

Dandelion in Dujiangyan

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Hundreds of silk balloons rose high into the night sky, each lifted by the heat of a burning candle and illuminated by its flame. The balloons glowed red, yellow and white, and drifted on the faint breeze like dandelion seeds blown by spirits.

It was May 12, 2009, anniversary of the earthquake that devastated Sichuan Province in China, taking 80,000 lives and leaving a million people homeless. The balloons were lit and released by ordinary people in Dujiangyan in remembrance of the victims of the quake.

A week after the 2008 earthquake, NPR aired a story about a poem written by He Xiaozhu, who lived in Chengdu about 80 miles from the epicenter:

Elegy by He Xiaozhu

*Thousands upon thousands of anguished cries
Returning to silence and tranquility*

*Heavenly acts cannot be predicted
The moon over Wenchuan
Still, a question mark*

*Aftershocks extend to Chengdu
Sorrow engulfs half the world*

*Tears turn to ice
Let candlelight melt them away*

*Children, climb on a dandelion
and line up for heaven*

When I read the poem, it brought tears to my eyes. I've been going to China two or three times a year for the past 20 years, and have come to love China and its people. The thought of those thousands of children crushed in the wreckage of their schools was more than I could bear. The poem, though, pointed to a way I could express my feelings and possibly help comfort some of the survivors. In China the dandelion represents new life, renewal, and restored hope. I could build a steel and silver sculpture of a dandelion, heralding the love and hope offered in He Xiaozhu's last two lines. An earthquake memorial museum was planned near Chengdu, and it seemed possible that the museum might accept a donation of the sculpture.

Though it took many months to contact the museum managers and get confirmation that they would accept the sculpture, confirmation finally came in January 2009. Between sessions of blacksmithing classes I taught in February, the dandelion began taking shape. In March I met Philip Greening Jackson online. He teaches blacksmithing, judo and business at the Guangya School in Dujiangyan, a city that suffered enormous damage in the earthquake. Philip invited me to finish the sculpture at the Guangya School, and to use his workshop as a logistics base for getting the sculpture installed in the museum, just 50 miles away. This was a terrific offer! Getting the sculpture shipped, complete, to China would have been a nightmare. Its final size would be 7 feet x 7 feet x 8 feet, and it required a half-ton of boulders for its base! Now I could ship it in pieces to China and assemble it at the Guangya School, and could find the boulders locally.

Everything went incredibly smoothly. In the first week of April, I finished the key pieces of the dandelion: the leaves, stem, seed head and the seeds complete with their "parachutes". Philip's suggestion to use bicycle brake cable for the parachutes was perfect. The dandelion's parts were packed into two foam-filled boxes and air-shipped to Dujiangyan.

On May 3 my wife Sharon, younger son Ben, and I arrived at Guangya School, where the headmaster generously provided us an apartment and meals. Philip gave me full access to his workshop, and Philip's Chinese wife Linna provided invaluable assistance at every turn.

On May 6 Linna took us into the mountains near Chengdu where Mr. Qian and Mr. Wu donated use of trucks and heavy equipment to pull selected boulders from a river bed and move them to a rock carving shop 20 miles away. We proceeded to the earthquake museum where we discovered that we had to install the sculpture before noon on Friday, May 9, just 3 days later! The museum was officially opening Monday, May 11.

The next two days were crazy. Philip built the armature for the dandelion's base while I learned how to stick weld so I could attach the leaves to the stem. Meanwhile the rock carver in Chengdu worked 36 hours straight to carve inscriptions into the boulders. I did some re-engineering of the sculpture to allow it to be disassembled into components small enough to fit through a doorway and be reassembled solidly without needing to haul a welding outfit into the museum. We found an unoccupied building at the school

where we coated the dandelion's parts with lacquer to protect it against the ever-present high humidity.

Friday morning we loaded the dandelion into a truck, covered with a tarp, tied it securely, and set out for the museum. The boulders got there just before we did, and the museum provided a perfect place to install the sculpture. All we had to do was unload it from the truck and carry it through wide double doors. Well, that's almost all. We also had to get the boulders into position. Fortunately there were a few dozen Chinese Army soldiers on hand, willing to help. By 11:30 the dandelion was installed, illuminated by strategically placed overhead track lights.



We got back to Guangya school about 3:30 to find Philip roasting a whole goat. That night the school's teachers – expatriates from India, America, England and other countries – gathered for food and drink. By 10:30 pm there was nothing left of the goat but hooves and well-cleaned bones.

We spent another 4 days at the Guangya School. Sharon and Ben explored the surrounding city and countryside while I met with art classes occasionally but mostly spent my time at forge and anvil, making tools for Philip's shop. One memorable project was drawing out a 2" drive shaft to make a 1" bar, from which I finally made a hammer drift. Did I mention that Philip's workshop doesn't have a power hammer? We took turns swinging a 14-pound

sledgehammer for most of an afternoon to make that hammer drift. By the end of the 4 days, Philip's shop had a good set of punches, drifts, chisels, scrolling wrenches, tongs, and chasing fullers.

Philip and Linna took us into Dujinagyan for a leisurely hot pot dinner on our last evening there. As we walked back toward the school in the dark, the sky filled with incandescent dandelion seeds – silk balloons lifted by candles and prayers in beautiful, loving tribute to the men, women and children lost in the earthquake one year ago. We will always remember Dujiangyan, Guangya School, and the children of Sichuan.

NPR interviewed us at Guangya School. The story is available at <http://www-cdn.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103953234>.