

Commerce on the agora  
in close proximity to the core of political power

At the language school you made fifteen dollars an hour tutoring kids, adventurous housewives, mid-level corporate strivers, and everybody in between, almost all touchingly driven to improve their English. Two hundred Yuan for one hundred minutes, not bad, though later it was revealed the school charged six hundred Yuan, taking a big cut. Whatever, pretty good money, especially since China was so cheap. And the students offered an exceptional window into the national psyche. You taught, or tried to teach, or at least help them with their English, and in exchange you got to ask them all about China and find out what they really thought about things. Candor came out, and it proved invaluable since it wasn't like you could go up to someone on the street and say, hey, what do you think of the Japanese? Or Mao? What's up with everyone carrying their dogs? Or what's the deal with those irritating commercials playing at maximum volume on monitors in the subway? In that hour and a half in the little cubicles things got close and secrets and outré attitudes spilled, and it could be fascinating. It was one of the best ways within my means to find out about what regular, or at least the ones who could afford six hundred Kuai an hour, Chinese people were all about.

That had been going on for a month, meeting new students, and trying to suss out the internal politics of the people who worked there, the "girls" in their black business pants and white button-up shirts who ran the place, set up the appointments, introduced you to new students and acted as agents, putting you together with students. Like a dating service. Things were going along fine and then one day Karen called, the queen bee who ran the office. They phoned all the time with frantic requests for you to come in to meet some student who would be "perfect for you!" She said, "Can you meet these clients? All you have to do is wear a suit. Do you have

a suit? OK. They will pay one thousand Kuai for one hour.”

A little fishy, but also exciting and novel and unknown. And fishy was par for the course, these semi-illegal or ambiguously sketchy arrangements so why be put off by that? And one thousand Kuai! One hundred and fifty dollars for one hour? That was unheard of and a veritable fortune. Whatever Karen had up her sleeve a chance at making one thousand Kuai was one I couldn't afford to pass up. Implying urgency Karen said I needed to get up there that day at six pm, so I put on my one suit, used a paper towel to wipe the dust off the one pair of dress shoes I never wore, and went out to get the 690 Bus up to Xian Lu. Mashed in there with the proletariat, shivering in the unheated bus, standing the whole way because of rush hour. Going up to the 17th floor of one of Beijing's most hideous glass and concrete office towers (and that's saying a lot) I walked into Best English just on time. At that hour it was always crowded with parents waiting for their kids and a tutor or two lounging about in the little waiting area with the four sad plastic chairs and plastic flowers in a dry vase as the usual babel of Chinese and English emanated from the cubicles. Karen emerged from the little office where the girls worked, exclaimed, "You're here!" and ushered me into the room with its one table, three desks, and a refrigerator full of half-eaten take-out food and sodas.

Sitting by the one table were three people who looked mildly out of place but also totally at ease. They had an air of professionalism that you didn't see there often, and were also dressed nicer than the norm, the two men wearing suits and the woman wearing a smart woman's business type of outfit. They were middle-aged, or around there, though one guy looked "younger" although not exactly young, and his clothes were slightly hipper. The age thing is always hard to tell. Could be forty, could be sixty. They exuded a distinctive air of seriousness crossed with laid-back confidence. I shook hands all around and Karen introduced me as a "writer" who had worked for American magazines and knew a lot about "architecture." I had no idea what she was talking about. A general summation with the usual amount of total bullshit and exaggeration, as if I was a star in my field. Of course if that were true I wouldn't be tutoring English at this sub-par English school out by the 4th Ring Road. But that was typical, the girls always sang the teachers' praises to outrageous heights, that being their job, plus they worked on commission. She said that, they listened and nodded and smiled, and then she stepped back to observe. The older looking gentleman introduced himself in semi-sufficient English as "David," obviously not his real name, and the other one Paul (actually his real name), and the woman as "Olivia."

David handed me his card, for a design and construction firm, and told me they were architects. I was completely mystified about what they

wanted. David went on to explain, with help from Olivia, whose English was more fluent, that they had a meeting planned with a real estate firm about designing an 88,000 square meter shopping center, and they wanted me to read something. Could I read something? "Sure," I said. They took out some papers and showed me renderings of a "Convention Shopping Center" with "The building was width and giant design. Landmark building. Forever building" written underneath the image. Another page had an elevation rendering with "The extraventricular elevations" and "Energy – eye-catching – colorful." There were some other plans and pictures. "I see," I said. "You're designing a shopping center. There are a lot of new shopping centers in China." "Yes," David said, "there are."

