Binds and the Soul: Explorations in Sculpture

Wendy Chen
wchen2@wellesley.edu

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Binds and the Soul:
Explorations in Sculpture

Wendy Chen

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INTRODUCTION

There was once a magic stone on the top of this mountain, which was thirty-six feet five inches high and twenty-four feet round. It was thirty-six feet five inches high to correspond with the 365 degrees of the heavens, and twenty-four feet round to match the twenty-four divisions of the solar calendar. On top of it were nine apertures and eight holes, for the Nine Palaces and the Eight Trigrams. There were no trees around it to give shade, but magic fungus and orchids clung to its sides. Ever since Creation began it had been receiving the truth of Heaven, the beauty of Earth, the essence of the Sun and the splendour of the Moon; and as it had been influenced by them for so long it had miraculous powers. It developed a magic womb, which burst open one day to produce a stone egg about the size of a ball.¹

—From Journey to the West by Wu Cheng-en

In Journey to the West, a classic piece of Chinese literature, one of the main characters, Sun Wukong, is a monkey born from stone. Having no mother or father, he represents freedom, chaos, and rebellion against the “natural” or established order on both Earth and Heaven. Throughout the text, he constantly defies expectations of what a monkey should be or do and seeks to attain the power and immortality of heavenly beings for himself. As he continuously oversteps his “bounds,” the gods and goddesses of Heaven begin to feel threatened by his acts of defiance. They try various methods to assimilate and contain him within their rigid order. After all their attempts fail, they finally call on Buddha to trap him underneath a mountain. Eventually, however, through his force of will and determination, Sun Wukong gains all that he wishes for—glory, fame, immortality, freedom—and becomes enlightened.

In Hanover, NH, I grew up listening to my grandmother tell fascinating stories of this monkey king and his many adventures. Born in the year of the Monkey, I felt a particular affinity to Sun Wukong. He always achieved the impossible, despite the limitations of his form as a mere monkey and the expectations of those around him.

When I entered elementary school, I learned to read and write English, and was introduced to Western literature. Although I buried myself in Greek mythology, I never forgot the stories in *Journey to the West* or the rebellious monkey. It was, after all, the first time a story transported me out of my own body and into some ancient, fantastical land. Good stories and poetry captivated me in this way, taking place not in some physical landscape that I inhabited, but in the landscape of the soul.

It felt only natural to return to stories that I had grown up with for my thesis work in Studio Art and English. As I explored the original text, I began to rediscover parts of the monkey’s story in a new light and to develop many of the concepts and questions that would inspire and be the foundation for both theses. For my creative writing thesis, I resolved to reinterpret part of the classic novel into a contemporary poem adaptation. At the same time, I drew up the initial sketches of several marble and bronze pieces for my sculpture thesis.

At first, my designs were heavily inspired by the lines that both divide and unify space in Calder’s mobiles and sculptures. In my proposal handed in at the beginning of the fall semester, I described my plan as such:

...I propose to create a collection of eight to ten sculptures, of which about half will be in marble and half in bronze. The sculptures will be reiterations, transformations, as well as evolutions of a primary concept— that of the ability of lines to unify and consolidate, rather than divide, the space and form of an object. For example, some of the marble sculptures might represent this idea through the composition of thick, strap-like lines carved in low-relief running around the block of marble (see
Portfolio #1). There may be multiple “straps” crisscrossing the block of marble, or there may only be a single “strap” carefully composed and placed on the marble (see Thesis Sketches #1). The lines could also be carved into the marble. Regarding the application of this concept to the bronze pieces, the “straps” would become the sole feature defining a geometric shape, such as a rectangular prism or a sphere, in space.

However, as the semester went on, existing concepts evolved to incorporate, more and more consciously, the themes and ideas I found relevant and personally compelling in Journey to the West. Straps began to represent bindings and journeys, rather than passive lines. I sought out stones whose forms took on symbolic meaning such as steles or thresholds. Other natural materials that I incorporated into my stone carvings took on spiritual significance of purification and renewal. In the end, my two theses became part of a larger project, not replicating or repeating, but rather resonating with each other. Each sculpture I made became a poem, and the poem became my attempt at carving out meaning.

