

Our China Adventure that turned into the Transformative Art & Architecture Course

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1. Little Yarra Steiner School

As one of the founders of the Little Yarra Steiner School (in outer Melbourne, Australia) I look back to an intensive 20 year-long involvement with the school. Starting out as the first class teacher, my responsibilities soon grew to that of administrator, project manager and, as it turned out, building designer. But that is another story.

After the school reached its first Class 12 in 2004, this was a major milestone, and I decided the time had come to move on and try other things. Although I had no formal contact with the school after that point, I still visited on occasion to show visitors around, particularly those with an architectural interest. So when I received a call from a former Chinese teacher trainee whether I would give an architectural tour to a group of Chinese visitors, I was happy to please. I drove out to the school at the appointed time and date, met the group and showed them around the school grounds, while explaining some of the ideas underlying its architecture. (photo 1) Afterwards I took them inside and we sat around a table and talked more as I showed them some of the plans and explanatory diagrams I had brought with me. After that I politely excused myself, drove home and gave it no further thought. That is until about three months later, when a Mr. Mu from Zhengzhou, China, contacted me and asked whether I would run a 5-day seminar about Anthroposophical architecture at his school.

It turns out Mr. Mu was one of the visitors I had shown round the school three months earlier. What I didn't know at the time, was that Mr. Mu was a department head at the ministry of education in Zhengzhou and his particular interest was to research educational architecture, in preparation for a planned major government school expansion. He told me later how his first

calls were to some architecture professors at Beijing university, who he felt had no relevant insights to offer about educational architecture, nor could he find anyone else able to answer his questions. He then decided to go on a world tour, to see for himself what different countries had to offer in the way of school design. That is what led Mr. Mu to the Goetheanum, whose architecture he immediately and enthusiastically embraced, which in turn inspired him to take a closer look at Waldorf education and Waldorf schools in different countries, Australia being one of them. Later, in due course, Mr. Mu would resign his position in the government, train to become a Steiner teacher and end up being the principal of the Zhengzhou Waldorf school. His visit to Australia and, as he says, the tour of Little Yarra in particular, had kindled his interest in Steiner education, Anthroposophy, and the connections with architecture.

My first visit to China was very tentative. From a distance, the land of communism and ubiquitous surveillance didn't have an overtly attractive pull and I had many reservations and questions what I would be in for when I first landed on the tarmac in China. Mr. Mu and the translator were waiting for me at the exit, smiling and waving their hands, and it didn't take long for them to make me feel at ease. The fact that I passed the chopstick test in the restaurant with flying colours and on top of that loved very spicy food, no doubt earned me bonus points. As the days went by, I was touched by the friendliness and hospitality of the people I met, many of whom would become friends over the following years.



2.

The 5-day workshop was attended by some 60 people and was received very well. (photo 2: 2016 group photo) Afterwards in the car, on the way to one of the first-class restaurants Mr. Mu was fond of frequenting, he asked me how much time I would need to run a proper course about Anthroposophically inspired architecture. I gave it some thought, reflecting back on the weekly evening classes I had been giving in previous years in Melbourne to small groups of interested adults, and said to him: to do it properly I would need three 10-day seminars. Not a problem he said (via his translator), and that was the start of both, the TAA initiative in China and TAA developing as an Anthroposophically based architectural course in its own right.

That was in 2016. The course as such was to start in May 2017. By then my wife Sue would be able to join in as well. Previously, she had been caring for my 100-year-old mother whenever I was away on overseas trips. When my mother reached the age where she needed 24-hour care, she moved into residential care, which made it possible for both Sue and I to travel and run the course as a team. I would do the lectures in the morning; Sue would run the artistic sessions in the afternoon.



3.

We flew to China three times in 2017, teaching the three 10-day modules with two-month gaps in between. (photo 3: 2017 group photo) Since it is stifling hot in Zhengzhou in July, Mr. Mu decided to organize the second seminar at a new venue in the hills, three hours north of Zhengzhou, in the same valley made famous by the ancient Shaolin Temple, which has become both a China-wide and an international tourist attraction. In fact, the whole valley was dotted with martial art schools, attended by many thousands of students from all over China. Apparently, the various martial art schools in the Shaolin temple valley are producing over 10,000 new graduates each year, supplying the security needs of government and business all over China.

By the end of 2017 we had successfully reconfigured the curriculum for the three modules and were heartened by the positive response we received from students. By now the word had spread and the numbers had grown. It was then that we realized that three modules in fact were not enough and that the course needed an additional, practical module. This happened the following year, when we moved to Chengdu, following an invitation from Mr. He, a businessman in the process of establishing his own Waldorf School and who had been one of the participants in the original 5-day seminar in 2016. After Chengdu, we were invited by MengHuan, a student of the course, to run the 4 course modules in Beijing in 2019. However, there was also the question of what to do with the students who had done the four modules

and who wanted more. This is when the idea of adding a second-year level arose. Together with MengHuan and Hannah, (photo 4: Sue and Hannah translating on the left) also a former student and our assistant and one of our translators from Chengdu, we formed our own little “TAA China team” taking responsibility for advertising and running the TAA introductory and advanced course modules out of Beijing. When international borders closed in early 2020, we managed to keep going online and have done so ever since.



4.

Later this year, in September 2021, we will be running the Advanced Practical Module, which is the 8th and final module of the full, 72 day TAA course. It will be attended by 19 students who have stuck with it over all these years and have become our friends. They are the first cohort of advanced TAA graduates, hopefully with many more to follow in future years.

The TAA course is based on four themes (modules), which are run on an introductory and an advanced level, totalling eight 9-day modules over 72 days. (The 9 days reduce to 6 days for English speaking audiences that don't require a translator.) The four themes are:

- Module 1: The Creative Process (as source of inspiration)
- Module 2: Language of Form (as bridge between spirit and matter)
- Module 3: The Human Being (as measure of all things)
- Module 4: Practicum (as a practical methodology)

On **October 30, 2021**, we will begin our first 6-day (3 weekend) module for an English speaking audience, streamed online from Seville, Melbourne, Victoria (see poster in this issue). As always, the mornings consist of lectures, Q&A and discussions, and the afternoons are devoted to artistic practise, with smaller breaks and a generous lunch break in-between.

When we asked our students how they rated the online teaching situation in comparison to the real life version, they rated it on average 7.5 out of 10, which we thought was very encouraging, particularly since the work includes practical drawing and clay modelling classes.

More information will be posted soon on www.BiosculpturalArchitecture.com