

Reframing the post-'89 generation of Chinese artists in Australia

The fabric of historic, demographic, economic, political and cultural ties binding Australia and China has seen some wear and tear in the half-century since formal diplomatic relations were established in 1972, alternately frayed by fluctuations in public opinion and woven anew to ornament a range of culturally enriching, politically expedient and crudely financial motives. As Nicholas Jose, the Australian Embassy in Beijing's Cultural Counsellor from 1987 until 1990, observed so eloquently in 1994, "Australia's China [is] a complex, various, historically evolved, and specific entity."¹ The truth of this statement is evident in the stark difference between the vision of China that prevailed when Jose wrote these words and that which grips the popular imagination and political agenda today. The decade began inauspiciously with reports of the atrocities inflicted by the Chinese Communist Party on their own people at Tiananmen Square, provoking outrage across Australia and a temporary freezing of diplomatic relations. It didn't take long, however, for the mood to thaw as the Labor government sought to sustain the momentum of the historic trade agreements of the 1980s. This economic focus continued to prevail after the re-election of the Labor government in 1991, yet reports of massive increases to military spending and rising popular nationalism in China fuelled a shift toward a more suspicious outlook that rapidly gained ground under the Coalition government elected in 1996. While ideology and economics dominated the headlines, the 1990s also saw a cultural shift toward China driven largely by a massive influx of Chinese *émigrés*. Arriving in the country at a moment of growing tension between policies of multicultural integration and an increasingly conspicuous undercurrent of fear and prejudice, the public reception of these *émigrés* can tell us much about the attitudes and archetypes that coloured understandings of China in both that decade and our own.

For many observers of the arts, the young Chinese artists and writers who arrived in Australia after 1989 heralded the dawning of a new generation of talent who would transform the local scene. Surveying the achievements of those who he considered to be the leading stars in this transformation for the *Australian Financial Review* in 2002, art critic John McDonald proclaimed that these "post-Tiananmen exiles" had kindled "a revitalisation of contemporary Australian art." He reserved special praise for Ah Xian, then recently anointed a rising star after receiving the first National Sculpture Prize in 2001, and Guan Wei, "the outstanding success story of the post-Tiananmen diaspora."² Art critic Benjamin Genocchio, writing for *The Australian* not long after the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen tragedy in July 1999, also named Guan Wei as the "most prominent" among "a group of... artists [who] left China in the aftermath of the massacre."³ For both Genocchio and McDonald, these artists were united not only by their birth in China but also

a shared endurance of state-sanctioned violence and the agony of political exile. These experiences, along with an apparently mutual interest in an aesthetics of cultural fusion exemplified by Guan Wei's hybrid visual vocabulary, seemed to imply a generational affinity.

Writers Nikki Barrowclough and Neil James were among the first to trace the outlines of a specifically 'Post-'89 Generation', establishing a convenient frame of reference for Genocchio, McDonald, and others. Writing for *The Sydney Morning Herald's* supplement *Good Weekend* in July 1996, Barrowclough offered readers a useful primer in the "wealth of talent and knowledge [brought by] the new wave of Chinese who began arriving... in the late 1980s." Focusing on the literary talent of authors like Sang Ye and Ouyang Yu, she compared their rising influence with that of "Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, and Amitav Ghosh [in the United Kingdom]."⁴ Guan Wei is notably the only artist mentioned in Barrowclough's account. James, writing for *The Australian's Review of Books* in 1997, also sought a historical precedent to comprehend this "Tiananmen generation" of writers, although, rather than the recent history of the UK, he emphasised the demographic and economic aspects of their arrival by casting readers' minds back to "the gold rushes of last century," a comparably momentous Chinese influx.⁵ Anna King Murdoch made the same comparison in *The Age* in 1998, while Michael Reid, writing for *The Australian* in 2001, regarded the "wave of Asian artists... breaking on our shores" as the latest of many such injections of talent from overseas that had "helped create a robust Australian art world" in the centuries since colonisation.⁶ In contrast to earlier, predominantly European waves, however, he praised this as "a particularly talented... politicised, sarcastic, excessive [and] confronting" deluge that would "have a far greater social and artistic effect."⁷ A wealth, a wave, a goldrush—these terms neatly capture the blend of anxiety and acquisitive interest with which many in Australia regarded China, and Chinese *émigrés*, during this decade.