BINDINGS

An immortal of great ken and purest mien,
Master Subodhi, whose wondrous form of the West
Had no end or birth by work of the Double Three.
His whole spirit and breath were with mercy filled.
Empty, spontaneous, it could change at will,
His Buddha-nature able to do all things.
The same age as Heaven had his majestic frame.
Fully tried and enlightened was this great priest. (114)

—From Journey to the West by Wu Cheng-en
In pursuit of immortality, Sun Wukong determines to acquire the secret of everlasting life from those who possess it on Earth—the Buddhas, Sages, and Immortals. He becomes a disciple of the immortal Master Subodhi, who passes on to him the knowledge of heavenly powers—specifically how to transform one’s physical body. In the text, Master Subodhi’s “spirit” and “form” is “spontaneous” and can “change at will.” His body is not bound by birth or death, nor is it bound by any physical form. By teaching Sun Wukong how to change his physical form according to his will (say, for example, into another animal or an inanimate object), he frees the monkey from the restraints of his physical form and sets him on his path to enlightenment.

I have always been interested in exploring “bounds,” specifically the bindings of our physical forms. How do bodies bind, contain, define, free, or support us? And what is it that they are binding? What is it that resides within these bindings? A consciousness, a spirit, a soul?
The idea of our bodies as bindings is a thought that I've turned over many times, like a pebble in the mind. When I was in high school, two close friends struggled against their “bindings,” each in their own way. One had just been diagnosed with cancer. The other had an eating disorder. For both, the body was a source of anguish and pain. Both struggled with their bodies, which had begun to deteriorate.

Healing was a slow process. Ann spent many months at Children’s Hospital undergoing treatment for stage IV Hodgkin’s lymphoma. My other friend was fighting a mental battle within herself. We tried to support them as best we could, but it was hard to see their suffering and feel only helpless.

After visiting Ann in the hospital and seeing the effects of chemotherapy and radiation on her, I wrote a poem in an attempt to understand what was happening. Poetry, after all, had always been a way for me to try to resolve what was happening the world around me.

**The Other Side**

“I hope I won’t lose my eyelashes though,” Ann says to me lying in a bed at Children’s Hospital, room 206.

“I am amazed

at the body's capacity for pain.
my body bottles it up like some liquid.
I don't know
where it all comes from, probably the same place as tears do."

The body no longer belongs
to her. Healing has transformed it. The shape
is gaunt and bruised. It has lost
most of its hair.

“They say I have to stay for a few more treatments at least
the surgery's over it's horrible
to think of them cutting you open to stitch you back together.”

“Some nights I still dream
of the needle and the thread,” she added
The thought of the needle radiates through her body
the thought that she always returns to, circling
turning over in the palm of her soul.
She does not lose hope because she knows—
She does not lose hope because she knows.

Afterwards, as I am leaving Children’s Hospital, I think of my birth:

The nurse turned me over, still crying, and worried over the blue-green birthmark on the back of my thigh, calling it a “Mongolian spot.” My mother patiently explained to her the real reason for my bruise, knowledge passed down to her through the centuries like a secret cure: children never wanted to enter the world, the knowledge of pain and suffering hidden deep inside them somehow, so the gods on the other side had to kick them out, crying and bruised—

After arriving at Wellesley, I continued to encounter the idea of body as “binding.”

During a poetry workshop that I took, Professor Bidart read his poem “Ellen West,” written from the point of view of a woman who suffered from anorexia and bulimia. Several passages resonated with me:

—Then I think, No. The ideal of being thin
conceals the ideal
not to have a body—;
which is NOT trivial ...

This wish seems now as much a “given” of my existence

as the intolerable
fact that I am dark-complexioned; big-boned;
and once weighed
one hundred and sixty-five pounds ...

—But then I think, No. That’s too simple,—

without a body, who can
know himself at all?
Only by
acting; choosing; rejecting; have I
made myself—
discovered who and what Ellen can be ...

