

MARVELS OF A FLOATING CITY  
AND OTHER STORIES

*by*

XI XI

Edited by Eva Hung

—An Authorized Collection—



A Renditions Paperback



## *Introduction*

### *Background*

Contrary to what many people seem to think, questions about Hong Kong culture and Hong Kong identity are not new-fangled ideas which have arisen as a result of the territory's imminent reversion to Chinese sovereignty. After all, while identity is usually defined by "sameness", it is thrown into much sharper focus when confronted with "difference", and Hong Kong's proximity to China means that its citizens have always been keenly aware of the differences which exist between the two places. The articles written in the 1960s by a group of young men and women on Hong Kong identity<sup>1</sup> are but some of the more explicit manifestations of the deliberations which have been going on for decades. Moments of crisis tend to make people explore and confront their sense of identity and allegiance with greater urgency, and Hong Kong has experienced many such moments in the few decades following World War II: the flood of refugees who arrived in the early 1950s; the

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<sup>1</sup>Published in the then influential *Chinese Students' Weekly* 中國學生周報, these articles are collected in Lo Wai Luen 盧偉鏗 ed., *Travellers on an Old Path—Selected Essays of the Chinese Students' Weekly* 舊路行人——中國學生周報文輯, Hong Kong: Ci wenhua tang, 1997.

riots of 1967 to 1968 which took place as a result of the Cultural Revolution in China, and the resultant wave of emigration; the Protect Diaoyu Island Movement and the fight for official recognition of the Chinese language in the early 1970s; China's Open Door policy of the late 1970s and its impact on Hong Kong's social and economic structure. . . . The imminent change of sovereignty is but the latest—though the most prolonged—crisis Hong Kong has faced in its recent history. Such experience and trials have been the proving ground out of which shared values and a common identity have emerged.

Hong Kong is one of the most cosmopolitan places in the world, and her culture is therefore varied and broadly based. The multicultural strands of Hong Kong's everyday life are woven into the works of her creative writers. For instance, in the early 1970s, when China was still in the throes of the Cultural Revolution and writers in Taiwan were moving from Modernism to Nativism, the young writers in Hong Kong were already finding inspiration in the works of Latin American writers. For those nurtured in an environment of cultural variety and who are equally at home with the Chinese and Western traditions, the possibilities of a more narrowly defined future as a result of the reversion to Chinese sovereignty is obviously a cause of anxiety.

Xi Xi is in many ways representative of this generation of creative writers. She wrote a series of short stories and one novel from 1982 to 1996 which encapsulate her feelings for Hong Kong in the crucial years of negotiations between China and Britain over the territory's future. These works, identified by the fictional name of its location, Fertile Town, were written in two stages: the short stories were published between 1982 and

1986, while the novel, *Flying Carpet*, was first serialized in Hong Kong's *Sing Tao Daily* and then published in book form in 1996.<sup>2</sup>

The period during which the Fertile Town series was written coincided with the most intense and prolonged period of anxiety, despair and hope in the history of Hong Kong. To quote Xi Xi's words in "The Fertile Town Chalk Circle": "The transition has not yet eliminated the old, nor has the new actually arrived. It is still a dim and uncertain age." (p. 68) In September 1982, the Sino-British negotiations over the fate of Hong Kong began. They culminated in the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1984 whose terms allowed Hong Kong to retain its way of life after its reversion to Chinese sovereignty. But a good deal of doubt about its implementation remained. The short stories in Xi Xi's Fertile Town series are literary chronicles of the mood of Hong Kong during the years spanning the Sino-British Joint Declaration. The novel, *Flying Carpet*, had a much longer gestation period, and is a bold attempt to trace the numerous changes that Hong Kong has undergone since the early colonial days—and the diverse cultural forces that shaped them—through the ordinary stories of ordinary people.

The three stories collected here belong to the first period of the Fertile Town series. Strictly speaking, the title story, "Marvels of a Floating City", is not part of the series. However, both the author's conception of the story and the concerns she expresses through it show a strong connection to the Fertile Town series. Thematically linked and written within a relatively short period, these stories nevertheless display a diversity in

<sup>2</sup>For excerpts from *Flying Carpet* in English translation, see *Renditions* Nos. 47 & 48 (1997), special issue on Hong Kong literature of the 1990s.



terms of style which makes them arguably the most eloquent testament to Xi Xi's virtuosity as a writer.

### *Marvels of a Floating City*

The title story, "Marvels of a Floating City", is one of very few—and certainly one of the most successful—attempts at multi-media work by a Hong Kong writer. The inter-dependence of text and pictures is, however, only one dimension of this short, but complex, narrative. The mixed communication medium is complemented by successful cross-cultural fertilization: in basing her text on pictures created by René Magritte, Xi Xi gives a uniquely contemporary Hong Kong interpretation to images which belonged originally to the modern Western tradition. Nor is the cross-cultural exploration limited to Magritte's paintings. The ideas and images presented in the text originate from both the Eastern or Western traditions, yet they blend easily into one another, creating a sense of indivisible heterogeneity which is representative of Hong Kong culture at its best. Xi Xi's casual references to the stories of Cinderella and Snow White on the one hand and those from the *Vimilakirṭi-nirdeśa* on the other are based on an assumption that her readers will take such diverse cultural references in their stride. Someone from a mono-cultural background may find such a mixture discordant if not disturbing, but to those who are used to negotiating between different cultures, this is just an acknowledgement of how far and wide our roots do stretch. Xi Xi belongs to a generation which is culturally at ease with its historical legacies.

Whether such legacies can be preserved is, however, a different question, hence the sense of unease pervading the

whole story. In "Marvels of a Floating City" the future is Mona Lisa's smile, famously ambiguous, and like an art exhibit, it will be here for all to see and interpret.

### *The Story of Fertile Town*

The four years during which the stories in this collection were written were marked as much by a re-examination of the past as by uncertainties about the future. Any attempt at preserving a legacy obviously involves an understanding of what it is in the first place. While some politicians turn to wars and treaties in their definition of the origins of present-day Hong Kong, Xi Xi's Floating City and Fertile Town are founded simultaneously on legends, imagination and history. In her stories, no one can say for certain how the place came to be there; the legends about it all indicate that it appeared out of the blue—either the blue sky, or the deep blue sea.

