

文学：另一种造屋
Literature: Another Form of Housebuilding
曹文轩
By Cao Wenxuan

Why do I write — or, why do I like writing? What state I am in when I am writing? I had been trying my hardest to give the best answer possible, only to find that the words and phrases I conjured up were so insufficient, so unsatisfying. Eventually, one day, I obtained an accurate, almost ideal allegory: literature is a form of housebuilding.

Yes, I write because it fulfills my craving for housebuilding, because it satisfies my desire for the happiness and delights of having a shelter.

I am writing, restlessly I am writing; I am building houses, tirelessly I am building houses.

I found that there is a “house-building” complex within everyone as I examine this “labor of love” case very closely. It is only that we employ different means to build our houses — I, for example, chose words. As I see it, the “house-building” complex is something born within us, something embedded into our souls’ deepest desire.

I have childhood memories of housebuilding. When played in the field or along the river, we would often build a small “cabin” with clay, tree bark and grass. We worked together, as busy as bees, like a true family putting up a real house, and everyone had their own duty: either a mason, a carpenter or a handyman who ran to and fro, following the orders of someone else. As we were building a “house”, we were also envisioning the ways it could be used. Certainly it should not be an empty house, we would adorn the rooms with beds, tables and bookshelves. We kept discussing the allocation: who will have which bed, who will sit on which specific side of the table; we would discuss the different rooms, and their different functions...Sometimes the discussion went smoothly, but occasionally we had fights. The worst situation was when a boy, being bully, abruptly kicked down the nearly complete house, claiming an unreasonable request regarding the division of rooms, which, naturally, had been rejected by all the others. When such a thing happened, very likely the bully boy was isolated or cursed with bad words, or even beaten black and blue and cried loudly for mercy. It was a serious matter to all of us, as if it was a true house, solid and real. It was a serious matter to the boy who wished the house could stay under the tree unharmed for a long time, it was a serious matter for the boy who wanted to recklessly destroy the house as well.

Of course, on many occasions the scene was very delightful. When the small house was finished, we usually celebrated by trying to imitate the sound of fireworks with our mouths — piz-pa, piz-pa, piz-pa. Then we sat or knelt in front of the cabin,

appreciating it in silence. We were so reluctant to part with it when it was time to leave for home, turning our heads and looking back at it every few steps. Ever after we got home, the small house still appeared in our minds now and then and one of the boys may run to it after a while— like a person who, after wandering through the world for many days, is now returning to his own house, returning to his home.

I preferred building houses on my own.

Alone, I was a designer, a mason, a carpenter and a handyman simultaneously. I gave an order to myself: “bring the bricks!”, hearing this, the “me” would reply: “sure, I will bring the bricks!”— but where were the bricks? There was nothing save a symbolic movement of my arms! — as I was busily building a small house, I often talked to myself: “A door should be installed here!” “The windows should be large!” “This room is for dad and mom, and this small one — no, a big one — is mine! I want a spacious room to sleep in — with a broad river running just under my window.” In these moments, there might have been no one except myself in a field. Around me was golden wheat undulating in the wind like waves, or flourishing rice plants stretching endlessly to where they joined the skyline. I usually was so absorbed, so concentrated that I couldn’t feel anything but my house. The sun, as I immersed myself in my activities, may have been hanging directly above my head, or falling into a large cluster of reeds that grew along a large moor in the west — it was bigger, much bigger than the sun that had hanged in the middle of the sky. And finally, finally, my house was built. Upon this unusual hour, a flock of wild geese may have flew across the sky, or there might have been nothing above, only a dome of pure blueness. I sat cross-legged before my house and quietly looked at it. It was a work of mine and involved no one else. When I was appreciating it, my mood was the same as the one Michelangelo must have had when he was appreciating his paintings on the dome of a Cathedral in Rome, with the confidence that generations and generations after hundreds of years would still look at them with awe. Unfortunately, back then, I hadn’t heard of this Italian, who, as a commissioned artist, often stealthily marked his works by signing his name on an unnoticeable corner of them. If I had known this at an earlier time, I probably would have written my name on the wall of my house as well. A house, a work, an incredible work, by me. Over the next several days I came back to see it again and again. When I wasn’t there, I never stopped missing it. I built the house on a low bank in the field, so it was a curious thing that stood there undisturbed for a rather long period of time despite the farmers who frequently walked close to it. It seemed that it was also treasured by anyone who saw it, until one day, in the afternoon or at night, a storm washed it away.