He then put a piece of paper in front of me entitled "Preface" and I read through the first paragraph. "From early times on commerce has been a major factor in the economic and social development of cities and communities. In antiquity, the activity of traders enlivened and formed city centers. In ancient cities, commerce was given a prominent location directly on the Agora or the Forum Romanum in close proximity to the core of political power. In medieval times, and at the beginning of the modern age, commerce became the basis for prosperity for individual families such as the Fuggers or for cities such as Venice, Genova, Florence as well as the cities of the Hanseatic Federation." I looked up at the three of them, incredulous. Or maybe a better way of putting is amused and amazed, because for one thing, the Agora and Fuggers aren't words you hear everyday, and I definitely hadn't in Beijing. And the Hanseatic Federation? I had some vague notions about the 13th to 17th Century northern German commercial league, but really, I didn't know anything about that. The document was both ridiculous and captivating. They smiled at me, and I went back to reading.

"The present-day galleries, passages, shopping centers, department stores, and retail stores in shopping centers comprise the broad range of today's commercial potential." Uh-huh. And there was more, including "The architecture of commerce hereby defines the transition between public and private spaces," and "The interconnection between urban design and architectural quality is a key factor in the success of inner-city retail commerce that plays a major role in enlivening entire urban quarters." I read it all the way through, and looked up and basically said, yeah, I get it. I didn't know where they got this pseudo-academic theory of commerce eyewash, but I knew the language, and started to get an inkling of what they were going for. "So," Paul said, "Do you think you can read that for a meeting? Actually you don't have to read it, just use that as a starting point." His eyes twinkled mischievously. I was still bewildered but it started to come into focus, just what these three apparitions from outer space were looking for, and more importantly were willing to pay one thousand Kuai an hour for.



It turns out they were from Canada. Though not really. Like many things in China it was a ball of confusion. David and Olivia were as Chinese as you could get, hailing from Beijing, but had moved to Canada twenty years previously and built up a successful architectural practice there. Paul was from Hong Kong, so he was ethnically “Chinese” but not Chinese in the way David and Olivia were, since he had grown up in British-controlled Hong Kong prior to 1997 and like many others of his generation decided it was best to get the hell out of town when the changeover happened and emigrated to Canada, where he set up shop as a interior designer and crossed paths with David and Olivia. So Paul was Chinese, but a different kind, in between, a liminal Chinese, and his English was much better, his manner was more easy-going, and he dressed and looked a bit more stylish and “sophisticated.” David and Olivia were well dressed, but conservatively so. Anyway they had a good thing going in Canada but now that China was booming they’d set up an office in Beijing. That made sense on a lot of levels, one of the main ones is that being “foreign” and Chinese at the same time gave them an immense advantage over their competitors because they had foreign cachet and experience along with intimate knowledge of the language, the customs, the paths of influence, and of being Chinese. Which is a king-sized help in China. But they wanted another advantage and I was somehow connected to that, though I hadn’t figured out why yet.

Even if I was still out-of-the-loop I had glimmerings, though absolutely no framework or context to imagine what exactly they were leading me into. A meeting, but where, how, when, what? Sure we were enjoying each other’s company and appeared to be on the same page, so to speak, though beyond the literal page in front of me the metaphorical one remained elusive. No matter, that would be revealed. David pushed over another piece of paper with the headline “Design Philosophy.” “The retail environment is primarily influenced by two factors: overall setting (Mall common areas) and individual components (Tenant storefronts). Both affect the perception of Arrowhead Towne Center as a prime retail establishment.” I see, Arrowhead Towne Center, wherever that was. Probably Canada. It got increasingly obtuse in the third paragraph, with “Criteria applicable to specific areas in the Mall specify certain requirements such as the extent of vertical and horizontal projections, the use of three-dimensional form and proper material use.” Totally. I looked at David and said something akin to “No problem, I’m with you,” as if it was an everyday occurrence. Go to Best English, wear a suit, meet these three, read about “the challenge of creating a successful architecture of commerce must be met within a framework that allow both a high recognition level for the retail sector and at the same time adheres to high levels of architectural quality,” (from the Preface), and asked to “just improvise.” There were some other printouts and a map of the site, which

showed the shopping center next to the Olympic Stadium that as we spoke was being built at a breakneck pace for the Olympics six months away. Did the mall already exist? Or was it going to be built practically overnight Chinese speed-building style? That detail remained unclear.