Two elements common to the Fertile Town series are the inherent instability of the place and its initial inferior status. (Xi Xi describes the "flying carpet" as a doormat at the entrance to a big country.) Both elements feature prominently in "The Story of Fertile Town". "Story" is the first work in the series to dwell on the question of the town's origin, elevating it to the mythical level while simultaneously making the issue banal by portraying the different legends as part of the eternal arguments between an old married couple. This juxtaposition of the legendary and the everyday is a key to Xi Xi's conception of Fertile Town. By manipulating the sense of proportion in the narrative, Xi Xi leads her readers into a surreal world. The humble origins of Fertile Town's sudden prosperity—its soil—is an evocative symbol: the Cantonese word *lanni* 爛泥 denotes



something which is of no value at all and which will never come to any good; it is also used as a metaphor to describe people. (The choice of the unusual compound "mud-plat" in this translation aims at alerting readers to the fact that the original word is not a standard one.) Surprise that immense prosperity should grow out of such humble origins turns to horror as the uncontrollable forces unleashed by the expansionist soil starts to destroy the very prosperity it created. When everyday life is suddenly and grossly exaggerated and goes out of control, even the most routine events resemble fragments of a fantastic dream. In this story, the collision of the fantastic and the mundane is reinforced by the innocence of the child observer who seems poised between the two worlds. The awesome beauty of the surreal is most forcefully conveyed in the scenes of growth and destruction seen through the child's eyes.

There is indeed a fairy tale quality to the character as well as experience of Everlasting Bloom. Like all child protagonists in fairy tales, she is a loner whose sense of curiosity takes her beyond the limits of a conventional life, and whose everyday adventures turn into a journey of discovery. However, Everlasting Bloom is much more complex than a fairy tale child: she never loses sight of the everyday routines which, indeed, provide her with an anchor. This sense of complexity is worked into the narrative perspective. Unlike the fairy tale child, Everlasting Bloom grows into adulthood and old age, and therefore has first hand experience of what happens to Fertile Town after the fertile soil fiasco, though this is not dealt with in the story. We know this because half way through the story the narrator reveals her identity—she is Everlasting Bloom. And yet she is not exactly Everlasting Bloom, at least not just the child-

observer/protagonist who witnesses the awesome and beautiful scenes of growth and destruction. There are clearly two voices in the story—the objective, adult narrator, and the curious, enthusiastic child. The years which turn the child into the old woman remain opaque. Like the steam that hangs in the air in the last scene of the story, those years are concrete but intangible. Thus, "The Story of Fertile Town" ends on as uncertain a note as "Marvels of a Floating City": what happens after the fertile soil fiasco remains hidden from our eyes.

### *The Fertile Town Chalk Circle*

Like "Story", the narrator of "The Fertile Town Chalk Circle" is also a child-observer/protagonist. Unlike Everlasting Bloom, however, he is not an observer by choice, nor is he unconcerned and objective. The narrator Shoulang is the child in the famous ancient court case in which an evil wife and a weak concubine fought in court each to preserve her life, honour and the custody of the family fortune as well as of the child. One of the key questions in the case is "who is the child's real mother?" This is not the first time the case of the chalk circle has been adapted and rewritten to express different contemporary concerns and points of view, but in 1980s Hong Kong the metaphor of the "mother" is both emotive and politically sensitive, for analogies of "birth mother" (China) and "adoptive mother" (Britain) were extremely widely used in relation to the status of Hong Kong. The negotiations which were to decide Hong Kong's fate were conducted strictly between the two "mothers".

What concerns Xi Xi in this story is not who wins the chalk circle contest, or even whether justice triumphs or not.



She focuses her attention on the basic right of making one's choices for oneself. So concerned is Xi Xi over this issue that her sense of frustration almost overflows in the story—an exceptional phenomenon in her career as a writer. Indeed there is so much angst and bitterness in the narrative voice as to make the reader distinctly uncomfortable. It is only in the context of an intelligent adult's frustration and helplessness at not being allowed to decide his own fate that this bitterness can be understood. Shoulang the narrator is at least 600 years old and has witnessed countless stagings of the play. He has a thorough understanding of all the characters and has no illusions about authority, tradition and justice. Thus the overpowering anger and resentment conveyed in the almost didactic narrative voice belongs not to the five-year-old boy, but to the 600-year-old narrator. Xi Xi, who so frequently endows her grown up characters with a child-like ingenuity, here turns the tables and expresses through this child character all the angst and resentment of a highly intelligent and experienced man forever imprisoned in a child's role. "I want my say!" is thus a cry of desperation.

Perhaps the greatest pathos of Shoulang's situation is that his urgent pleading can only be directed at the audience or readers who, however sympathetic, are unable to affect the outcome of the chalk circle contest. While he is allowed to engage the attention and sympathy of the audience and to present his point of view, in terms of the action on stage he remains an object whose fate is in other people's hands. Neither Shoulang nor the audience has control over the script. "Chalk Circle" thus ends on the same note as "Marvels of a Floating City": despite the link established between protagonist and observers, they can only watch as the future unfolds.

### *About the Author*

Xi Xi 西西 (pronounced "See See") is the pen-name of Zhang Yan 張彥. Of Cantonese extraction, Xi Xi was born in Shanghai in 1938 and received her primary education there. Like so many Hong Kong people of her generation, she came to Hong Kong with her family in 1950 from China shortly after the communist take-over. Having arrived in the territory as a child, she is among the first generation of writers to have been educated and nurtured in Hong Kong. Xi Xi graduated from the Grantham College of Education in 1958 and became a primary school teacher. It was during the 1960s that she first established a local literary reputation—as a poet, fiction writer, script writer, and film and art critic.