Later, I had a toy to play with. It was building blocks.

Actually I had no other toys besides building blocks back then. For a long time, I was deeply fascinated by them. Or more accurately, I was fascinated by the possibilities they promised. I built house after house with these blocks of different

colors, shapes, and sizes. What surprised me was that I was able to build so many houses — each having its own unique style — with only a few wooden blocks. This was so different from when I was creating small houses in the field with clay, twigs and grass. I could choose to build a house following a model in the guidebook that went along with the toy or I could build any house I invented independently, without looking into the guidebook. When I stopped my busy hands, there was always a house standing quietly on my desk, exactly the same as the one I had imagined in my mind. It would stand there for days, like iconic architecture we see or have seen in life, until it collapsed from the kicking of a hen or the striking of, say, a cat.

I only understood it after I had grown up, that a house is a symbol that appears to a child at a very early age, that the symbol was passed down to us through generations of time by the ancestors of all human beings. That is why, I think, teachers always choose to begin their first art classes for children by drawing a parallelogram and adding vertical and horizontal lines on it to form a “house”.

A house usually means a home.

The birth of the house is a consequence of human beings’ recognizing the concept of “home”. A home is a shelter, is warmth, is a place to rest one’s soul; it is the very reason he lives. Actually a large part of activities in our world revolve around home. Happiness, suffering, refusals, pursuits, strives, retreats, sacrifices, escapes, war, peace...all these are more or less connected to the home. Thousands upon thousands of soldiers charge forward, roaring, even heaven trembles at their shouts; their blood floods the battlefield, and what do they go to battle for? They fight for their homeland. A home is sacred and inviolable. Likewise, a nest in a tree is also inviolable. I still remember clearly a scene in my childhood: a magpie’s nest was brought to the ground, which attracted countless magpies, all incessantly screaming and flying around it, even daring to strike those who tried to walk close to the nest. Everybody on the scene was so shocked at the small birds’ brave actions.

A home has endless meanings to be interpreted.

As I grew up, my longing to build houses did not fade. In fact, it grows stronger and stronger as I become more mature and as my understanding of life deepens. However, I no longer use clay, twigs, grass or building blocks; instead, I employ words.

A house made of words, for me, is a shelter — for the spirit.

No matter how happy or sad I am, I need words. Whether I am to vent or to console, I can’t do either without the help of words. I need my house of words even more when I feel frustrated and broken in the real world. It is another home for me. On some occasions, I feel like a bird with its wings clipped off, but at least I can go

back to my house of words and have a rest. And it was at one such moment that I realized a house of concrete could only solve a fraction of my problems, certainly not all of them.

There is another explanation, probably the most important one, to my passion for building houses in the form of writing: because it satisfies my intrinsic yearning for freedom.

The “freedom” I mentioned here is irrelevant to politics. Actually, my desire, or our desires for freedom won’t be satisfied even by the most progressive democratic system. This is something said by Jean-Paul Sartre after the Second World War, in which he had been a participant. This saying was very unpleasant, even unbearable for many people to hear. Further, he even dared to tell people who were celebrating victory: “Never were we freer than under the German occupation.” By saying so, he of course was not praising the Nazis, as he was a revolutionist himself once. Rather, he was pointing out the dry fact that true freedom doesn’t exist in any political system. For Jean-Paul Sartre, a person whose pursuit of freedom bordered on mania, must have realized that it is impossible to attain such a kind of freedom. But he found a way that leads to it, and that is writing — building his own house.

Human society has to comply with laws and regulations and is subject to endless restrictions in order to survive. However, bounds and constraints are things that go against our natural desire for freedom. The more orderly a society is, the more rules it has. Thus, I don’t think a civilized society can solve this conflict between bondage and freedom. We were born with a longing for freedom, which is reasonable and should not be denied. Thus this paradox concerning freedom and its relationship to control will confuse us eternally. However, as creatures with wisdom, we human beings have found many ways to balance this relationship, and writing is one of them. When you are writing, you are able to summon and dispatch tens of thousands of words, like a general who has millions of troops at his command. Plan your words on a barren desert, and the desert will disappear. Turn your words into a flock of pigeons and they will hover in the vast sky. If you want a field, a field will there be. If you want a barn, a barn will materialize for you. Words can be everything.