Putting the schematics back in his briefcase David asked, “Would you like to go out to dinner?” I thought maybe we’d spent enough time together but on the other hand hunger loomed so I said, “Sure, that would be great”. Down the dinghy elevator we went, through the dim small lobby into the parking lot and around the corner to a restaurant in the same building, one of these three storied glass-enclosed mega-restaurants with black government Audis and spanking brand new SUVs parked outside and an army of hollering parking attendants. Walking in we were assaulted by another army of silk dress-wearing hostesses and waitresses, and went up to the faux-opulent and excessively nouveau riche second floor. Sitting down there was banter about how long I’d been in China, did I like Chinese food, that kind of small talk, and they ordered and the serving girls came from right and left, leaving all kinds of mostly unidentifiable Chinese delicacies. A collegial and friendly atmosphere prevailed, like we’d known each other for a while. I liked these three, not just because they were going to pay me, for what I still wasn’t sure, but because they seemed like interesting people, and though I’d met a lot of interesting people in Beijing they were different, with an exotic foreignness crossed with their Chinese-ness. Conversation flowed and we could understand each other quite well, a nice break from the usual incomprehension and mangled lines of communication. David’s English was slightly halting but we could mostly get our points across to each other and Olivia and Paul’s English was fine, bordering on idiomatic. A bit strange, the whole thing, but I was enjoying myself and also excited about the possibilities with this trio who came out of nowhere to pluck me out my drab English tutoring life.

It should be mentioned that I am not and most probably will not ever be anything close to an accredited architect. That fact was right out in the open but didn’t seem to bother my new friends at all. As we talked I only dimly intuited that what really mattered was that wearing a suit and glasses I could pass for an architect and possessed a smattering of dilettantish knowledge about buildings and their designers. We discussed the under-construction Rem Koolhaas CCTV tower, whether they liked it or not, and some other new edifices going up in town. Moderately informed shop talk, especially moderately informed on my part, and slightly informed on theirs because they didn’t seem that interested in rockstarchitects and bulbous balloon natatoriums so much as, well, malls. When I asked Paul who he thought was the most well-known Chinese architect he shrugged, and when I suggested I.M. Pei he snorted and said, “He’s not really Chinese!” That made



me chortle, getting under the skin of the whole what makes you “Chinese” fixation many Chinese are fixated on, and it made me warm to this guy with his purple highlighted hair and sharp pin-stripped suit. And the other two, the husband and wife duo with their 88,000 square meter shopping mall and erudite yet practical manner. So things were sailing along while I ingested some freaky noodles and inquired when this meeting they wanted me for was going to happen. “Tomorrow, at 8 a.m.” I thought it was in a week or something. Tomorrow at 8 a.m. felt really soon. “But no problem, right, you can do it” Paul said with unquestioning optimism. “Oh, no problem at all.” We finished and as David paid the check with a wad of bills Olivia asked if I had plans for the evening. No, I replied truthfully, and it was suggested we go check out a new mall in Beijing’s financial district. Sure, why not? It’s not like I had anything more exciting going on.

In front of the restaurant as the parking attendants yelled and caused more disorder than order a valet drove up in a gleaming new white BMW 7 series sedan. The big one. And it was theirs. In the luxurious body-caressing backseat next to Olivia I stared out the window with the men in front as we cruised onto the 4th Ring Road heading west and then vectored to Beijing Financial Street on the west side. Always with the poetically evocative street names. The shopping mall was even brand newer than the car, and humongous. It’s always a screeching adjustment when you go from the grinding poverty or at least earthy reality of street level grit that is, or will soon be was, most of Beijing, into one of these ersatz “luxury” environments with Gucci and Louis Vuitton stores mixed in with posh Hong Kong Brands like Lane Crawford and gleaming mock-marble everywhere and overbearing plant terrariums and dressed up second girlfriends (èrnǎi , literally “second tit”) clacking around in their counterfeit Manolo Blahniks. We went up and down some escalators, checked out the chrome guardrails (Olivia laughed when I said, “These are sort of tacky”) and gave it a once-over. After that little tour, we went out past the migrant workers squatting and smoking, and they dropped me off after saying they’d be waiting at 7:30 on the corner.

