

In a land not so faraway, there was a clan of people who thought they were descended from dragons, and being civilized for a long time, believed they lived in the center of the world. This Middle Kingdom, a name they gave themselves, lasted for 50 centuries, a long time verily. They had a chance to illuminate distant corners of the globe with their civilization. Mighty ships they built, but expansionistic they were not. They were content for other kingdoms to pay homage and gift them with tributes, acknowledging their superior status and Heavenly Mandate. Believing they needed nothing from the outside, they closed their doors, not deigning to trade with anyone else. Thus began their fall.

Fair skinned barbarians stormed their ivory tower, many unequal treaties were made that weakened them further, but not enough to wake them from their stupor. Like a patient going into a deep fever before she could recover, the Middle Kingdom was invaded at the fringes, factions within fought at the heart. She descended into the throes of Civil War and a Revolution cultural in name but decimated that and everything else.

Then the winds of Consumerism blew into the land. At the start much seemed to change for the better. Factories replaced farmlands, farmers became workers, workers joined companies, companies incorporated and built shining towers of commercial riches that were the envy of the developing world. Then the winds turned foul, the air became suffocating, the waters poisonous to drink, and her people grew obsessed with getting rich.

The wheels churned and the winds turned. People started to wake and remembered a time when they didn't have so much and yet were happier. Leaders grew bolder and began to speak of visions, 60 moons at a time, of change and betterment.

This is where our tale began. A group of adventurers heeded the call of a guild in the landlocked province of Shanxi, to plant trees and restore balance in an environment ravaged by coal mining. They were tasked with planning roads and homes on a hillside, just outside of the city of Taiyuan. The guild showed them schemes submitted by other groups of adventurers. One showed theme parks and foreign visions of cultural irrelevance and verily, disrespect. Another showed gardens of bland conformity that belonged everywhere and nowhere.

Our protagonists, let's call them United Design Practice, UDP for short, for the emblems they bore emblazoned on their arms. They set about finding local myths and stories as ingredients for the craft many call design. Street and place names were clues that led them into the memory of this ancient city of Taiyuan. Many such tales were little remembered or forgotten entirely, even by its people. Bit by bit, they started to piece the stories together; to draw, to masterplan, to shape, to design, to tell a tale of Taiyuan Cultural Renaissance.

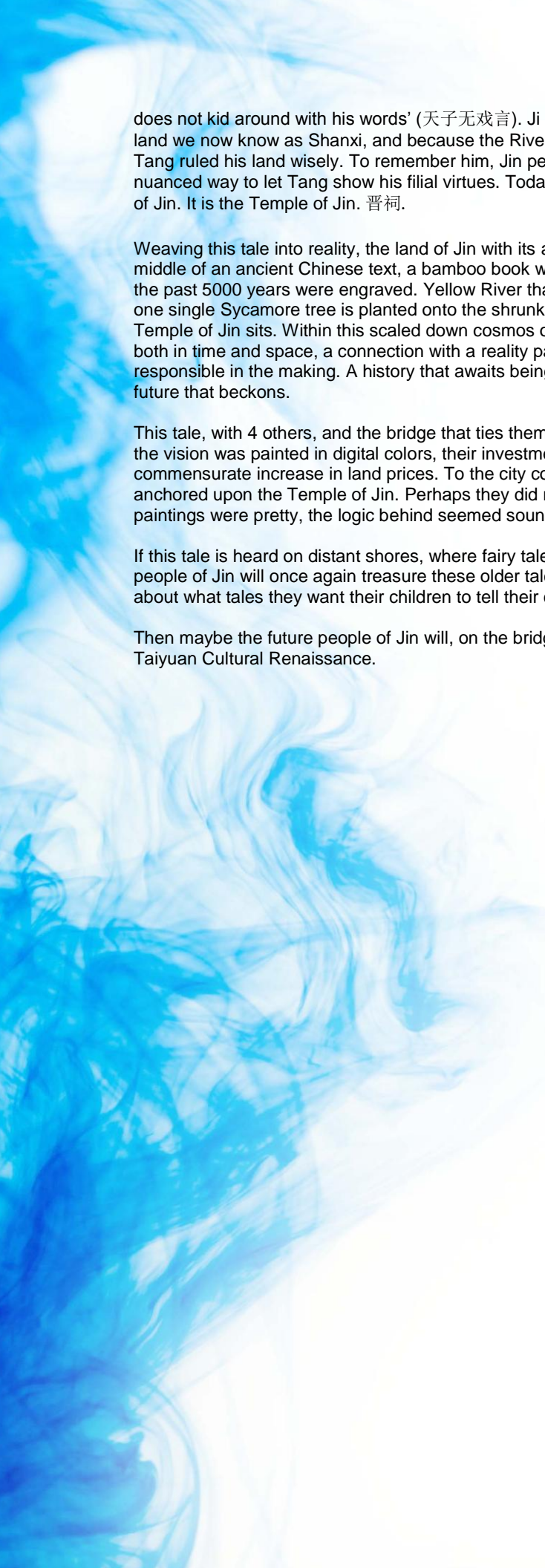
Using technological wizardry of Engineering and Architecture, they constructed a bridge that let people walk amongst trees, crossing valleys and hilly terrain. The bridge pitched neither up nor down, so that people young and old could walk easily and appreciate the nature around them, species of trees tall and short, their crowns revealing the birds, bees, flowers, ferns and other wonders that people wouldn't otherwise see in their everyday vantage points.