Though Xi Xi has used a number of pen-names in her career as a writer, from the mid-1970s onwards she has published most of her fiction under the name Xi Xi, and all her collected works are also published under this name. The word xi 西 literally means 'west', but Zhang Yan's choice of this word as her pen-name has little to do with the word's meaning; rather, it is treated as a pictograph. The following is Xi Xi's own explanation of her pen-name:

When I was young I loved playing a game similar to hopscotch, which we called 'Building Houses' or 'Aeroplane Hopping'. First you draw a series of squares on the ground. Then you tie a string of paper clips into a knot and toss it into one of the squares. You then hop from square to square until you reach the one with the knot in it, pick the knot up and hop your way back to where you started . . . The Chinese

word xi looks like a girl in a skirt with her two feet planted in a square. Put two of them side by side, and they are like two frames of a film, a girl in a skirt playing hopscotch in two squares.

As Stephen Soong suggests in his article on Xi Xi,<sup>3</sup> this pen-name reveals that the author has retained a childlike joy in her perception and depiction of life. Critics have pointed out that Xi Xi often adopts extraordinary narrative angles in her fictional work, a characteristic which can probably be attributed to the freshness of her childlike vision.

Though Xi Xi won a number of literary prizes in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, and was one of the editors of two major Hong Kong literary journals, her name only became widely known after she was awarded Taiwan's prestigious United Daily prize for fiction in 1983. In the mid-1980s Xi Xi gave up her teaching career to become a full-time writer, thus occupying a unique position among serious writers in Hong Kong. In the last three decades, Xi Xi has been one of the territory's most prolific writers, a fact which is partially concealed by her use of different pen-names and the variety of genres she covers—she is equally at home in poetry, fiction, the occasional essay, translation, film review and art criticism, and has published extensively in magazines and newspapers in Hong Kong and Taiwan. She also edited a contemporary fiction series authored by mainland writers and published in Taiwan.

E.H.

<sup>3</sup>Translation adapted from "Building a House: Introducing Xi Xi" by Stephen Soong, translated by Kwok-kan Tam, *A Girl Like Me and Other Stories* (enlarged edition) (Hong Kong: Renditions Paperbacks, 1996), p. 127.

### *The Fertile Town Series:*

"The Story of Fertile Town" 肥土鎮的故事

October 1982 [*Su Yeh Literature* No. 13; collected in *Shoujuan* 手卷]

"Town Curse" 鎮咒

February 1985 [*Hong Kong Literature* No. 2; collected in *Beard has a Face* 鬍子有臉]

"The Fertile Town Chalk Circle" 肥土鎮灰圈記

December 1986 [*United Daily*; collected in *Shoujuan* *Flying Carpet* 飛氈]

1996 [Hong Kong: Su Yeh Publications]

### *Related Stories:*

"Marvels of a Floating City" 浮城誌異

April 1986 [*United Daily*; collected in *Shoujuan*]

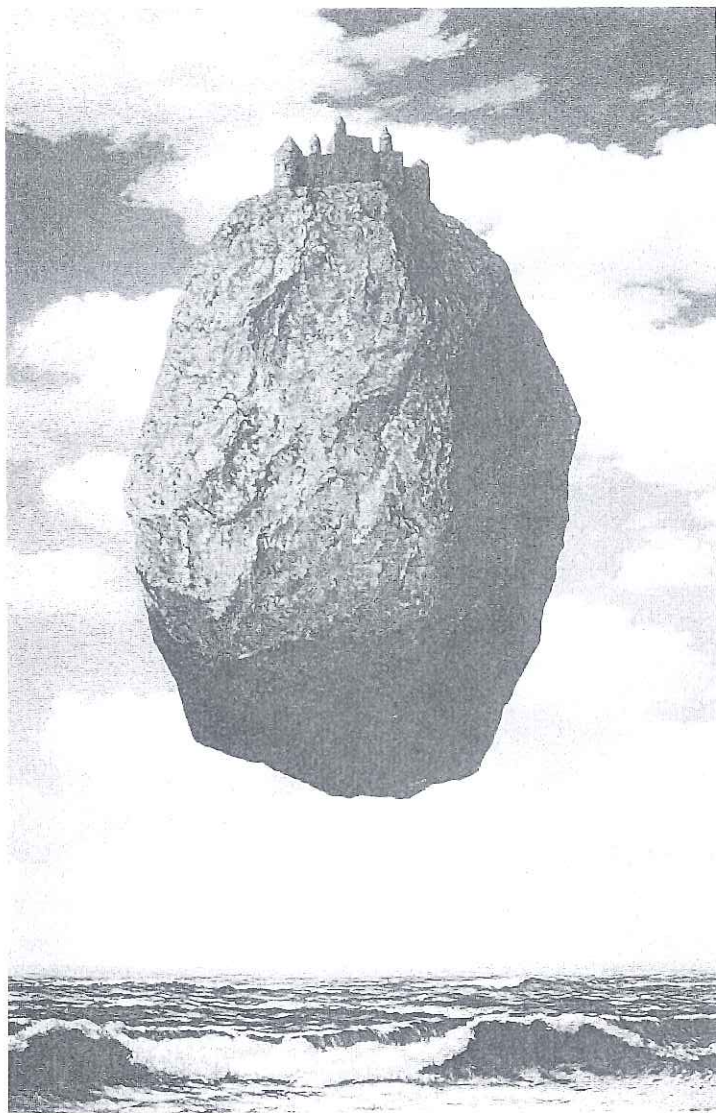
"The Case of Mary" 瑪麗個案

December 1986 [*Hong Kong Literature* No. 24; collected in *Shoujuan*]

"Delights of the Universe: a Supplement" 宇宙奇趣補遺

January 1988 [*Baifang* 八方 No. 8; collected in *Mu yü* 母魚]





## I. Floating City

Many, many years ago, on a fine, clear day, the floating city appeared in the air in full public gaze, hanging like a hydrogen balloon. Above it were the fluctuating layers of clouds, below it the turbulent sea. The floating city hung there, neither sinking nor rising. When a breeze came by, it moved ever so slightly, and then it became absolutely still again.