Although now known as the Post-'89 Generation, this wave could more accurately be termed the 'Post-'86 Generation'. In that year, the Labor government approved an agreement with the CCP under Deng Xiaoping's leadership to allow state-sponsored Chinese students to enrol in ELICOS (English-Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) programs under the new Overseas Student Policy introduced in 1985. This legislation had signalled a significant shift in the political currency of educational exchange. Previously, the Colombo Plan had been the primary mechanism through which exchange took place, offering financial support for students from developing countries to study in Australia, on the assumption that they would return home after completing their studies to put the knowledge they had acquired to good use. After 1985, however, educational exchange came to be seen instead as a lucrative export industry and a central pillar in Labor Prime Minister Hawke's ambition to benefit from China's economic rise. The architects of these policy changes were unprepared, however, for the speed and scale of their impact. In 1986, there were 273 students from China enrolled in ELICOS programs; by 1990, there were 13,142, accounting for almost eighty percent of the total population of Chinese students in Australia. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, Hawke offered students who had left China before 20 June 1989 a four-year visa extension on humanitarian grounds, while those who arrived after this could seek political asylum. By the end of 1992, another 34,793 students had made their way to Australia, and in November 1993 the 16,000 students who qualified for the visa extension were granted permanent residency.⁸ While the events of 4 June 1989 undoubtedly prompted a new interest in Australia among students who may not otherwise have made the journey southward, this interest was in fact an extension of a trend initiated several years earlier.

ALEX BURCHMORE

These shifts in the educational exchange sector also coincided with a more general turn among young artists in China toward the opportunities offered by travel or relocation overseas. Though much of the inspiration for this turn grew from the same economic reforms that had prompted Prime Minister Hawke to seek closer ties with China, like the rapid uptake of the Overseas Student Policy it arose primarily from individual ambitions. In her landmark study *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (2006), Melissa Chiu remarks that while columnists like those cited above tended to portray “the exodus of the art world [after 1989 as a] migration of dissident artists escaping an oppressive regime... this is not entirely correct.” Instead, she explains, the Post-’89 artists and writers were but one tributary of a larger torrent afflicted with ‘leave the country fever’, who chose to leave in search of opportunities overseas.⁹ Looking not only to Australia but also to Europe and the United States, these artists were in part inspired by a desire to seek the sources of the imported ideas that many had so voraciously consumed after the book bans of the Maoist years eased. Yet they also sought to advance their careers beyond the limits of the state-led arts ecology by ‘going international’ and ‘breaking out of Asia’.¹⁰ While the fear and anxiety provoked by the Tiananmen Square massacre certainly added a new urgency to such plans, these motives provided the first inspiration to move for many artists—further encouraged by programs like those developed under the Overseas Student Policy—and they remained a primary motivation throughout the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the myth of the Post-’89 Generation as one of idealistic young artists and writers desperately fleeing authoritarian rule to seek sanctuary in the democratic haven of Australia has proven remarkably enduring. Considering how closely it aligns with current public and political impressions of China, this is perhaps not unsurprising. In the days before the thirtieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 2019, for example, Michael Smith reported for the *Australian Financial Review* that artist Guo Jian remained “haunted by bloody images of [that] nightmarish evening when the Chinese Army was sent in to crush student protests.”¹¹ Guo had returned to Beijing in 2005 after living in Sydney since 1992 but, after the publication of an interview with the *Financial Times* to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary in 2014, he had been detained and forced again to leave China following an interrogation, recounted at length in Madeleine O’Dea’s first-hand chronicle of the Chinese art scene.¹² While his exile had been due to expire two weeks after publication of the *AFR* piece, Smith remarked, “[Guo] says it is no longer safe [in China, so] he will remain in Australia.” Several of the artist’s friends, Smith continued, “told [us] they could not talk about these events, even thirty years on,” and had been “warned not to make political statements.”¹³ The horror of June 1989 and the continued suppression of open dissent in China cannot be denied, yet the frequent reference to these circumstances by journalists and politicians as a useful foil for claims of democratic sanctuary must also be acknowledged. “To be in a position to offer compassion, to dole out help, can be confirmation of superiority,” Jose reminds us, while the sensationalism of such events can all too easily “[play] to Australian prejudices.”¹⁴