—But then again I think, NO. This I is anterior
to name; gender; action;
fashion;
MATTER ITSELF,—

... trying to stop my hunger with FOOD
is like trying to appease thirst
with ink.  

Sun Wukong, too, desires freedom from the restraints of his body—death, his lowly monkey form. In my English thesis, titled “The Stone Monkey,” I write about his first ascent into Heaven in those terms:

He burned away with them, the weighty matter of his body dropping away as he propelled through space. In the darkness, he was nothing but a mind.

Each sculpture addresses the question of binding and containment in its own particular way. They are individual meditations upon the idea: philosopher’s stones. They are impossibilities—bindings squeezing the stone as if it were soft, or bronze straps held up by nothing but air—just like the impossibility, or perhaps marvel, of our individual, unique consciousness or souls arising from clusters of atoms.

The tension between the bindings and the mass they contain is akin to the tension between one’s body—a physical form with its boundaries and limitations—and one’s consciousness or soul—an immaterial, indefinable thing.

Initially, all of my bindings were closed off, completely wrapping around each mass of stone. However, during my first thesis review, Professor McGibbon suggested that I

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explore the idea of bindings that were not closed circuits, but open-ended—free. The suggestion opened up possibilities that I hadn’t considered before, and caused me to rethink the function of the bindings and the relationship between the bindings and what is being bound. The idea of this freedom was incredibly attractive to me. After all, Sun Wukong acquires freedom in his enlightenment in the end.

I also consider the bindings as individual roads or journeys drawn across the stone or in bronze. As loops, many of these bindings end at their beginning, or can also be conceptualized as having no beginning or end, like the wheel of Dharma. Many of these roads also “cross paths” with one another, much like the main characters in *Journey to the West* who band together to attain enlightenment. Although no one can follow the exact journey of another, there are moments when individuals meet that are moments of communication, understanding, and empathy.

 THE FORM

...Out of the basement of light,
Sadly, lifted through time’s blinding layers
On perhaps my tombstone

In which the original shape Michelangelo believed was in every rock upon earth
Is heavily stirring,

Surprised to be an angel,
To be waked in North Georgia by the ponderous play
Of men with ten-ton blocks

But no more surprised than I
To feel sadness fall off as though I myself
Were rising from stone

Held by a thread in midair,
Badly cut, local-looking, and totally uninspired,
Not a masterwork
Or even worth seeing at all
But the spirit of this place just the same,
Felt here as joy.

—From “In the Marble Quarry” by James L. Dickey

I learned to carve during the summer of 2013 at the Carving Studio in West Rutland, VT under the instruction of Professor Dorrien. The Carving Studio is located on the former grounds of the Vermont Marble Company, where piles of marble blocks lie scattered amidst quarries filled with water and the buildings of old manufacturing facilities. I stayed there for a week in June, carving for most of the day and exploring the grounds.

In the poem “In the Marble Quarry,” Dickey describes the magic of the quarry and the stones that are pulled out of the “basement of light.” The quarries are truly beautiful places, magnetizing in their stark, sheer cuts and monumentality. It is the same monumentality that attracts me in Richard Serra’s swooping steel sculptures or in Andrew Gormley’s Angel of the North. Although they are on a much

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smaller scale, I wanted my sculptures to contain the same imposing presence within their forms.

*Bindings* was the first marble piece I carved and polished there. When picking out a stone to carve, I was immediately attracted to its clean, rectangular shape. I knew I wanted to carve straps around the stone, but I was not sure of their exact placement. The process that felt the most natural and intuitive to me was to draw directly on the stone and make revisions from there.

After I finalized my design on the marble block, Professor Dorrien introduced three basic types of chisels (flat, pointed, and toothed) with which I could experiment. I tried making different marks on a small piece of marble before attempting my design. I spent some time familiarizing myself with how much force to put behind the hammer and how to hold the chisels steady. I took note of the different angles at which I could hold the chisels and the importance of undercuts to create shadows at the edges of the straps. Eventually, I began carving my final design and soon graduated to using pneumatic tools. The vibrations made my hands unsteady, and it was a while before I felt I had some control over the tools. Nevertheless, as the week went on, I greatly enjoyed the process of carving away, rather than adding to, the mass to reveal the sculpture in the stone.