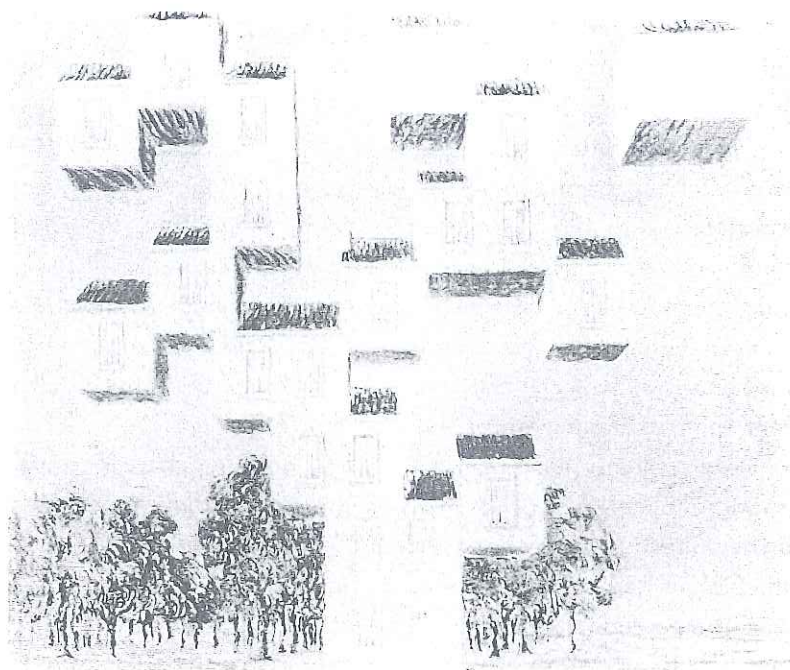
How did it happen? The only witnesses were the grandparents of our grandparents. It was an incredible and terrifying experience, and they recalled the event with dread: layers of clouds collided overhead, and the sky was filled with lightning and the roar of thunder. On the sea, a myriad pirate ships hoisted their skull and crossbones; the sound of cannon fire went on unrelentingly. Suddenly, the floating city dropped down from the clouds above and hung in mid air.

Many, many years passed, and in time our grandparents' grandparents all passed away. Even our own grandparents went to their eternal sleep one after another. The events of the past which they had related became obscure legends.

The descendants of these grandparents settled down in the floating city and gradually adapted themselves to its conditions. The legends of the floating city faded in their memory. Most people believed that the floating city would continue hanging steadily in the air, neither rising nor sinking, for ever. When the wind blew, it would sway only a little, just like the pleasant motion of a swing.

And so many, many more years have passed.





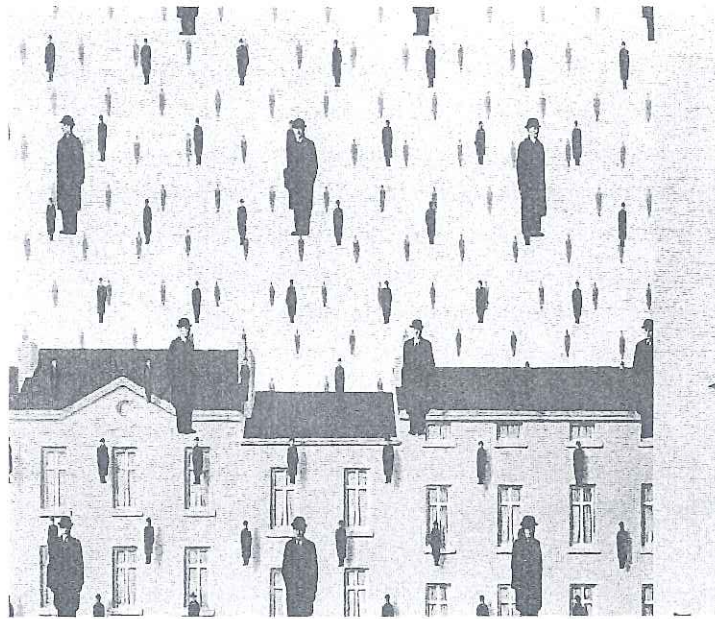
## II. A Miracle

You need courage to live without roots. This is written on the title page of a novel. To live in a floating city, however, you need more than courage; you need will-power and faith as well. There is another novel which mentions a nonexistent knight—he is just an empty suit of armour. Charlemagne asked him: So, how do you sustain your life? He answered: With will-power and faith.

Though this is just a floating city, the people here have, on the sheer strength of their faith and will-power, strived to build a home fit to be lived in. In just a few decades, their pioneering spirit and hard work have paid off: the floating city has become a vibrant and prosperous metropolis.

Buildings shoot up from the ground, each one taller than the next. Flyovers circle the air space above road junctions. Trains, centipede-like, crawl underground and all over the suburbs. Kidney stones are shattered by laser beams; brain tumours are diagnosed by scanning. Those interested in the Haley's Comet can follow its track in the Planetarium; those interested in the life of sea lions can observe them at Ocean Park. Nine years' compulsory education; social security; allowances for the disabled; pension schemes—all these have come into being. There are several art festivals a year, and the bookstores stock books from all over the world. Those who choose to remain silent have absolute freedom to do so.

People find it is almost unbelievable that buildings in the floating city can float in the air; that flowers grown in the floating city are each big enough to fill a whole room. People say the existence of the floating city is truly a miracle.



### III. Sudden Showers

The period from May to September is the typhoon season in the floating city. Strong winds blow from all directions, and the floating city rocks and sways. The people who live here are used to all this rocking and swaying and carry on with their work and horse racing undisturbed. Experience tells them that even in the typhoon season, the floating city never gets blown upside down, nor does it get blown away.

