

If I Wasn't an Artist, I'd Be An Empty Building

By Pearl Peng-Hui Lu

BFA, Fashion Design at Parsons School of Design | The New School

As a Chinese American woman who grew up in Queens, New York, my main goal for most of my life until now was to learn more about the art and living culture in China and fully understand what it means to be Chinese. Through this summer's research, I've come to the conclusion that to understand the Chinese people and to understand China is to first understand the themes that exist within the daily lives of the people, something that has been ingrained within the Chinese from the very start of time. These themes can be found in every form of Chinese art. My family background is artistic, with my mother being a painter and my father an author of award-winning books, both based in Beijing, and both my grandparents from my dad's side being professors at Peking University. As a result, I feel that it is my duty to carry on their legacy but make it my own. My India China Institute (ICI) project is therefore a reflection of everything from them to me, and everything that has been lost in between because I have never truly connected with this part of my life due to living in the United States for extended periods of time.

Although my research/project is mainly a personal narrative and reflection of my personal growth development and experiences, the academic research portion revolves around the weeping willow plant, also known as the *Salix babylonica*. Upon researching about these plants, I have found symbolic meanings, poetry and literature references, and interesting fun facts about the plant which resemble that of human characteristics, all of which are helpful in regards to learning about daily life and scenic elements of northern China, where my family

originates from, specifically Beijing and Shandong, two places in where I've conducted my research this summer. The weeping willow tree is native to dry areas of northern China and was traded along the Silk Road to the West. A few characteristics of this tree are that upon planting a willow branch in the ground, a new tree will grow in its place, and that the branches are extremely flexible and can be bent and contorted in all sorts of ways and directions without any signs of snapping or breaking. The last one is that the weeping willow tree roots are very strong, thus making the plant perfect for planting along bodies of water to prevent flooding accidents. All of these characteristics are a metaphor for human life, drawing the connection to the perseverance of humans and our ability to adapt and thrive in our given environment.

The weeping willow is called a 柳树 (liǔ shù), and 柳 (liǔ) is a homophone of the Chinese character 留 (liú), with a tonnage change, asks a person to stay. The

melancholy meaning of these trees has been used as a symbol throughout the Chinese dynasties and in various writing and art forms, symbolizing saying farewell to someone. Due to their long, elongated branches, these trees look like crying tears and have since gotten their name, the Weeping Willow. To conduct more research about the Weeping willow plant, I took a trip to the National Library of China in Haidian District, Beijing, where I read some poems. There, I found that an ancient bamboo flute music named “Breaking Willow Branches” was used by poets to express their homesickness. One of the greatest poets of the Tang Dynasty, Li Bai (701-762), wrote a well-known poem about this: “From whose house comes the song of the jade flute unseen? It fills the town of Luoyang, spread by the wind of spring. Tonight I hear the farewell song of Willow Green. To whom the tune will not nostalgic feeling bring?”

ICI's Student Fellowship influenced my project this summer, but also my projects

moving forward. If it weren't for this opportunity for a trip back to Beijing this summer, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to truly explore an area of my life that has always lingered with me. With ICI's help, I was able to walk the paths that my mother had once walked in Beijing, alone, with a clear mind and set goals, in museums, art galleries, hutong alleyways, small barber shops, sky bridges, crowded restaurants, and parks filled with willow trees. If it weren't for this student fellowship program, I probably wouldn't have traveled to China this summer in preparation for my fashion thesis, but all thanks to my trip back to Beijing that I was able to explore the theme of the weeping willow and how much they resemble traits of my mother, and have since formed my graduation thesis based on my observations this summer.