Getting up at 6:45 am was jarring, but after some Folgers and a quick look at my script I went out into the utter madness of Dongzhimen Wai and Xindong Lu at 7:15, dodging humans walking, running and riding on or in bikes, scooters, those damn electric bicycles, motorized three-wheeled carts, cars, trucks, and buses to make it across the street to the designated southeastern corner in front of the bakery that blared Hong Kong pop music out into the street, no matter what time of day. At the appointed time a minivan pulled up and Olivia called my name without the “o” at the end, as she would call me from then on, sounding more like “Chock” than “Jock.” With a guy driving and two younger Chinese people I assumed worked for their firm we started motoring, though no sign of David and Paul. “They

will meet us there,” I was told. We headed to the 3rd Ring Road and went north, bumper to bumper with a cacophony of incessant honking and Olivia snapping at the driver, I guessed about getting there on time. With me she was relaxed, and we chatted about traffic, smog, trash along the side of the road, things like that. Upon arrival David and Paul were on the sidewalk along with two more employees, and we entered a crappy non-descript low-rise office building with a poorly lit lobby and went up the stairs into an even more poorly lit conference room with a big table and twenty chairs around it, with more chairs arranged around the perimeter. The three of us with the four employees in tow went to the head of the table and sat down with our various notebooks, phones and computers. I had a binder with my “Preface.” Hot water and tea got served in paper cups, David and Paul appeared busy, and smoothing out my rarely worn suit I glanced around with a look of curiosity, affected nonchalance, and barely concealed anxiety.

The room filled up with men wearing suits and women with a professional air and younger ones wearing traditional dresses who were more secretarial and poured the hot water and tea. More and more people, until all the chairs were occupied except for the two at the head at the table, and all the chairs by the walls too, and everybody intently typing on laptops or punching keys on phones and scribbling in notebooks. And I was sitting there thinking what the hell did I get myself into, and then noticed some small holes in the arms of my suit jacket. The urge to bolt did arise, but there was no turning back now. Paul and David weren’t really paying attention to me but would look over every once in a while and smile with this “You’re OK, right?” expression that was oddly comforting. Like they believed in me and had better things to do than worry about my state of mind. Which they most surely did.

Rustling, chitchat, and things quieted down as two middle-aged men who didn’t look any different than anyone else but who you could tell by their manner were the bosses came in. Show time. Hemming and hawing, computer fidgeting, coughing, tea slurping, and David addressed the crowd in Chinese. I watched, glanced down the length of the table, scanned the room, and then looked back at David as he said my name, the first name only. Just “Jocko.” Taking a peep at the power point presentation, I consulted my “notes,” took a deep breath, and started. Expostulating about the Hanseatic League and the modern mall concept and how from early times on commerce has been a major factor in the economic and social development of cities and communities my eyes roved around and I wandered if I was making any sense. But what did it matter? Then it dawned on me, and funny that I didn’t think of it sooner, that some of the people in the audience spoke English. Sneaky. You think they can’t but actually they can, or at least can understand better than they let on. Every couple of sentences I



would stop and David would translate, supposedly, though of course there was no way for me to know what he was saying. After he'd do that I'd plow forward about the architecture of commerce defining the transition between public and private spaces and the interconnection between urban design and architectural quality being a key factor in the success of inner-city retail commerce that enlivens entire urban quarters. I made sure to use the words "modern," "North American," and "contemporary" as much as possible, and come across breezily professional. I kind of wished Olivia was there but she wasn't so I looked up at the screen again, turned to the "audience" and talked more about the great width and design of this landmark building and the extraventricular elevations. Authoritatively, blithely, also tentatively I riffed on my "script," yammered away, and in the end spoke for less than five minutes. Then I stopped, looked over at David, nodded, he nodded back, I folded my hands on my lap, and listened.

