

Xiangfan Princesses, Dragon and Five  
Elements

DEBORAH FORBES 2008-09

## **Xiangfan Princesses, the Dragon and Five Elements**

**An installation comprising laser cut steel; 10 metres of silk fabric; video (fire, wind, water originating from Infanta Project: Series II and Shadow Princesses); a wooden box; soil with fragments of a print on paper from Infanta Project: Series I, Bury; dragon cut-paper birthday card.**

My work with the images and ideas of “princess” has spanned more than a decade. In its evolution, new situations present themselves that become another thread in the braided strand of investigation. In May 2008, I was a visiting scholar at Xiangfan University, Hubei province, China. Everyday, I would take the same walk from my campus apartment to the International Education College and the Fine Arts and Design buildings. Most days, I would leave at approximately the same time as young children would be making their way to the elementary school on the campus. On several days I passed the same two little girls who were sometimes walking and sometimes riding bicycles. They would often be animatedly laughing and talking to each other and I thought how like my Canadian shadow model, Hannah, they were.

Hannah was the shadow model for Shadow Princesses. Each little girl carried a backpack decorated with Disney princesses – Snow White, Beauty from Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella. The backpacks were unquestionably made in China yet sported the insidiously popular American images of Disney princesses. The influence of Disney movies on the image of princess as icon is one to which I am alert. Little girls growing up in the 21<sup>st</sup>



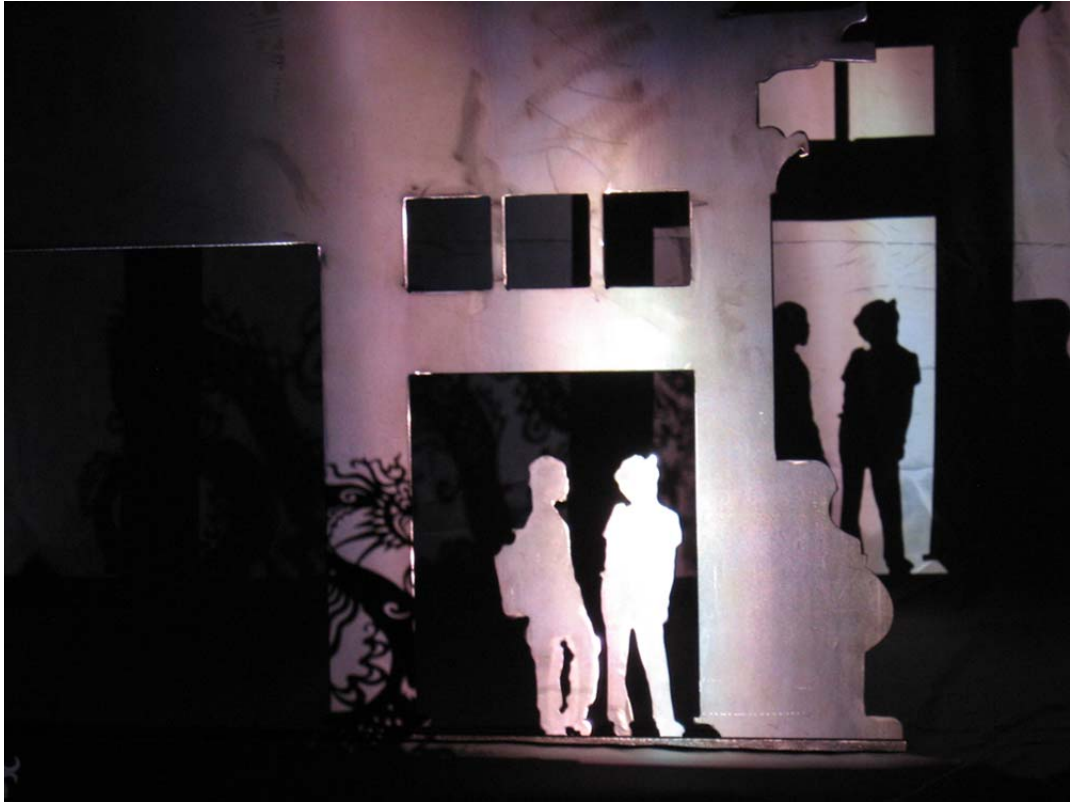
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Jan 09.

**Fire**











century nearly anywhere on our globalized planet, will know these images and know the Disneyfied stories that accompany them.

While at Xiangfan University, I looked out my apartment window early every morning into the mists and watched Longzhong Mountain start to reveal itself as it crept out. Miss Li took me for a walk up the mountain one day.