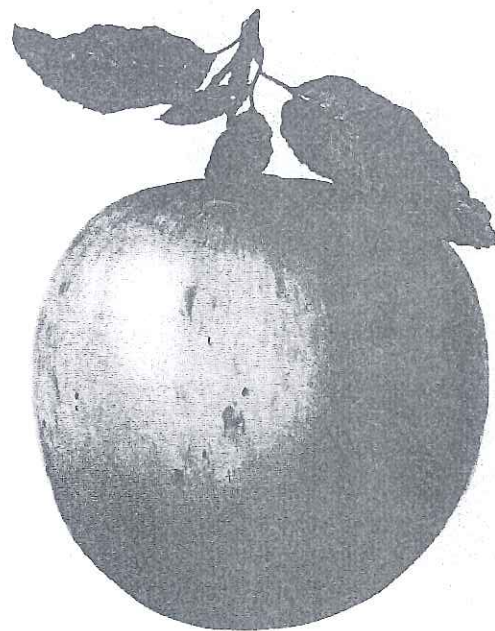
There is just one thing somewhat special about the typhoon season, and that has to do with the dreams of its citizens. With the arrival of May, people in the floating city start dreaming the same dream. In this dream everyone is floating in mid air; they neither rise up to the heavens, nor do they drop down to earth—everyone is just like a small floating city. The floating humans do not have wings, which means they cannot fly. All they do is stay afloat in the air, silently, and solemnly, with no means of communication between them. The city sky is afloat with people like raindrops in an April shower.

With the arrival of May people start dreaming their floating-human dreams. Even those who take a nap in the daytime have the same dream—they stand silently and solemnly in mid air. Such dreams do not disappear until September. When the typhoon season is over, people in the floating city start dreaming their individual dreams again.

Why should everyone in the city share the same dream of being afloat in the air? One school of psychologists has drawn this conclusion: this is a collective manifestation of the Third-Side-of-the-Straits Complex.



*Ceci n'est pas une pomme*



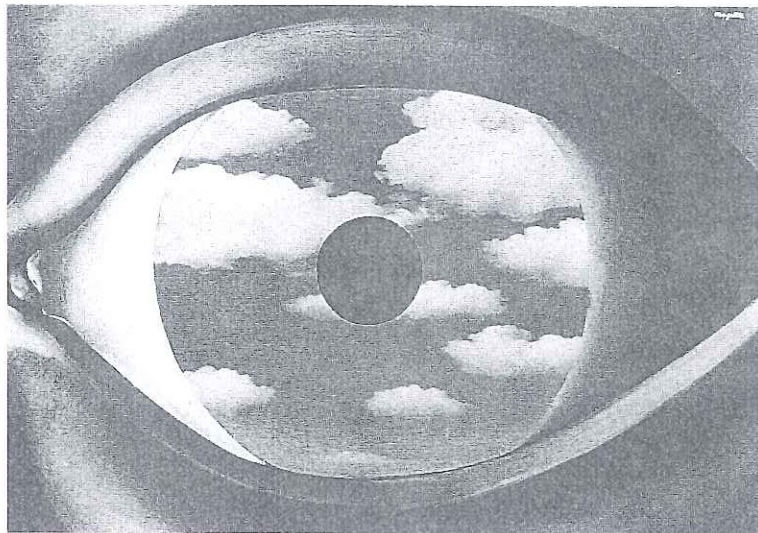
Magritte

#### IV. Apple

It is summer. On many streets and lanes of the floating city there appears a poster of an apple with one line written in French at the top. It says: Ceci n'est pas une pomme. It is only natural that this poster should appear, because the city is to hold a large-scale retrospective of the works of the Belgian painter René Magritte. The painting with the apple is part of the exhibition.

"Ceci n'est pas une pomme." What does it mean? There can be no mistake that the picture is that of an apple. What the artist actually means is that the apple in the picture is not an edible apple. If you stretch out your hand, you will not be able to grab hold of it; if you sniff it, you will not smell the scent of an apple; if you cut it open, you will not get the flesh and juice of real fruit. And so the apple in the picture is not a real apple, only lines, colours and shape—an illusion. Didn't the Greek philosopher Plato say that the picture of a bed, however well drawn, however real it looks, remains no more than an imitation of the bed?

Though the poster of Magritte's painting appears in all the streets and lanes, those who attend the exhibition will number no more than 0.1% or 0.2% of the population. However, the fact that these apples should appear in every corner of the city is rather fun—many people actually think it is a publicity campaign for the fruit market. Only a handful of intellectuals are struck by an idea: the floating city, despite its absolute steadiness, is also an illusion. The miracle of the floating city is, after all, not a fairy tale.



## V. Eyes

"Cinderella" is a fairy tale: a pumpkin turns into a carriage, mice turn into steeds, and rags turn into a beautiful ball gown. But when the clock strikes midnight, everything reverts to its drab old self. Is the floating city just another Cinderella story?

It is not that people in the floating city don't have eyes that see clearly. They are technologically advanced, and they have the best microscopes and telescopes. They are always looking down at the ocean, or up at the sky, or testing the wind direction. What is it that enables this floating city to stay so steadily in the air? Could it be the gravitational pull between ocean and sky? Or could it be a marionette performance staged by the god of destiny holding numerous invisible strings in his hands?

The picture of an apple is not a real apple, so perhaps a floating city whose existence depends on a miracle is not a permanent city. In that case, is its destiny really in its own hands? What if the gravitational forces of the ocean and the sky change, or if the god of destiny tires of his game? Will the floating city soar upward, or sink, or be blown away to some unknown place and never be heard of again?

Their eyes wide open, the people of the floating city look downward. If the floating city sinks, the billowing ocean under their feet will swallow the whole city. Even if the city manages to stay afloat, pirate ships flying the skull and crossbones will come and sack the city. If the floating city soars upwards, will the soft, wispy clouds be able to bear the weight of such a solid metropolis?