Even while it served to harden popular opinion of China and fuel a growing tide of anti-Asian prejudice, however, this narrative of persecution and salvation also proved useful during the 1990s for those endorsing policies of multicultural integration. The circulation of this trope is most evident in exhibition catalogue essays and arts magazines, in which Post-’89 artists—like Asian-Australian artists in general—are frequently positioned as intermediaries between their adopted and birth countries. This is especially notable in writing about Guan Wei, whose role as the de facto leader of the Post-’89 Generation prompted many to ascribe him a comparable part in the forging of ties between Australia and China. Sue-Anne Wallace, for example, noted excitedly in



ALEX BURCHMORE

her review of one of Guan Wei's first exhibitions in Australia in 1991 that the artist had "been studying English and already has conversations in this foreign language," while his art offered an equally promising fusion of "Asian roots... tempered by Western idioms."¹⁵ Curator Judy Annear, writing a few years later for *Asian Art News*, similarly remarked on Guan Wei's ability to create a "synthesis [of] Chinese traditions and Western influences," praising his talent as "a juggler of systems, images, [and] traditions."¹⁶ For author Evelyn Juers, it was above all "the migrant artist's special vocabulary of old and new... East and West" that distinguished his work, along with that of his fellow "energetic trader[s] and traveller[s]," as a key vehicle for "the process of exchange of goods and ideas" between China and Australia.¹⁷ Exhibitions of Post-'89 art could even be directly involved in multicultural community-building. *Shanghai Star* (2001) at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, for example, offered locals in Sydney's outer west a chance to learn from Fan Dongwang, Li Shan and Yu Youhan with a program of "masterclasses in colour memory painting, charcoal drawing, and Chinese flower *baimas* [to] expand their knowledge [and gain] a better understanding of Chinese culture."¹⁸

As many have argued persuasively elsewhere, state-driven visions of multiculturalism were in several respects fundamentally flawed, no matter how inclusive they were intended to be or how successful they appeared to have been in fostering an acceptance of diversity.¹⁹ The most notable sign of this in the discourse framing the Post-'89 Generation is a persistent inclination toward the repetition of a 'good migrant' narrative. McDonald, for example, in his 2002 *AFR* piece, hailed Ah Xian and his younger brother Liu Xiaoxian as "success stories of contemporary Australian art" in their rise to respectability after "[beginning] their careers... working at the lowliest part-time jobs and learning English in their spare time."²⁰ Rodney Chester, writing for *The Courier-Mail* a year later, also drew readers' attention to the "struggle and hardship" that Ah Xian had endured, "his dream of being a full-time artist put on hold as he carved out a life... [painting] houses for a living [while] his wife, Mali, worked in a factory and his brother drove taxis."²¹ McDonald described Shen Jiawei's first years in Australia in similar terms, remarking that he had "eked out a living as a portrait sketcher at Darling Harbour... while he waited to resume the life of a professional painter."²² By 2004, this theme had become so prevalent in coverage of Post-'89 artists that Fan Dongwang, speaking with David Wilson for the *Sunday Morning Post*, could remark, "with a wince, [that journalists] mistakenly—or, perhaps, not so innocently—[had] interpreted his love of painting cityscapes as... a former career as a painter and decorator."²³ While Ah Xian, Liu Xiaoxian, Shen Jiawei, and many other Post-'89 artists did indeed struggle to make ends meet when they first arrived in this country—as many migrants did, and still do—the presentation of these struggles as the preface for a 'rags to riches' story of artworld fame and fortune can tend to conceal a more complex reality.

These tropes of democratic sanctuary, multicultural integration, and the redemptive salvation of the good migrant defined the immediate circumstances for the reception of work by the Post-'89 artists. Yet they are also momentary expressions of more deeply engrained habits of mind that have long shaped contact between Australia and China, both before and after 1949. Writing in 1994 of the Australian government's 'turn to Asia' under Prime Minister Paul Keating, Jose remarked that many of the public figures then debating the merits and limitations of this pivot tended to overlook the long history of contact between the two countries.²⁴ This is a history marred by systemic prejudice and persecution, something which the diplomats charged with fostering closer ties may have been eager to forget. "In searching for the 'fit,'" however, Jose argued that it would be "necessary to recognise [these] points of non-connection... resistance, even of repulsion"

Reframing the post-'89 generation of Chinese artists in Australia

to understand “what *we* are, and where we come from.”²⁵ Meaningful dialogue across cultural difference cannot arise from reductive narratives created to serve political ends – it requires a mutual commitment not only to open conversation but also to earnest self-reflection.