Longzhong Mountain is the site of the home of the legendary Zhuge Lian, a local hero from the history of the area. A travel site notes:

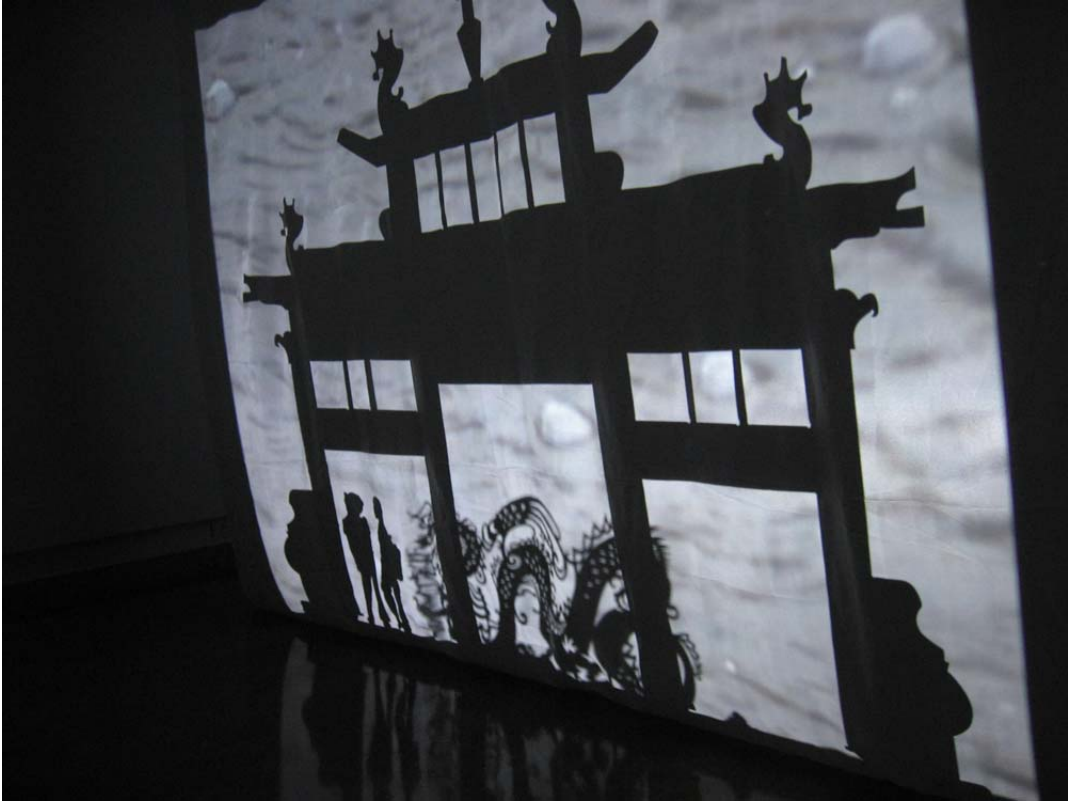
Longzhong lies in the west part of Xiangfan city. It used to be the residence of Zhuge Liang, a famous politician and strategist of the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280). Sitting in a mountain valley surrounded by streams, pine trees and cypresses, the city is a secluded place for living and studying.

Zhuge Liang (181-234), also



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**Water**



named Zhuge Kongming, was from Langya in Shandong. He came to Longzhong with his uncle after his parents died and studied hard by himself here while paying close attention to the outside world. He was called a "sleeping dragon", indicating that he was a talent in obscurity. To realize his dream of reunifying China, the warlord Liu Bei paid three visits to Zhuge Liang until the latter agreed to aid him. Zhuge Liang gave a comprehensive analysis of the situation then and put forth his strategic suggestions, that is the famous article Longzhong Reply. From then on, Zhuge Liang began to help Liu Bei lay the foundation for the later division of three kingdoms. There are many buildings in



Longzhong in memory of this great man such as the Three Visits Hall and the Marquis Wu Shrine.

