The plan to renovate the Central Market will be scaled back. Its HK$1.5 billion budget will be slashed and the grand idea of building a glass-walled “floating oasis” above the conserved historic low building is no more.

The Standard’s headline vividly described the ditching of this floating garden as “Oasis plan floats away.” Mary Ma’s editorial called the garden plan “a castle in the air.” A castle in the air is “空中樓閣.”

“空中” (kong1 zhong1) is “mid-air,” “樓閣” (lou2 ge2) is “a tower.” Literally, “空中樓閣” (kong1 zhong1 lou2 ge2) is “a mid-air tower.”

“A castle in the air” means “extravagant hopes and plans that will never be carried out. To “build castles in the air” is to “daydream,” “to make plans that can never come true.” It’s the equivalent of the Chinese idiom “空中樓閣” (kong1 zhong1 lou2 ge2), which also means “a fantasy,” “an illusion,” “a mirage.” When your colleague can’t stop talking about his grandiose idea that is totally impractical, you will tell him to stop building castles in the air. Likewise, you can tell him “That’s just “空中樓閣” (kong1 zhong1 lou2 ge2)!”

But not everything “空中” (kong1 zhong1) is an illusion. When you are flying in an airplane, there is nothing more real than the “空中小姐” (kong1 zhong1 xiao3 jie3) and “空中少爺” (kong1 zhong1 shao4 ye2), literally “mid-air young ladies” and “mid-air young masters.” They are the flight attendants who are there to make sure that your mid-air journey is comfortable.

Terms containing the character “空” (kong1) include:

天空 (tian1 kong1) – the sky
空地 (kong4 di4) – vacant land
太空 (tai4 kong1) – outer space
空頭支票 (kong1 tou2 zhi1 piao4) – dishonored check