For two hours. As plans and renderings flashed on the screen David went first, then Paul, then David, back and forth. When Paul spoke David translated into Mandarin, which was humorous because having grown up in Hong Kong Paul could easily have spoken in Mandarin, albeit with a telltale accent. But Paul and I were the exalted foreigners, we had to be translated. I surveyed the scene and thought, what a strange world. I looked the part and was that lowai who conferred cachet, I had "spoken," and now I sat, a mannequin, an actor playing a part. Which was fine by me. Entertaining, and stimulating to try and figure out what they were going on about, to match their gestures to concepts of what this huge mall (88,000 square meters!) was going to be like. Sometimes when Paul talked I'd nod, like yes, that's where the atrium should be. Because we were partners, the cool design team, and had a long-standing rapport. In between I'd drink tea and when Paul spoke I'd put my fingers to my chin and act like I was agreeing with or by non-verbal signal seconding what he propounded. Actually I thought he went on too long. The audience's attention flagged, and they fidgeted while enduring endless graphs and diagrams about "traffic flow" and "ceiling fans."

Finally the presentation came to an end, we stood up, and shook hands not with the underlings but with the bosses. Overnight David had gotten business cards made which looked like theirs in Chinese with "Jocko 设计师" added in English. Just Jocko. After handing the cards our posse went to a restaurant next door for lunch where Olivia joined us and spirits were high. I asked David "So how do you think it went?" "Great, you were good!" We had a nice lunch with genial conversation, a lot of it having nothing to do with the project, and after as we stood outside David suavely handed me 1,000 Yuan. "Thank you," I said, "I hope it was a help." "It was a help. You were very good, we'll do it again." Really? I thought it was a one shot deal. In the van with Olivia as we inched through the afternoon

traffic I pondered the risk they had taken. What if I'd been a total disaster? This big project, ten (twenty, thirty?) million dollars or more, and they were trusting that I'd "perform" well at this pretty important meeting, having just met me the night before? That's a major chance to take, it seems. Whatever, weird country. When I got dropped off Olivia mentioned that Paul wanted to go to Lan, this horrid Phillip Starck-designed nightclub, so maybe we would do that, and either way promised to call soon because there might be other opportunities.

After I was in a good mood. 1,000 Yuan didn't come along every day and along with it a glimmer of hope into my humdrum existence as a part-time English tutor and general layabout in this confusing, exotic land. There had been talk of their architecture office, that maybe I could help with the design of the mall. Preposterous, but then again, you never know. I was game. This could be my new career. A few days went by and things returned to normal so I began to chalk it up to a one-of-a-kind novelty but a week later Olivia called and asked if I wanted to go out to dinner. The next evening I was out at the corner when they drove up in the BMW sans Paul, and we went over by the Lufthansa Center where there are a bunch of five star hotels. The Mandarin Oriental? The Hilton? The Kempinski? The Ritz Carlton? One of those. Through the glossy trying-to-be-elegant lobby we proceeded to a large restaurant area where multiple food "stations" represented different areas of Chinese and world cuisine. Olivia toured me around the choices and I decided to go western and got some lamb, and some other not too complicated fare. Mashed potatoes even. Taking in the abundance I couldn't help but laugh at the contrast between this and my spots and their attendant atmospheres. Extremes of high and low. Eating Jiang Bing on the street and top ramen in your cold apartment, and then you meet some Chinese by-way-of-Canada architects and you're dining at the ritzy hotel. All in a day's work.

We sat down, with Olivia and I doing most of the talking since David's English could be stilted. She reported that they were in the running for the shopping mall after the "presentation," so this was a celebration of sorts. "You think you're going to get the job? Really? Great." An interesting three-way dynamic evolved in which David would say something, then Olivia would elaborate, and then she and I would have a more dynamic dialogue. They wanted me to "do more." Olivia flattered me, she was adamant that I knew how to match my clothes, that as a westerner I had a better eye for art, and I could be a big help to them. David nodded assent. Things were nice and informal between us, and I allowed myself to ramble on about a few of my ludicrous (at least in these parts) notions of art "not being about money." Olivia fixed me with her intense gaze and exclaimed, "I think you are a romantic!" "Too much of a romantic, Olivia," I replied. We got a good laugh



out of that. We were getting along swimmingly as the meal wound down, and I started to wonder, just what is it with these two? Are they swingers? Because we had gone far beyond “business” right away and it was like we were old friends and to put it mildly it was ambiguous. Such is the nature of these interactions. I’m pretty sure they weren’t swingers. They dropped me off at my corner, and after I treated myself to a couple whiskies at the only decent bar in Sanlitun to further commemorate my good fortune. Because I was an architect now. Or a designer. Or a mascot.

