and the drone of human voices returns. The monkey looks at me from flat, almost almond-shaped eyes with what I might consider wicked satisfaction. I am reminded of the Monkey King, or Sun Wu Kong, as he is called in Chinese. He is perhaps the most popular figure in all of Chinese myth and legend, even more so than Lady White Snake. He is featured in hundreds of
ancient tales and operas. (And even in advertisements for mobile phone companies, as I have often seen on the train station billboards). He is the trickster god, the wild element who was able to confound even the Buddha. In the classic novel, *Journey to the West*, he is being punished for, among other things, stealing and eating the peaches of immortality. As part of his sentence, Kuan Yin (Kwun Yum) places him on a quest with a monk named Tripitaka and his comrades to retrieve some sacred scrolls from the West. She places a golden band on the Monkey King’s brow that keeps him in subservience to Tripitaka. He cannot remove this band; if he even tries, he will suffer a terrible headache. If he refuses to obey the monk’s commands, he will suffer similar pain.

This tale is mythical code for subjugation of the wild. As the embodiment of compassion, perhaps Kwun Yum placed this band on the brow of wild Nature to help humans survive and subsist in an often extremely hostile world. But we have gone beyond survival, beyond subsistence. We must now use compassion to remove this band, and release the wild element, Sun Wu Kung, back to his native home. This is release on every level, not just the physical. We must release all of our perceptions of the wild and let it be itself. We must learn to discriminate between what we project onto Nature and what actually is. Bears can never fulfill their evolutionary destinies as neutered, fat teddy bears crammed ten to a cage. Golden coin turtles and golden monkeys, removed from their habitats and placed in breeding compounds, are irrevocably altered by such a shift, as are the mountain ecosystems they inhabit. Breeding for breeding’s sake is not a sign of satisfaction in any animal, human or otherwise.

The vision of conservation as intervention must change. It is yet another form of human predation. Conservation cannot be served by locking animals into a living death.
As Jack Turner notes, "Removed from their home, living things become marginal, and what becomes marginal is diminished or destroyed." This is true for both wildlife and their habitats. Without pandas or golden monkeys, what are the mountains of Wolong or Yunnan but barren patches of bamboo? Without the cloud forests, what are the golden monkeys and pandas but purposeless, if living, *objets d'art*? The monkey is the cloud forest; the cloud forest is the monkey. There can be no separation without marginalization, no marginalization without eventual annihilation.

On a Chinese website about endangered wildlife, the text reads: "There live a small number of Golden Monkey in China now. Chinese do something to protect them. They are very lovely." I am most troubled and amused by the second sentence. What is the "something"? Is it locking them in cages like this? Is it taking them into research facilities to make clones out of them, as they are attempting to do with the panda? Perhaps the solution is too complex to post in English, especially for people who are extremely challenged by the language. Yet this vagueness cuts to the heart of the central problem of wildlife conservation. No one knows what we are doing or why. There is no ultimate plan, no ultimate goal. The Chinese do something. What that something is, it seems even they do not know.

As we are leaving the zoo, two Chinese veterinarians spot Tiger. Her flaming hair makes her hard to miss. She is well known to them, well respected for her work with wildlife. They chatter at her, keeping her barricaded in a friendly, if somewhat disturbing way, against a fence. Only when Henry returns from the restrooms with Cally do we

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understand what the veterinarians want. They are begging her to come to their offices. They have so many questions; there are sick animals...She looks for a moment like she might comply, and I am preparing myself to aid her in some hopelessly nasty task—cleaning pus from an abscess on a turtle’s behind or delivering a baby giraffe. But she says kindly and firmly for Henry to translate, “No, I’m afraid I can’t stay today.” Their disappointment is obvious as they go back to their work. We flee toward the gate before any absolute disaster can happen.

Their eager desire to learn is saddening and heartening at the same time. It is impossible to know whether these men have actually chosen this job or not. Whether they even have any real veterinary training is questionable. In a country where people for many years were not allowed to choose their own professions, it is likely that they know next to nothing about the precious charges they keep. George Schaller was astounded by this during the panda project. He had assumed, as would most Westerners, that people participated in such research because they wanted to be there. But many of his assistants had absolutely no interest in the work, consigned to it as they were by the Chinese government. Their apathy had consequences for at least one of the pandas he studied. But here I am encouraged to see that these men honestly want to learn. They are eager to receive any training they can. When will we start providing it?

This is perhaps one of the most disturbing problems with conservation in China. Local people are seldom invited to participate in the process of environmental decision making, especially in regards to decisions of groups like AAF. There were no plans in Panyu or Chengdu to include the local people in any way. If anything, they wanted to shun the local people as much as possible, hiring them only as keepers or food-preparers.
This is a recipe for disaster. When you spend millions to keep bears in honey and raisins for the rest of their lives, while the people around them can often barely feed themselves, you only cultivate hatred and misunderstanding of conservation aims.