## VI. Problem

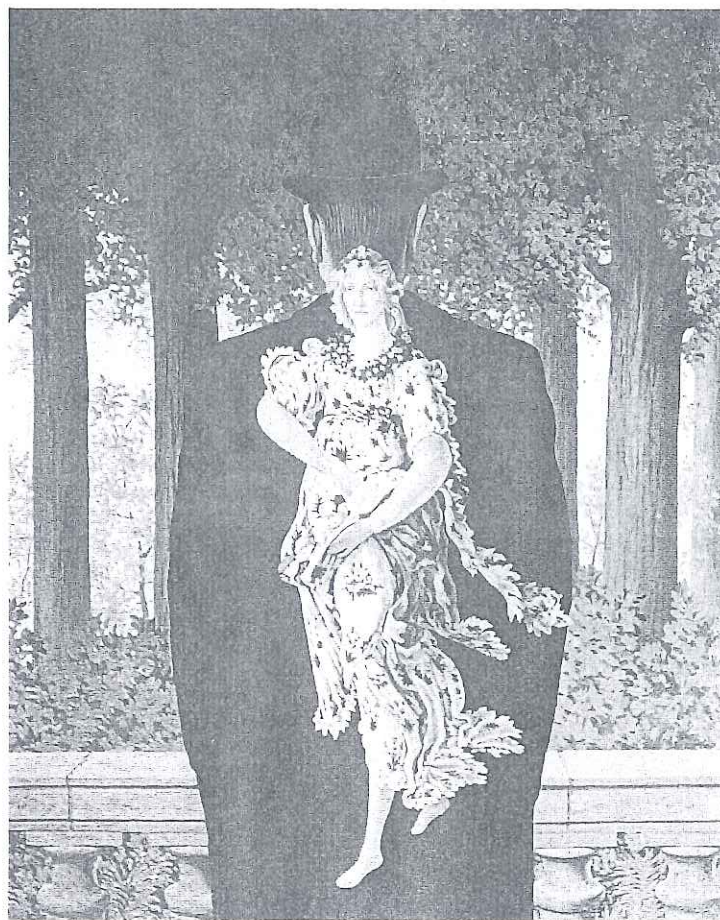
There are no big rivers in the floating city, and since sea water is undrinkable, the floating city depends on the mercy of heaven for its drinking water. That is why although people here like bright sunny days, they cannot but also long for thunder storms.

A teacher takes a group of students to City Hall to see an exhibition of Magritte's paintings. The students all put pen to paper, writing down their reaction and the titles of the paintings. They ask: This umbrella with a glass of water on it, what does it mean? And why is it called Hegel's Holiday? They try to find an answer in the exhibition catalogue.

At different times, people have different attitudes towards water. Sometimes they accept it, and sometimes they reject it. For instance, people drink when they are thirsty, which means they allow the water to go into their body; but on rainy days they all hold up their umbrellas to prevent water from touching their body. Acceptance and rejection, external and internal, these are questions for philosophers. As for the subject of water, perhaps a philosopher like Hegel may be interested in pondering it for a while, but since it is a very limited subject, it's likely that he'd only think about it in his spare time on a holiday.

A student looks at the painting for a long time, then asks: Umbrellas are for protecting people from getting wet in the rain. Now since the water is contained in a glass, there should not be any need for the umbrella. What is there to reject? That's true. If there are solid clouds above the floating city, then it would be a good thing for it to soar up to the skies. What is there to reject?





## VII. Flora

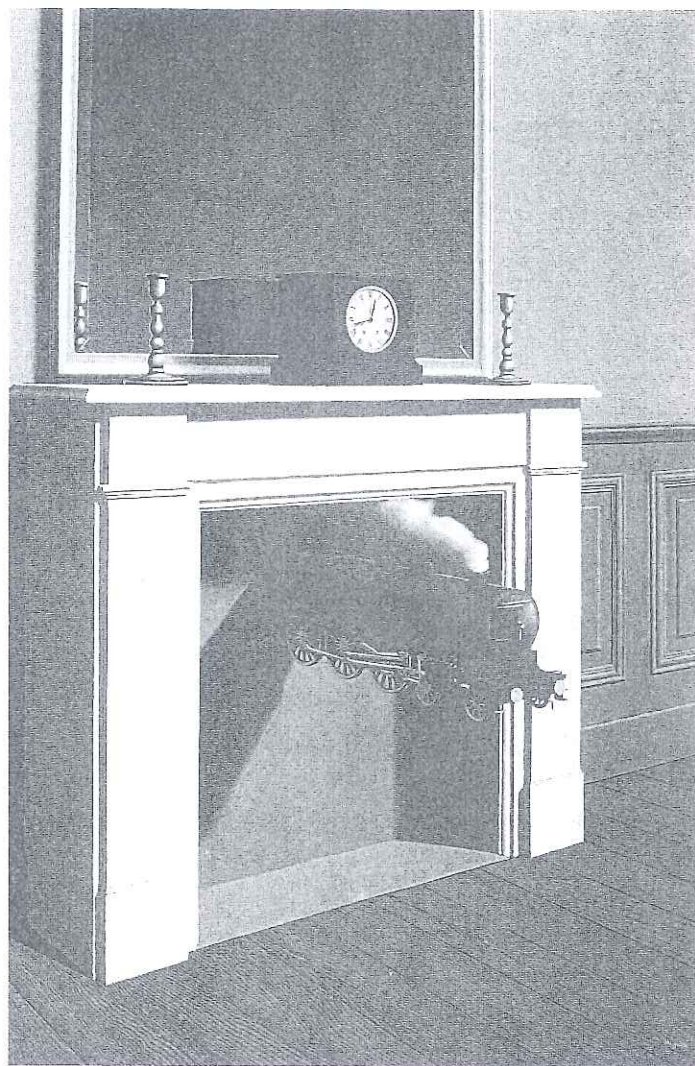
The majority of the floating city's inhabitants are men with hats—a symbol of the petty bourgeoisie. They want a society that is stable and prosperous, a home that is warm and quiet, and so they work as hard as bees and ants; for work is the best antidote for sadness. The hard work of these citizens bears fruit in the form of a well-clad, well-fed, wealthy and bustling modern society. But inevitably such a society is full of material temptations enticing people to work harder and harder, and eventually dragging them into the black hole of material possessions.

Sandro Botticelli was an Italian Renaissance painter. In one of his paintings, entitled "Spring", he depicts the images of deities who bring the news of spring to earth: Hermes the messenger-god leads the way; Cupid flies above Venus; and the West Wind walks next to Flora. The three Graces dance along while the Goddess of Spring, clad in a diaphanous colourful dress, sprinkles blossoms over the fragrant meadows.