The site had been mentioned. The building did already exist, and a few days later my new best friend Olivia called and said we were going to the mall. Standing, again, at the corner, getting blasted by the horrible Muzak spewing out of the Weiduomei Bread place at 8 am. Picked up in the Beamer and off we went toward the Olympic stadium, getting waved through various checkpoints when we arrived. Migrant workers everywhere. A van full of employees from their office was already there, though nobody I recognized. Which brought up the question of who I was there to impress, exactly. The real estate developers at the meeting, that made sense, but their own employees? Receiving yellow hardhats we entered the colossal edifice and started in the basement. Really cold down there, dank, damp, and I shivered in my sports coat and nice shoes, and hardhat. Miles of air conditioning ducts, all kinds of pipes, and escalators wrapped in plastic. Wandering through we’d look at light fixtures, point at stairs, and say things like “That’s placed well” or “Why are there two escalators here?” To bring the point home of how massive the space was a worker pedaled past on a bicycle. Took some pictures with my camera, as if I was legitimate, and occasionally came across a lone worker sitting, doing nothing in the dusty cement cavern, wearing an overcoat and an armband. One feature that gave Olivia and I a laugh were all these light posts, “outdoor” style-lighting with a fake Paris Metro design. We agreed they were silly.

David and Paul went off somewhere so I caught a ride home in the van with Olivia. Somewhat conspiratorially she asked about my tutoring at Best English and if I’d spoken with Karen lately, who’d brought us together. I reported I’d seen her a few times but we really hadn’t talked. “I have to tell you something, Chock,” Olivia said, a bit mischievously, and proceeded to relate a story mixing equal parts outlandish irony and stereotypical it-could-only-happen-here lunacy. Another tutor, a Canadian who had a degree in architecture, heard what happened and implored Karen to introduce him to David, Paul and Olivia. It seems this Canuck was put out that he hadn’t been the one chosen as a pretend architect. He did manage to wrangle an interview and showed them his portfolio, as might be expected from an aspiring architect as opposed to someone who could wear a suit and throw in a reference or two to Peter Zumthor and complain about gaudy railings

but who actually had no architectural background or ambitions. I guess he didn’t make a good impression and David didn’t see any reason to hire him. Perhaps more importantly Olivia didn’t take a shine to him. Undeterred, he kept emailing and calling them and wouldn’t take no for an answer. The end came when David and Olivia were in Hong Kong on business right before our visit to the construction site and he called again. This struck Olivia as the height of impertinence, and what really got her goat was he mentioned me and told her he was more qualified. The gall! “He called when we were in Hong Kong. Doesn’t he understand? We don’t want to hire him.” Then, getting heated, she exclaimed, “He is too aggressive, too pushy! I want to hire who I want to hire!” I agreed, very pushy. Not cool, north-of-the-border would-be architect. Who did he think he was anyway?

As we were yukking it up about this Olivia stated how she glad she was that I was working – working? – with them and then made a statement that summed up the whole bizarre scenario. “Do you know why I like you Chock?” I smiled. “I’m not sure Olivia.” “I like you because you have ideas!” Whether I had ideas or not, or if they had any value, was another question. Olivia thought I had ideas, so I was in. Reconvening with David and Paul at another extravagantly ostentatious restaurant we had a swell time, and I almost barfed on a disgusting pea-filled dumpling and had to cough it up into a napkin that I discretely dropped on the floor under my chair. David handed over the 1,000 Yuan and said he’d call me about “choosing colors.” A few days later back in the real world at Best English I saw the Canadian and smirked. Never saw him again after that.

