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28 April 2005
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## Bearing gifts from the east

Penelope Aitken and Jennifer Conley  
April 16, 2005

SETTLER cultures are full of emigre artists. From the convict forgers deported from England to post-war refugees, artists from Europe have helped shape Australia's cultural life.

Artists from China have become a force to be reckoned with. For instance, Jiawei Shen has painted some of Australia's most prominent citizens, but the commission that will add lustre to his name is the portrait of Denmark's Crown Princess Mary destined for the National Portrait Gallery.

The Chinese-born painter – he has also painted Mary MacKillop, lawyer Tom Hughes and Melbourne Lord Mayor John So – will try to show the princess's innate Australianness, a quality he has been studying since leaving China in the late 1980s.

Beijing-born painter Guan Wei is another artist who has ridden a wave of change sweeping through Australian culture. Guan came to Australia in 1989 following the Tiananmen Square massacre. His work, often politically charged, has been exhibited at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art.

Also escaping from a life of poverty in rural China, celebrated dancer Li Cunxin defected from the Beijing Dance Academy. In his 30s he came to Australia to work with the Australian Ballet and, on retirement at 38, became a stockbroker. Now famous for his autobiography, Mao's Last Dancer, Li has made his contribution to Australian cultural life by drawing attention to the kinds of obstacles many migrants here have overcome.

Other Chinese-Australian artists such as Lindy Lee, Megan Keating, Paula Wong, Kate Beynon, William Yang and John Young do not share the

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experience of exile but live and practise here as first, second and third-generation Australians, often with Anglo-Celtic threads to their lineage or a Western education.

They all maintain a strong interest in Chinese culture. The most interesting contemporary artists meld the symbols, techniques and experiences of Australian and Chinese art forms, creating work that disturbs or surprises audiences.

Tasmanian artist Keating, who had a Chinese grandfather but grew up without any significant Chinese influence, learned the techniques of paper-cutting in Beijing. Rather than following this form's predisposition for flowers and birds, however, Keating made expansive installations of hundreds of Red Army soldiers dancing with bombers.

Hong Kong-born Melbourne artist Beynon's early work also involved learning Chinese by fashioning characters from chenille pipe cleaners. These texts were positioned on the walls next to Celtic symbols, drawing attention to the pictorial forms of other languages.

Binghui Huangfu, a Chinese-born curator and now director of Sydney's Asia-Australia Arts Centre, says of the many Chinese artists living in Australia today: "The Chinese artists arriving after Tiananmen spearheaded an interest in contemporary Asian art in general. They employed styles and techniques learned through academic drawing and socialist realist painting, combined with pop-culture imagery, historical references, irony and humour, which perfectly illustrated the post-modern age of the late 20th century."

Chinese Australians are also growing in influence and prominence in many other fields.

There is, for example, Shanghai-born student Alan Wu at the University of Melbourne, who is quietly redefining the word achiever. Wu, 21, is chairman of the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, a member of the Advisory Council of the ABC and a member of the UN's Youth Advisory Council. He is also among a star-studded list of speakers at this month's Alfred Deakin Innovation Lecture Series in Melbourne.

Another on the long list of Chinese Australians is Liberal senator Tsebin Tchen, who came to Australia as a schoolboy from Chongqing. In his maiden speech to the Senate, he said the possibility of becoming an Australian citizen was not even on the agenda 48 years ago.

"In those days, Australia was still thought of as White Australia," he said. "Since then Australia has grown and changed from an isolated outpost of England, a minor player in the affairs of the British Empire, to be a significant power in the Asia-Pacific region."

He regards his election to the Senate with special significance. It affirmed "that every Australian, regardless of his or her cultural or historic background, stands equal in the eyes of his or her fellow citizens".

Then there is John So, who in 2001 became the first directly elected lord mayor of Melbourne City Council. He was re-elected last year. A businessman and justice of the peace, he has stimulated growth in the city through his support for leading events and infrastructure and recognition of the importance of international visitors and delegations.

Zhang Jijing was president of CITIC Australia (formerly China International Trust and Investment Corporation) for 17 years before returning recently to Beijing. The state-owned conglomerate oversees the Chinese government's international investments, as well as some domestic ones. Zhang is now a director of the parent operation and continues as chairman of CITIC Australia Trading.

Another prominent Chinese Australian is Jason Yat-Sen Li, an international lawyer, who first came to notice working with Ninian Stephen on the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Li was elected to the 1998 Constitutional Convention, was co-chairman of the national Yes Coalition for the republic and is deputy chairman of the Australian Republican Movement.

James Chen, from Shanghai, is the founder of Australian Maritime Services, a Melbourne-based company that recently went into a joint venture with Hong Kong giant Hutchinson Whampoa.

John Yu, chancellor of the University of NSW, has made a valuable contribution to Australian medicine, education, art and the quality of life of thousands of Australian children over a brilliant career. He is a former chief executive and head of medicine at the Children's Hospital, Westmead, in Sydney. He is chairman of the Australia-China Council and has served on the council of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

Yu was named Australian of the Year in 1996 and in 2001 was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia for his service to pediatric care and research, children's rights, education and the decorative and visual arts.

"I am proud of my Chinese heritage but even prouder to be an Australian," he says.

Kwong Lee Dow, until recently vice-chancellor at the University of Melbourne, is a fourth-generation Chinese Australian who has made an enormous contribution to education. He was dean of the faculty of education for 20 years and the inaugural chairman

of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. He also chaired the Commonwealth Review of Teaching and Teacher Education. Among other roles, he serves as deputy chairman for the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership.

*Penelope Aitken and Jennifer Conley are from Asialink, a centre for the promotion of public understanding of Asia and of Australia's role in the region, based at the University of Melbourne.*

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