Our Song dynasty painter Li Gonglin for his part painted a picture of "Verishnu Preaching". On the instruction of Sakyamuni, the Bodhisattva Manjusri took his disciples to visit Verishnu, who had taken ill. While Verishnu lectured the group on the principles of Mahayana Buddhism, a diva standing at his side scattered flowers all around, and Manjusri's leading disciple had his robe covered in flowers.

The prosperous floating city is full of material temptations. People here all wish the diva's flowers would fall on them, and they go so far as to carry the goddess of spring with all her blossoms on their back, like a knapsack.





### VIII. Time

This is the critical moment; this is the absolute moment—a train engine arrives. Before this moment, the engine has not yet entered the fireplace; after this moment, the engine will have departed. It is only at this particular moment that the engine steams into the fireplace in this room; it is only at this absolute moment that the smoke from the engine can rise up the chimney: and the chimney is of course the only proper outlet for smoke.

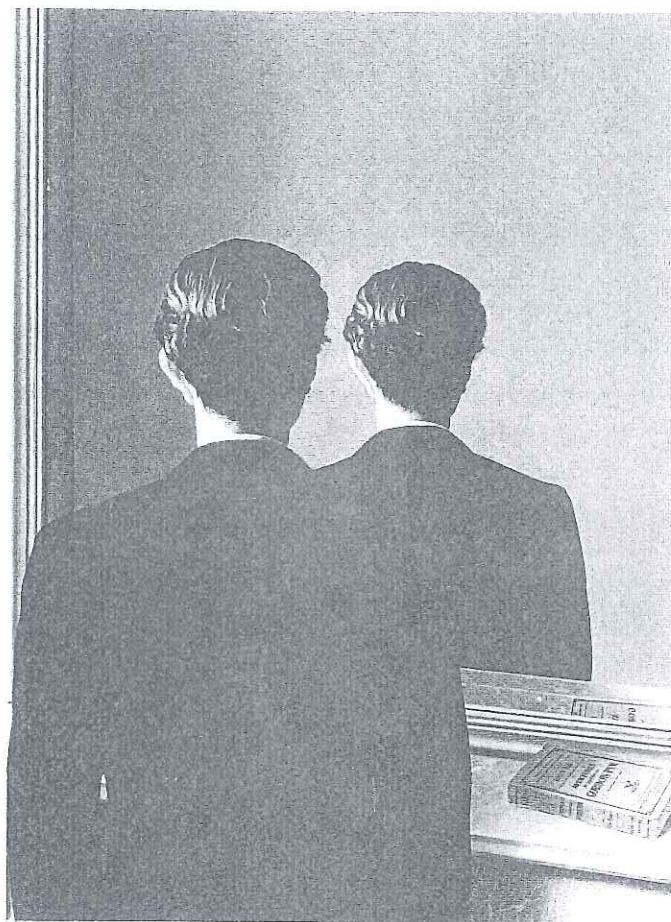
A fireplace reminds one of Christmas festivities—a time of glad tidings for the whole city. But from the look of the room we can see it is not festival time: there are no gift stockings hanging from the mantelpiece, no pine tree in the room, no shimmering lights, no angels, no silver bells, and no candles in the candlesticks.

The marble clock on the mantelpiece has its hour hand approaching one and its minute hand approaching nine; the position of its second hand is uncertain. It's past midnight. Had there been a carriage, it would have turned back into a pumpkin; had there been steeds, they would have turned back into mice; and the beautiful ball gown is again just rags.

Yes, it's past midnight. But as the story goes, Cinderella meets her Prince Charming before midnight. Is the floating city's Prince Charming waiting somewhere around the stroke of midnight? Although he rides a white steed, it boasts only one horse-power. Maybe he is late.

Zero hour always has people worried. What will the hour one be like? Perhaps people can see the future in a mirror?





## IX. Mirror on the Wall

Only those who have been to the floating city know about its mirrors—they are totally different from ordinary mirrors. In the fairy tale “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, the wicked Queen has a magic mirror on the wall which answers her question “who’s the fairest of them all?” It is an honest mirror; it never lies. The floating city’s mirrors are all honest mirrors, too. They are keen to reflect reality. However, even mirrors have their limitations, and the mirrors in the floating city only reflect the back view of things.

All mirrors, whether locally made or imported from abroad, reflect only the rear side of things as soon as they are hung on the walls of buildings in the floating city. And so when people in the floating city look at themselves in the mirror, they don’t see their faces, only the hair at the back of their head. Someone tried placing one mirror in front of another, but whatever you do, however many mirrors you use and whatever the angles you place them at, the mirrors only reflect the rear side of reality. That’s why the floating city’s women have to visit beauty parlours—it’s very difficult for them to do their own make-up. The same goes for the men—for a really good shave they have to go to a barber.

In the floating city, you cannot find the answer or predict the future by looking at a mirror. However, to be able to see the past is by no means a bad thing. History is a mirror, and that is one positive aspect of the mirrors in the floating city.





## X. Wings

Modes of transportation in the floating city are diverse: from ancient rope ladders and balloons to modern helicopters and parachutes. Those who want to have a look above the clouds can climb up a rope ladder or ride up in a balloon; those who want to have a look at the sea can descend in a parachute or a helicopter. However, the majority of the citizens wish they had wings. When all is said and done, these people feel that to live in a city that is floating in the air is a scary thing. Those most worried brood over it day and night, and finally decide to pack up and leave, like migratory birds. They will build their ideal nests somewhere else.

A novelist records something like this: Someone went to an embassy to apply for migration, and the official in charge asked where he wanted to go. Doesn't matter, he replied. The official handed him a globe and told him to take his pick. The man looked at the globe, turned it around slowly, and then asked: Do you have another one?

Where does one go if one leaves the floating city? That's a tough question. Where can one find a solid city where one can live forever in peace? Besides, those who leave must have sturdy wings, and they must be very careful during their flight. They must not get too close to the sun, or the wax will melt, and they will fall from the sky as Icarus did.