Academic and writer Alison Broinowski, another historically minded observer of the ‘turn to Asia’, identified several points of resistance in her formidably wide-ranging survey of Asian inspiration in the arts from the nineteenth century to the 1990s, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia* (1992). Her study of these “impressions,” she wrote in the preface to the first edition, had revealed in no uncertain terms “how powerful images are and, once received, how resistant to change,” shaping responses to the unknown and unfamiliar for decades.²⁶ To aid readers in identifying such images in their own study of the arts, both past and present, Broinowski offered a useful vocabulary of terms. A lingering Australian tendency to deny our geographic proximity to Asia and instead regard our own region as “a remote place... more distant and exotic than Europe” is neatly summarised in *The Yellow Lady* as the “Far East Fallacy.” Our literary and filmic visions of the region as a backdrop for the typically “male, superior, [and] authoritative... bringer of enlightenment and... setter of examples” to educate and lead local populations characterised by “immorality, treachery, and savagery” have gestated a mythology of the “Adventure Zone.” The extent to which “civilised norms [of] behaviour could be abandoned [in this] place where the white adventurer could be tempted in ways unknown at home” has contributed to a vision of this regional playground as an alternately alluring and repugnant “Illicit Space.” Finally, the combination of these fantasies of the exotic and the fears of miscegenation that have haunted Australians concepts of nationhood since 1901 finds expression in the “Butterfly Phenomenon” – the stereotype of Asian women as “exotic, beautiful, and transient” yet always fated to perish in tragic circumstances, “a fragile art object [and] cheap, replaceable commodity.”²⁷

These habits of mind appear throughout the substantial critical commentary and scholarship dedicated to the artists of the Post-'89 Generation. They are most evident, however, in those aspects of this discourse that are conspicuous for their absence, the deafening silences in the critical record that can reveal far more than the familiar refrain. This well-rehearsed melody is in many ways a duet between the two voices now associated most frequently with the Post-'89 label, Guan Wei and Ah Xian, with occasional accompaniment from other players. Mention should also be made here of Xiao Lu and Shen Shaomin, who, while they didn't enjoy as much critical attention as the former two artists in the years immediately following their move to Australia, are now major names in the broader field of contemporary Chinese art and have to a certain extent transcended the confines of the generational brand. This transcendence can be partially attributed to their return to China, Xiao in 1997 and Shen in 2001, though Xiao holds Australian citizenship and moved back to Sydney in 2021 after living between the two countries for several years. Both artists also retain strong connections with Australian arts organisations like the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and White Rabbit Gallery. It could therefore be more accurately attributed, perhaps, to the style and content of their work, which tends to focus on issues of materiality, mortality, and bodily experience that hold universal appeal. Their shared preference for installation and performance art likely appeals as well to the coterie of curators and collectors on the biennale circuit who shape the contemporary artistic mainstream. Consequently, while Xiao and Shen should be acknowledged as formative members of the Post-'89 Generation, for various reasons they stand slightly apart from the names now most frequently associated with this label and from the artists discussed in this essay.

ALEX BURCHMORE



Reframing the post-'89 generation of Chinese artists in Australia

While the artists, works and styles that enjoy popular and critical acclaim reveal much about the visible social dynamics of taste, only that which remains largely unseen or unsaid can show the underlying habitus of attitudes and archetypes on which such judgments are based. In the second half of this essay, I have sought to uncover several aspects of the work created by five members of the Post-'89 Generation who received much less critical commentary than Guan Wei and Ah Xian in the 1990s and the first years of the current century, but, partially because of this relative lack, prove especially revealing of tropes like those which Broinowski outlines in *The Yellow Lady*. Shen Jiawei and Wang Zhiyuan were the first of the five to arrive in Australia, both in 1989 as ELICOS students. Shen, who arrived in January, numbered among the 16,000 Chinese students who received a four-year visa extension and were then granted permanent residency in 1993. Wang, however, because he arrived in November (after 4 June), could only apply for (and receive) asylum. Next to arrive were Liu Xiaoxian and Fan Dongwang in 1990. Liu and his older brother Ah Xian had been invited to participate in the first Sydney Spring International Festival of New Music and Visual Arts in September of that year, following Ah Xian's two-month artist residency (with Guan Wei) at the University of Tasmania's School of Art in early 1989. Fan had secured a Distinguished Talent Visa, in recognition of his potential as an artist and aspirations to pursue further study. Finally, Guo Jian moved to Australia in 1992 after several years in the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village on the outskirts of Beijing. He had been an active participant in the Tiananmen hunger strikes that preceded the June crackdown and had hoped to escape further harassment in the relative seclusion of the former imperial gardens. Discovering that he could not elude the eyes of the state even here, however, he fled further afield. Of the five artists, then, Guo most closely adheres to the archetypal narrative of the Post-'89 Generation.