For, whether we like it or not, humans are the essential component in the equation of conservation. We have ignored this for many decades at great peril, both to the natural world and ourselves. Our choices determine how the great drama of evolution will continue to unfold. If we acknowledge other species as kindred, then we must alter our treatment of them and teach other human beings how to foster that respect. "To be kindred does not mean we should treat animals as our babies. It means instead a sense of many connections and transformations—us into them, them into us, and them into each other from the beginning of time. To be kindred means to share consciously in the stream of life," says Paul Shepard.46 Such a sharing embraces true freedom—the chances of death and life in the wild for all species who make their home there.

Ultimately, then, we must enact a form of creative conservation that takes into account both humans and the myriad beings. Creative conservation "...refers to the intelligent conversion of resources, whereby their continued utilization becomes possible in an evolutionary sense...It is merely the matter of the actual state of our consciousness that determines the nature of conversion; and the highest level of conversion or transformation, in which one finds his true nature, is in religions called salvation."47

On my way back to what has become my home, I am still kissing Tiger and the girls goodbye, still trading naughty words with Henry in Cantonese, still seeing the bears lumbering around their pen. Sha Tin’s gaudy mall swallows me, people darting in its mouth like fish. Marble and gilt glitters everywhere, an attempt to hide the fact that, like everything else, this building is simply another block of concrete and steel. We swarm past Maxim’s, a fast-food restaurant where the barbecued eyes of geese and duck wink at me from their turning spits.

I skirt a giant soundstage in the middle of the mall. A banner proclaims loudly: Shatin Anglican Church. And under that: Church on Fire. A big white man on stage says, “...So, would you please welcome the Texas Girl’s Choir.” It is almost enough to make me stop and stare, except that I see many eyes turning to me, the only nearby gweilo. The blonde and cream girls, in their red pinafores and white kneesocks, are already filing like a military corps onto the stage. I hurry past the chubby army of God before they open their pink mouths to sing.

Too wired to get on the train, I buy an overpriced cappuccino and go outside. In the rain-soaked, blue evening, I listen to magpie robins singing in a small patch of trees by the town hall. I identify them by their posture, so strikingly like the mockingbird of home. But their song is liquid and soft in the weeping branches of the pines, and if I focus hard enough, I can almost imagine away the skyscrapers, the bamboo scaffolding, the smell of moldering pollution from the road nearby. I can almost raze the buildings with my mind, let the mangroves curve around the coast, bring back the pearl pools and the evergreen jungles on the heights. It is an exercise I have grown all too used to perfecting in my spare time.
When I finally tire of trying to make the impossible possible, the red pinafores and their white kneesocks are marching back off the stage. A large woman pounds away on a tiny electronic keyboard, while the white man gets back up on the stage and reassures the crowd. “The girls will be back in a minute. They have to change their costumes. But while they’re gone, I want to tell you about a man named Jesus…” I can hear the Cantonese translation softer, more insistent as I speed up. I look to see if anyone is leaning forward in anticipation, to see if anyone is listening. But though they stand there, mute and waiting, with the roar of the crowd around them, I see little expression pass across their faces. It is as though they are hidden inside themselves. I hurry towards the train, trying to disappear within them.

As the train begins to pull away from the platform, we pass the giant IKEA store, locked in its glittering round of blue glass. Behind it, I have often caught glimpses of the Ten Thousand Buddhas monastery. It was here that I saw my first monk, pulling his little luggage cart full of groceries behind him. I am embarrassed to admit that I stared at him, watching him over my shoulder until Andrew hissed at me to watch where I was going. But to see the shaved head, the long, gray robes and cloth sandals, was a glimpse into the China I seek, the China of roving dragons and hidden tigers, the China that I know still hides behind the glitter and gilt facades.

I try to hold all the paradoxes in my mind as the train slides past Fanling, Fo Tan, University, back towards Lo Wu, the place from whence I came only hours ago. T-shirts say “Hysteric Glamour” and “Bathing Ape” as though these phrases mean something, like the trendy Chinese prints that say nothing at home. A teepee crouches next to the new, glamorous resort building in Tai Po Kau. I move through the crowds as though
dreaming, trying not to knock out small children with my umbrella or shoulder bag. I see over a sea of black hair, and the occasional failed attempt at blonde or red. Everything is a few inches shorter than it should be; sometimes I feel I am walking on small stilts.