As I worked on my piece, Professor Dorrien also showed me methods to sharpen tools and explained ways to make one’s own tools. When I finished carving *Bindings*, he then taught me to polish the surfaces of the straps in order to highlight contrasting textures within the sculpture.

I wanted to respect the original shape of the stones that I picked out and keep that form present in the completed sculptures. After all, being able to pick out my own stones, I
chose ones whose shapes were already pleasing to me. The original shape of Landscape, for example, heavily informed my final design with its existing drill marks. Many of the stones that caught my eye had forms that reminded me of markers or monuments, or, as Dickey mentions, “tombstones” or steles.

When I was in China in the summer of 2011, I had visited the Forest of Steles in Xi’an. I remember entering an unusually quiet courtyard and coming across rows of steles, illuminated by the soft, evening light. They were not especially tall, and yet their collective presence was so commanding, that I never forgot how I felt coming across them.

The idea of death was present in my mind last summer as well. My paternal grandmother had passed away in China that summer, and although I had only met her a few times, it was the first time in my life that any family member had died. After I had heard news of her unexpected passing, I sat down to write the first lines of “The Stone Monkey.” I began in the middle of the monkey’s story—when he is first dragged into the underworld against his will:

Even when the fetchers of the dead came for him, he was unafraid. Despite not knowing what he would encounter beyond the city walls of King Yan’s daedal underworld, he broke free of his bonds and smashed through the iron gates.
In the World of Darkness, the Ten Judges sat in their palaces, watching the spirits of the dead come and go through the subways of the world. The Ten Judges sat in their palaces, growing fat from all the criminals.

Ox-Head and Horse-Face, the guardians of the gate, rushed through the city to give their report of the soul that had freed itself. Their shouts skittered like firecrackers in the night.

Stunning din. He plucked the golden staff out of his ear and swung it through the air, fracturing the city of death.

The sound blew the Ten Judges out of their palaces, where they tumbled before this fur-thickened creature. They handed over what was demanded of them—that colossal leaf:

The Register of Life and Death, more thick than book. In it, he found the names of all the creatures that would live and die. In the category of Monkey, under Soul No. 1350, he found his own—Sun Wukong.

He blotted out his name, and the names of the other monkeys. Horsehair brush. India ink. Its glutinous black snuffing out each character.

Behind him rose the city of Death. As he searched through the slow fog, a clump of grass seemed to sprout underneath his feet. The fluorescence of new life buoyant, and tripping—

When he awoke, he was home again, on the Mountain of Fruit and Flowers. Reaching his ears, the sound of water-luminous running down the rock face.

“I have freed us,” he told his brothers, “from death. We won’t answer to those idiots underground anymore. Why should we subject our bodies to their rules?”

Writing those lines was a way for me to express my desire for the impossible. In telling his story, Sun Wukong could once again do what we could not—escape death and free not only himself but those he cared about as well. He would not be bound by the rules of mortality imposed on him by the gods of Heaven and Hell. As steles, my sculptures were monuments of death, but also of life—and the journeys we take in our lives.

I also picked out a few long stone planks whose shape recalled those of thresholds or mantles of doorways. The form represented to me the liminal spaces, or the spaces of transition, which have always interested me. In many ways, ours lives can be defined by the moments of transition, of metamorphosis. Life itself can be conceived of as a thin threshold between what exists before birth and what comes after death.
The ephemeral nature of these thresholds is what gives them their power. In “The Stone Monkey,” I write a scene where Mo-Li Hung, the guardian of the gate of Heaven, reflects on the attraction of earthly mortality:

Mo-Li Hung had visited Earth but once before, and the smell still haunted him. After all these years, he could remember the scent of: aspens rotting where they stood, sun congealing upon a lake, sticky damp feathers of newborn things.