As a system of identification marks, a most fundamental function of written words is to reflect the physical world. Take the Chinese language for example, we have the character “山” (shan) to depict a hill or a mountain and the character “河” (ho) for the river. But just as an old Chinese idiom goes, “The heaven alone is long-lived, the earth alone is enduring”, many objects no longer exist, only the words that signify them are left and still used by us daily. Besides, our description of the world is usually retrospective. When we say “a small, green sapling”, in most situations, we probably don’t have a real sapling to look at or to touch. Actually we are just attempting to represent a scene, a space, or a time in which our physical body has long ago disappeared. If this is illogical, then you will have no right to tell

your friend in Beijing what the Musée du Louvre was like when you return from Paris — unless you have the magic power to move it to Beijing. Such a request, no doubt, is absurd. Further, we should notice the flexibility of words. For instance, we can use the word “large” to depict a relatively bigger ant, we also can use it to depict a mountain shrouded in clouds — “a large mountain”. There are endless combinations of individual words within a grammatical frame. We can elicit a truth from all these facts, and that is that language has gained independence from the physical world by establishing a self-governed state ages ago. The first principle of this state is freedom. This principle is in consistence with our yearnings for freedom. Indeed, this state has its own laws, but still we can enjoy extensive freedoms under these laws. Writing has the power to set our spirits free. It brightens our souls with freedom. And ultimately, writing comforts our hearts which are persistently beating for freedom.

If you are writing for freedom, you will be free for writing’s sake. The house will entirely be yours. It is your room. You can have your heart and your mind stark open, you can freely express your emotions, you can elevate your creativity to its highest level. Even the act of building houses itself may offer you a taste of ecstasy from pure freedom. The location, the style...everything relevant to the house will be decided by you. You have immeasurable choices. And when finally, a house stands before your eyes, looking exactly as you imagined it to be, your happiness must be brimless!

Housebuilding is, for certain, an aesthetic experience. The house you build is both an aesthetic object and a manifestation of your aesthetic ideal. Its exterior and interior features, such as its shape, its structure, its style, its compatibility with nature...will guide you through an experience of beauty in ways you are not even aware of. These experiences, in return, will provide you with spiritual fulfillment.

Still later, when I realized that the houses I built didn’t belong only to me, but also to the children, I ascended to a higher stage of life with my mindset and beliefs renewed. I started to write and build houses with a new heart. Today, most of the time I forget the personal connection between me and the house I am building, as I think of only one thing: its relationship with the children — thousands of them. I have a clearer and clearer vision of what I should do: I am obliged to write for the children and to build houses for them. I become more earnest, more conscientious, with a sense of the sacred. I adopt the most stringent standard for each house I build, for I must build houses as beautifully and solidly as possible for the children. I know my ability is limited, but I have been trying my best to achieve this high standard.

Growing children need their shelters. They need a house to protect them from violent winds and furious storms. In freezing weather during the winter, there should be a fire in their houses. In unbearable, summery heats, they can open the windows and let in the breeze. When darkness descends and horrors spread on the wildness like mist, a house will make them feel safe and fearless. Their houses, besides having

soft beds and dainty toys, should also contain ample interesting objects that can inspire their minds. There are bookcases to be found in the houses — which themselves are made of books. Thus contained in the bookcases are books of books. These books will purify their souls and teach them how to act like a true human being. They are ships that carry them to the other shore. They are lights guiding them to faraway places.

As a person, my greatest hope, which also will be my greatest bliss, is that when the children have grown up and left these houses for years, they would still occasionally recall the shelters that gave them warmth and protection. If they, in the process of aging, feel a sense of nostalgia — or a similar mood — upon the remembering of the old houses, then my writing, my housebuilding, will be ultimately have been worthy of my strife and passion.

I will not stop building houses until the moment my heart stops beating — for myself, but more so, for the children whom I will forever feel connected to with deep care and affection.