The inhabitants of the floating city are not migratory birds. If they leave, they will not be able to return. Can one just pick up one's walking stick and knapsack, and leave without looking back? Though the people of the floating city long to be winged pigeons, in their hearts they are repressed, caged birds.



## XI. Bird-grass

Their wish to fly means the people of the floating city are always looking up at the sky. Despite this, they don't have the ability to fly, nor can they create the flowing sashes of the flying divas in the Dunhuang caves. In the typhoon season all they can do is dream; they dream that they are floating silently in the air, but even though they are in mid-air, they still cannot fly.

After the typhoon season, people return to their own dreams. They dream of box kites, of drifting snowflakes, of graceful butterflies, of thistle down; some even dream of the floating city sprouting wings. But when they wake up, they find that they are still firmly attached to the ground of the floating city. Surprisingly, this ground gives rise to a strange plant which our biological world has never witnessed before—the bird-grass.

The floating city is covered in green. All over its urban areas and suburbs, beside all its streams, over all its hills and valleys, in all its gardens and parks, there now grows the luxuriant dark green bird-grass. This is an unusual plant: its flat leaves are in the shape of birds. Pick a leaf, and you'll see clearly the bird's head, beak and eyes. Even the surface of the leaf feels like bird feathers. When a breeze comes along, the grass rustles like birds flapping their wings.

Though the bird-grass looks like birds, it is nevertheless grass. None of its leaves has wings. People say that if it had wings, then the bird-grass would be able to fly. The sky above the floating city would then be filled with flying bird-grass, and no one would be able to tell whether they were birds or grass, animal or plant.





## XII. Child Prodigies

In the same year the bird-grass appeared, the floating city had its first child prodigies. They are children of exceptional intelligence. These children do not arouse much attention at birth—they are just normal-looking plump and soft-skinned babies. But these children grow exceptionally quickly both

physically and in terms of intelligence. In no time at all they become strong, agile and mature-thinking big boys and girls.

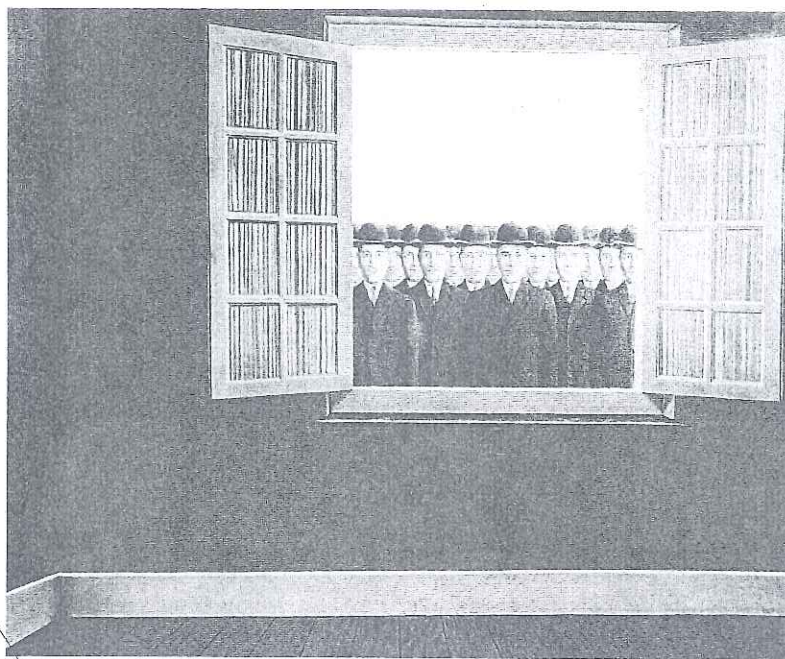
It probably starts with their arithmetic homework. Their mothers watch as they do their exercises, and cannot understand why addition, subtraction, multiplication and division are done with coloured blocks of wood rather than with pen and pencil. And if 480 grains make an ounce, then why should grain be measured in kilos? And what is this thing called "set"? As time goes by, the mothers find themselves unable to understand any of their children's school books. Moreover, the children don't need to open any books any more; they just turn on the TV or put on a pair of earphones.

First, the children tell their mothers to keep the bathroom window open when they take a hot shower\* and not to use too much salt when they cook. Then they take their mothers on trips, treat them to delicacies and buy them presents. The mothers feel that they are becoming more and more like babies, while their children become the pillars of the family, taking over from them as parents, subverting their traditional role of authority. Many mothers are scared, not knowing what to do about all this.

A small number of mothers, however, are delighted. They have always had doubts and worries in their heart, problems which they cannot solve. Now when they think about these child prodigies, they figure that perhaps everything will be resolved in the children's hands.

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\*To prevent gas-poisoning caused by old-fashioned single-flue water heaters.



### XIII. Windows

The earth is only a tiny planet in the universe, and the floating city is only a tiny city on the earth. If you look at a map, you'll find that the size of the floating city is like a pin-prick; even its name doesn't seem to exist. However, tiny though it is, this city has gradually attracted the attention of people in far-away places.

A city floating in the air; mirrors which only show the back view of things; people floating in dreams during the typhoon season; bird-grass that grows in the soil . . . . This fantastic city has drawn numerous travellers to explore and experience it, to look in its mirrors and to dream its dreams. As for those who haven't come, it's not that they are not curious about the city; no, many of them are actually quite concerned about it. And so they stand outside and look into the city through an open window. Their hands hang by their sides, making it obvious that they cannot offer any practical assistance. But to observe is a kind of participation, too, for to observe is to monitor.

The observers at the window—what do they see now? They see a teacher taking a group of students to an exhibition of Magritte's paintings at the City Hall. The walls are lined with paintings, and people walk around in twos and threes. Suddenly, the observers at the window come face to face with the students and their teacher. From the solemn looks on the observers' faces one can detect how things are going. If it is a tragedy, their faces will be sorrowful; if it is a comedy, they will of course smile.

At the other end of the room, workers are putting up a Mona Lisa poster on the notice board announcing forthcoming events. Over here, the people in the painting and those who have come to see the painting are staring at one another through a window, deep in thought.

*Translated by Eva Hung*