At the Sheraton by the China World Trade Center soon thereafter we had dinner again. Another buffet. Hungry, I piled all kinds of continental foods on my plate and made sure to avoid any dumplings filled with peas. All paid for so why not eat up. And stimulating chitchat along with the meal, and more waxing lyrical about my “ideas” that ranged from half-baked to ludicrous. Though there was something tangible this time as I was organizing a show by a French artist named Artus de Lavilléon. I was telling them about how this exhibition wasn’t going to be in some “arts district” white cube but at a dusty warehouse that housed Beijing’s one mini-ramp. Very punk and underground. The show promised to be “illegal” to some degree since we certainly weren’t getting any permits or anything like that. As an aside, everyone and their sister assured us that the police were going to raid the opening and the show would get closed down after one hour. It didn’t. While this “bohemian” art concept seemed to be slightly confusing to David and Olivia they also appeared to be enthralled. It was an “idea,” i.e. something out of the ordinary. As expected Olivia was enthusiastic, and so was David in his understated way. A very interesting person, that David. Serious, and a man of a few, well-chosen words.



The night of the opening was quite a scene. The migrant trash pickers living in the hovel next door were there, along with some Hong Kong advertising babes in mini-skirts and high heels (one was very intrigued by “street culture” from a marketing standpoint), skaters of both Chinese and foreign extraction, adventuresome high school students, and a motley assortment of degenerate expatriate riffraff. And lots of weed and beer. At the supposed six pm start time before they all got there I looked up to see the big BMW slowly coming down the rutted, muddy track past the super stinky bathrooms. Followed by a delivery van. That was surprise because I really wasn’t expecting them to show up. David, Olivia and Paul got out and then the guy from the van brought out these two big flower arrangements. They’re traditional at openings of stores and are six foot tall pyramidal bamboo towers adorned with flowers and red banners (Red. Always. Good luck red) that read “Congratulations.” The dude put them on both sides of the door going into the “gallery,” and they were pretty impressive. I was touched. These three probably had better things to do and it wasn’t their “scene,” that’s for sure, and despite that they came to support me, I guess, or out of morbid curiosity, and brought their expensive flower felicitations. We toured the flat bottom of the ramp since it was the “floor” of the space and they checked out Artus’ paintings, drawings, and photographs. Paul, as always, was dapper. If you’re going to be a fifty-five year old with dyed purple tints in your hair and bespoke suits, you’d be thankful to look as good as him. On the subject of architecture, the show included a photograph of Artus skating down the slanted roof of a brand new apartment complex right by Sanlitun. Pretty ballsy move. It’s a cool picture, and the roof is dramatically slanted. Paul got really into that one, recognizing the architectural landmark and appreciating the verve of bringing the extreme to the extreme building. Or something like that. They stayed for a legitimate amount of time, hanging out in rubble and beer bottle-strewn urine-soaked “yard,” then said bye and drove off I’m sure to another buffet at the Mandarin Oriental. After that the skating really got going, a bunch of people got bashed in the ankles, and there was even a fight later.

A break ensued until a month later Olivia called and said they were going to the real estate place, the mall deal, and could I come? Could I? I surely couldn’t turn down the money, and besides the inconvenience of the meetings starting at eight a.m. everything else about hanging out with them was pretty jake. This meeting was with the “real” boss, who I guess we hadn’t met before, and was in a much nicer conference room than the first two assemblies. The bona fide boss turned out to be quite young, and not a chatty Cathy. The thing that really struck me about this confab was that though we all had water or tea in paper cups he had an actual mug. Big shot. As I sat there looking mildly presentable my gaze followed the

sort-of but-not-too-attractive young woman walking around pouring tea or water into paper cups (and the ceramic mug) and wondered what she thought of all this. Impossible to know. As the meeting progressed it built up to everybody starting to talk at once, except the boss. Lightning fast Chinese at an increasingly high volume. I tried to follow, and did get some snippets thanks in part to Paul as he made asides to me as if I had any say in the matter. There were discussions about the length of the aisles in the supermarket, flow problems, and worries about people throwing trash in a particularly ugly decorative fountain.