I arrive at Pak Ngau Shek, the place that is now my home. The deepening twilight dusts everything with a fine, blue ash. The bushy tops of the peach trees, the tile houses, the small grave shrines, even the roads, are softened into blueness. The path seems smoky and insubstantial as I walk it. In the typhoon last week, one tree lost a blossom-laden limb and the flower lies on the ground, refusing to die like a severed but undead organ. The green bananas cluster like unwanted treasures behind it. I remember how Regina told me to beware of banana trees once. The giant flower is like a secret fallen from ghostly lips, dark gift cut untimely from beneath its fanned shelter. I walk by, feeling the fear and the yearning, how they die and do not die, and in their very being, give to the life of this land. The banana trees whisper, *Let the Monkey King go free.*
CONCLUSION

My time in Hong Kong came abruptly to an end. Word came that my father was dying of a very aggressive form of cancer, and his doctors warned that he would be gone by the end of the summer. I agonized for days, but in the end, I chose to return to the United States, leaving behind a life and country my husband and I felt we had barely begun to understand.

On my last day at the Farm, I went to say goodbye to all the places that I had loved, the places where I had often walked, thinking about this thesis. There was a green pool I loved to visit near the Raptor Sanctuary, a place where the young Lam Tsuen River slowly was sculpting one boulder into two. Hong Kong newts and freshwater arrow crabs with their peculiarly long arms frequented the stream. But none of them were visible as I followed it upwards. As I approached the pool through the screen of ferns, palms, and evergreen oaks, a white bird took flight, most likely a Chinese pond heron in breeding plumage.

I was startled to realize how much this place had become part of my consciousness, how creatures and plants here were as familiar, if not more so now, than those back in Virginia. The transformation had happened entirely by itself; I had merely been its willing participant. Within us, there still nests a tiny animal, a being that can teach us how to know Nature if we will let it. In the West, we have wrestled with the division of human and animal since the rise of civilization, most particularly since the birth of Western science and logic. For too long, we have thought ourselves separate from Nature, though most recent discoveries, including my own small ones, prove the contrary. Yet, we still live in the way of the divided—thieving, plundering, and raping,
then “rehabilitating” the wild as we see fit.

But if we are animals and part of Nature, how do we overcome the boundaries that beset us? For, like it or not, we have imposed boundaries that for the vast majority of human society at this time are irrevocable. We have traded caves for condos, sunsets for sitcoms, birdsong for boomboxes. We did this because we wanted an easier life, an end to the infestations, diseases, and terrors of the dark that come with being in the field of Nature. We have consistently worked to annihilate death but in the process we stand to annihilate life as well. For as we are inseparably animal and human, life and death are similarly conjoined—yin and yang interconnected, interdependent, all things vitalized by the moving power of qi.

I chewed on this thought as I took my final walk back down the slope towards my office. A flash of gold caught my eye, and I turned toward it, seeking the butterfly that must be floating nearby. But then the pattern emerged, and I gasped. Not butterfly, but spider. Giant woodland spider, to be exact. She depended from a golden web, her entire body longer and wider than my hand. Her abdomen alone was larger and thicker than my thumb, gold-gilded black velvet. Scarlet chelicerae were sunk into a huge katydid. The spider’s jaws pulsated as she sucked the thick, rich life, drawing all its color into herself with a patience and voracity that sickened and drew me. I got as close as I could—I wanted to touch, to be in that moment with her of sucking the marrow of that life.

But just as I wanted this, I knew the boundary between us must remain. Until we choose to integrate ourselves more thoroughly into the processes of the wild, these artificial boundaries must be maintained. In our rush to correct the wrongs we have done, we are perhaps creating more in the name of our self-indulgent guilt. Shierry Nicholsen:
It is important to acknowledge how reluctant we are to settle our own questions, to accept the obvious and deal with the consequences of facing the truth. As [Thomas] Berry says, we are reluctant to think that what we are doing is inherently incompatible with the workings of the larger world. Think how much information we have put forward and how many times we have written things that point so compellingly to the same conclusions, yet we keep debating the questions over and over again...Why this temporizing? Why is it so difficult to accept that something really cannot be saved, that a change must occur...48

Until we can return to the earth as mature human animals, understanding the physical, spiritual, emotional, and evolutionary consequences of our actions, perhaps the best we can do is to let the wild and its inhabitants simply be. For whether we touch or are touched by them, the truth of the connection is there. We are all held together in the web, and it is only our fear and hubris that makes us think otherwise.

Jack Turner says that the word for the "ten thousand things" that the Buddhists say emerge from the void can also be translated as "intimacy."49 By our physical absence, perhaps we can create even more intimacy than with our intervention. But is our love strong enough that we can leave Nature alone? Only when the animals no longer run from our approach, will we know the difference.

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