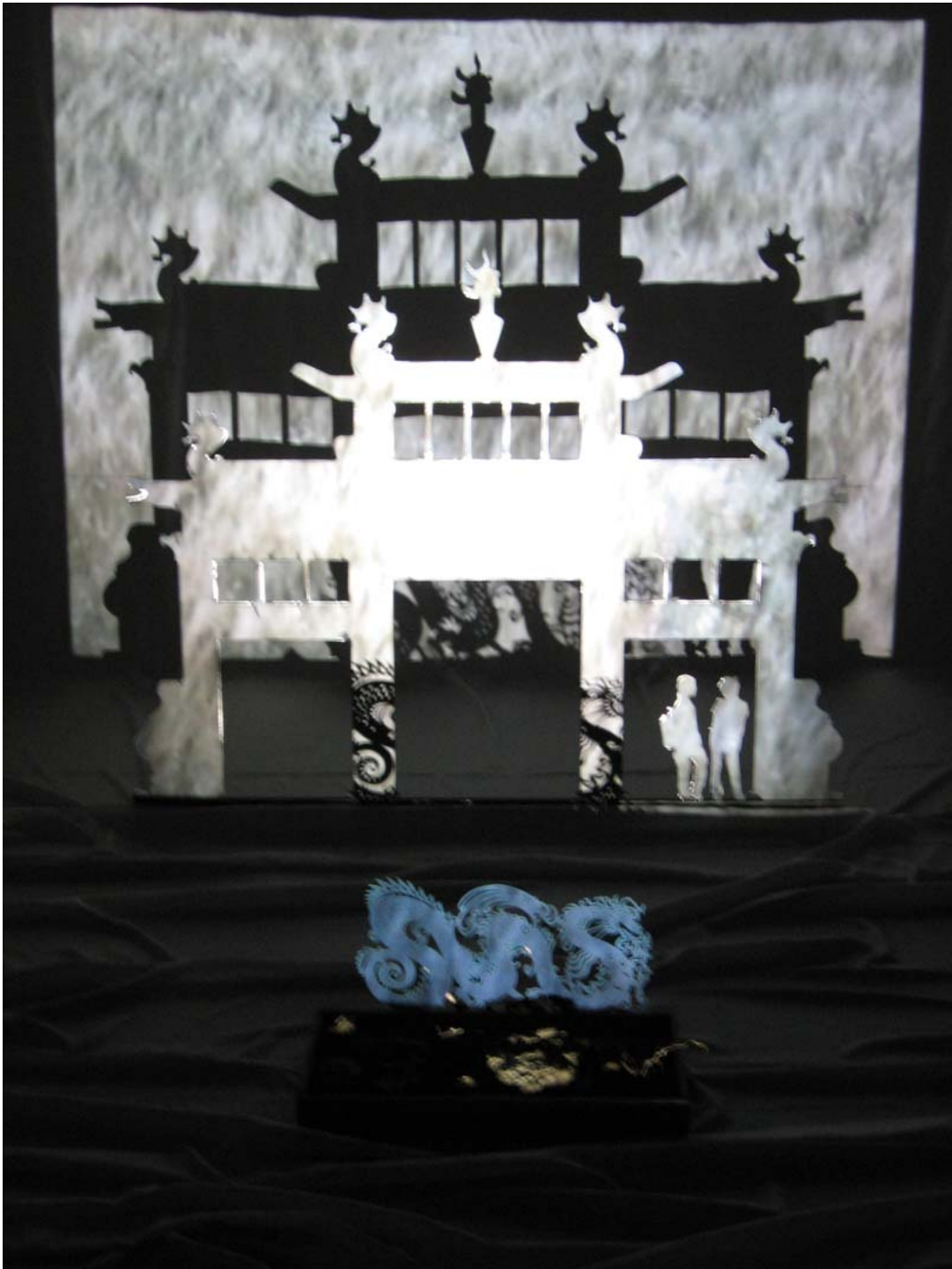
We walked from one ancient shrine to the next as if walking back in time. We could turn in any direction and the view would be as if intentionally composed. As happened on several other occasions in Xiangfan, I became consciously aware of the five elements in Chinese philosophy: wind/metal, earth, fire, water and wood.

After my return to Canada, I looked at my photos many times but after a while the only photos that were of sustaining interest were the ones of the little girls and the ones of the gates at the entrance to the road up Longzhong mountain. When images repeatedly draw me, I know they are getting ready to be used in my work.

In Xiangfan Princesses, the Dragon and Five Elements I have used the princesses, the elements, the dragon, and the Longzhong gates. Time (ancient and recent) is always a factor in my work. I have now added place, which is new to me. Setting princesses in space and time but alluding to a deeper history by using the gates to the mountain that have existed since the "long ago," commences the tale: "Long ago there were two little princesses ....."

Deborah Forbes

December 2008



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**Wind**