This possible use of the fountain as rubbish bin – a totally justified concern – precipitated a verbal explosion from Paul. “It’s a high-end mall! Do you want a low-end mall?!” He practically shouted, with the implication that by not wanting to pay for the fountain or being worried about it getting polluted they were capitulating to less than civilized elements of the population. Did they want that? Wouldn’t that show they were inferior, less classy, than they wanted to appear? He made more disparaging remarks about their lack of cojones for not wanting the pretty fount, and for reaffirmation looked over at me. “Absolutely, you have to have the fountain, and worrying about people throwing trash in it doesn’t reflect very well on your ambitions to have, you know, this high-end mall ambience.” David nodded vigorously, “Yes, he is right!” Our spontaneous improvisational theatre piece rolled along like a freight train. Sometimes I did wonder about their lack of preparation and the confidence they had it would all work out. Daring that they didn’t want to practice and never even brought it up. I suppose they trusted me to be a good actor. Paul sure as hell was one. In fact, he deserves an Oscar.

The fountain was just the beginning. Paul was getting revved up and provoked by someone’s ill-advised comment exploded. “No, no, no! No fish or fake flowers!!!” “Yeah definitely not,” I exclaimed, “That would be a really big mistake.” Then there was a whole tangent about a curved ceiling vs. a flat one, and a war of PowerPoint pointers between our side and theirs, arcs of light having dogfights all over on the plans projected up on the screen. People were grabbing the pointer from each other, jostling to make their views known. Open Plan! No! Closed plan! Semi-open plan! Semi-open plan won out in the end. Escalators! In the spirit of the moment I drew a little sketch on a napkin of two escalators facing each other to use as a prop in the clash of the opposing escalators. The battle raged but I had a hunch victory was at hand. “We” were winning. It was a fait accompli and this was just the ritual and symbolic jostling for power that would fall by the wayside in the face of this stupendous juggernaut of a project with David and Paul (and Olivia in her stealth lieutenant role) at the helm. It was a done deal. I could tell by looking at the boss. His face showed favor towards us, and

sly satisfaction. He took a drink from his mug, and the conclave was over.

Paul was excited, I could tell. We almost high-fived but managed to restrain ourselves. David as usual was cool, calm, and collected. There were handshakes and business card trading, and a palpable bonhomie in the air. And I thought, wow, they, we, won! And, isn't it ironic, without stating the blatantly obvious? Because I'm not an architect, and I pretty much can't stand any malls, let alone malls in China, but because of my compensated collusion in this meta-playacting performance I kinda had some weird impact on the result. The observer affects the outcome just by observing, and I did more than just watch. I participated, and contributed. Sort of. No fish or fake flowers! After we had a very festive and I'm sure very expensive celebratory lunch, and at some point David in his indomitably subtle fashion handed me my 1,000 Yuan.

Nothing lasts forever, right? Now they had the job so my services were less in demand. I was hoping they'd hire me to, you know, consult on some colors or something, but it didn't happen, and that's ok. Then we were out of touch, they must have been busy. There was one last dinner with their cute daughter who was visiting from Toronto and working at the office. Paul had gone back to Canada. This was at an ornate restaurant, not a hotel this time, in one of those private rooms. Lavish. We had a good time, talked about our time together, laughed about our exploits. I didn't really know then but I sensed that that evening was the last. It was a really pleasant outing. I liked those two a lot, and Paul too. They were good to me, and liked my ideas. We said goodnight, and that was it, they left for Toronto and that was the last I saw of them. *C'est la vie.*

They probably came back in October when things had calmed down after the Olympics, just as I was saying goodbye to China. But there was a day in late August between that dinner and my exit when I went with one of my English students to watch the Paralympics at the Olympic stadium. This super cool twelve-year old kid named Mike. When we got off the subway it was jam-packed nuts to butts in the line with heavy-duty security and we had to wait a long time to get to the ticket booths and the shuttle to the Bird's Nest. And as we shuffled along I looked over and not too far away gleamed the massive shopping mall I helped design, almost finished, and huge, and impressive in a way. I remembered I'd told Mike, because we had a good rapport and confided in each other, about my other "job" with David, Olivia, and Paul. He was aware of my extracurricular activities. "See that Mike?" "Yes, teacher?" "That mall? That's it, that's the place I told you about, that I had something to do with." And Mike smiled, happy to see the fruit of my labors, and seemed suitably impressed.