There was no dwelling on such things for him. Thoughts like those only led him through the mazy pathways of the soul where, at the liminal space between revulsion and attraction, he found desire.

But there would be no home for him on Heaven or on Earth. He was ruler of the gate, inhabitant of the in-between. What use was such nomadic longing for him—passing through the fat arteries of his heart?

When I returned from Vermont, I brought back several stones for my thesis project. I returned a second time in the fall to search for and bring back more material to work on, before the winter snow covered the stones from sight. It is an intimate experience to pull stone from the land where it has been resting for decades. One can see where and how it has aged over the years. One can see how it has lived.

**MATERIAL**

Marble and bronze have often been used in commemorative and memorial sculptures, as markers of the lives that people have lived such as tombstones or figurative statues. As monuments to lives, bodies, and souls, the two materials are symbolic of a resistance against death, time, and the ephemeral quality of life. By virtue of their form and material, my sculptures thus simultaneously resist and embody those three ideas.

Last fall semester, I took a geoscience course at Wellesley in order to learn more about the material with which I was working. Not only did I learn about the conditions under which marble and granite forms, but also the minerals that make up the stone. The
knowledge that I gained helped me understand, for example, why certain parts of the stone were harder to carve than others or had a tendency to split in particular way. With this newfound knowledge, I was able to execute my designs in a more effective and informed manner.

In my initial thesis proposal, I had planned to transform my bronze pieces “through the placement of a light source within the sculpture, thereby adding another layer of texture to the sculpture and allowing for an interesting play of light and shadows on the floors and walls of the gallery. These bronze objects, reminiscent perhaps of lanterns, would most likely be presented in groupings and clusters of varying shapes and sizes.”

I have always admired the magical qualities that light could bring to an installation or sculpture. Bruce Munro’s *Fields of Light* (2004), for example, made quite an impression with its constellation-like network of glowing orbs and optic fiber. Its structure also seemed to reflect the activity of neuron webs within the brain. The *Milky Ways* (2007-ongoing) of Mihoko Ogaki were striking as well. Each of her figurative sculptures embedded with LED lights seem to contain within it a galaxy of stars.

When I was at the Carving Studio, I began to consider introducing materials other than light into my sculpture. After one rainy evening, I returned the next morning to see that one granite piece with a well cut into it had filled with water. The sculpture (*Quarry*) became, in that moment, an embodiment of the abandoned quarry itself—water filling the spaces where rock had been removed.

During my second thesis review, Professor McGibbon encouraged me to begin envisioning how I might present the sculptures during the thesis exhibition. Professor Dorrien spoke of the effect they would have placed individually around a room. After the
review, I began consider more seriously what sort of space I wanted to create for viewers and how I wanted viewers to feel entering into this space. Having *Quarry* as a reference point, I decided to create another cut within a longer plank of stone. This time, however, I would fill the sculpture (*Vein*) with salt, which has long been associated with the rituals of purification. I resolved to place this container of salt at the entrance of the exhibit space, so that viewers would step over this threshold, thereby reenacting a ritual of sorts, upon entering this space.

**CONCLUSION**

Carving stone is a repetitive, labor-intensive, and rewarding process. In many ways, the process is similar to the process of writing poetry. It is a time of intense focus and concentration, and also a time of meditation and reflection. The mind often wanders during the process and comes back with connections to seemingly unrelated occurrences or thoughts. There is also plenty of consideration given to the placement of lines and the editing of those lines.

The various bindings that I carve in low relief, though not words themselves, are akin to inscriptions upon the stone as on a tomb or memorial. In many ways I feel a kinship to artists like the poet-sculptor Ian Hamilton Finlay or Jenny Holzer who bring language into the
material world with their sculptures or installations. In particular, Finlay interests me with his works such as *The Present Order* (1983) or *ARCADIA n. A Kingdom in Sparta’s Neighborhood* (n.d.) which stand like monuments or fragments of monuments in the landscape of his land art/garden Little Sparta. Although my own sculpture is not necessarily for the public, I strive to create work that similarly speaks to universal preoccupations of humanity.