But this bridge is not a bridge. It is the spine of a book, that marks different chapters in the city's past. It is a bookmark, inserted into a tome at different points, reminding people to open up the stories that pop open into landscapes before their very eyes. It is a timeline made real, transporting one from one tale into another. It too is a compass, giving one different cardinal points to view the historical fables laid bare against the modern cityscape in the distance.

This bridge threads together 5 fairy tales, or folktales for they didn't really have fairy tales then. For their language and belief system is coded with stories past but made current in the form of through the lessons they avail and the relevance they have with everyday life. Every tale has knowledge to impart; some pedantic, some cautionary, others inspiring, or even just plain old romantic. Thus the 5 tales were translated into 5 narrative anchors, 5 civic spaces, told in an architectural language. Foremost to be enjoyed, spaces to relax and play, the narrative coded into the meaning of the space. Reviving first the experience of the land, only then will the narrative be revealed and appreciated, and in time the magic of the land.

The magic of the land was once strong. 晋祠, or the Temple of the Jin People, is just over the next hill. 晋 Jin was the name given to the land and its people for a long time now. The story of how this came to be, and the proverb 'The gentleman bandies not with his word' (君无戏言), came from this 'Tale of the Gentleman's Word' or (桐叶封弟).

During Zhou Dynasty (about 1000 BC), there was a young emperor by the name of Ji Yong 姬诵. He was playing in the imperial gardens with his brother Tang Shu Yu. Picking up a Sycamore leaf, he made it into the shape of a jade tablet, and in jest proclaimed his brother to be the king of the land to the west. Aghast, his consort asked him if he was serious. 'Of course not,' Ji Yong rebutted, 'we're kids, we're just playing.' His consort, Duke of Zhou chided, 'The son of heaven



does not kid around with his words' (天子无戏言). Ji Yong then kept his words and crowned Tang Shu Yu ruler of this land we now know as Shanxi, and because the River Jin flowed within its borders, the land came to be known as Jin. Tang ruled his land wisely. To remember him, Jin people built a temple, not to him but to his mother, which was a nuanced way to let Tang show his filial virtues. Today this temple is not for him, nor his mother, but for the whole people of Jin. It is the Temple of Jin. 晋祠.

Weaving this tale into reality, the land of Jin with its actual hills and valleys, is shrunk 180 millionth times, and sits in the middle of an ancient Chinese text, a bamboo book with each slip a stele laid horizontal upon which important events for the past 5000 years were engraved. Yellow River that borders the land to the west and south is rendered a bench, and one single Sycamore tree is planted onto the shrunken 3 dimensional recreation of Shanxi province, exactly where the Temple of Jin sits. Within this scaled down cosmos of the Jin universe, one walks upon this land that held many stories, both in time and space, a connection with a reality past, present and future, that one is observing, a part of and also responsible in the making. A history that awaits being understood more fully, a present that begs to be cherished, and a future that beckons.

This tale, with 4 others, and the bridge that ties them together, were presented to the current people of Jin. To the guild, the vision was painted in digital colors, their investment made sound in the light of an elevated cultural positioning and commensurate increase in land prices. To the city council, it was sold as an integral part of the larger tourist ecosystem anchored upon the Temple of Jin. Perhaps they did not truly understand the significance of these tales, but the paintings were pretty, the logic behind seemed sound. Yet they waited.

If this tale is heard on distant shores, where fairy tales were celebrated, and still deemed important, then mayhaps the people of Jin will once again treasure these older tales, take stock of the current one they are telling, and think seriously about what tales they want their children to tell their children.

Then maybe the future people of Jin will, on the bridge, tell their children, this is part of how it all began, the tale of Taiyuan Cultural Renaissance.