RED TIDE

The colour red... should be inoffensive. After all, sunsets are red and so are apples... Roses are red, as every Valentine knows. So far it seems innocent enough. But add a touch of tribalism to the equation: sporting teams have red colours and so do nations. Australian schools used to have wall maps of the world according to Victorian Britain, with red proudly proclaiming the far reaches of political influence. Our simple concept begins to lose its innocence. The Red of Empire. The Red Army.²⁸

These opening lines from Neil James' account of Post-'89 Generation writers neatly summarise the mixture of optimistic curiosity and growing anxiety with which many in Australia regarded China in the 1990s. As the final words in the associative sequence indicate, the primary source of apprehension for James and other cultural commentators at this time was the prospect of a newly ascendant communist state, apparently intent on global domination. As early as 1993, Jose could observe that three archetypal narratives tended to predominate in media reports on all things China-related: "the free-wheeling capitalist road story... the oriental communist despotism story... [and] the freak story." Regardless of which narrative they chose to pursue, he added, writers were forced to navigate the narrow pass between "the Scylla and Charybdis of fear of immigration and anxiety about [Australia's] trade competitiveness."²⁹ In the case of Post-'89 artists, the second narrative proved most alluring—especially for those writing about the work of artists, like Guo Jian and Shen Jiawei, who once served the CCP but now seemed to have renounced their prior ideals to embrace Australian democracy.

ALEX BURCHMORE

O'Dea's *The Phoenix Years* again proves the richest source for the details of Guo's experience. Sharing insights gathered from many conversations with the artist, she records that he chose to enlist in the People's Liberation Army in late 1979, not long before his eighteenth birthday, because "[it] seemed like an adventure and a way out of poverty." He was assigned at first to complete training as a signals officer and given responsibility for his division's radio, "up half the night chasing frequencies, smoking local tobacco... too excited to sleep." When an officer noticed his talent for drawing, he received additional orders to design propaganda posters to raise the morale of his fellow soldiers, an experience he later considered to have been "more valuable artistic training than anything [he learned at] university." These remained his primary duties until he resigned from military service in 1982.³⁰ Speaking with writer and sinologist Linda Jaivin for the text published to accompany his breakout exhibition *Mama's Tripping* at Canberra Contemporary Art Space in 2000, Guo recalled that his stint in the army had been "a way to leave home, [to] become independent ... I was attracted by the image of the PLA... I was just out of puberty. I thought, if I survive this, [I'll] get the prettiest girlfriend!" He found the propaganda posters that he and others were assigned to produce, as well as revolutionary productions like *The Red Detachment of Women*, especially alluring. "I loved it. We all did... all those women in shorts!"³¹

The imprint of these years is evident in works like his raucously theatrical *Trigger Happy II* (1999), in which the scantily uniformed protagonists of his favourite model opera leap across the canvas, rifles at the ready, while the artist himself appears semi-naked and leering in glee, his pink water pistol firmly grasped in both hands. In other works in the series, Victoria Hynes wrote for *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2002, "sexually voracious, panting [PLA] soldiers and semi-naked pin-up girls' erupt from the canvas, like Chinese revolutionary art on acid... with glamour girls in military fatigues wielding machine guns, army officers lounging in a drug-induced stupor or hysterical frenzy."³² In *National Anthem* (1999), the addition of a bathrobe-clad Mao Zedong and semi-naked Jiang Zemin, China's President from 1993 to 2003, suggests a satirical intent that critics like Hynes and McDonald were quick to embrace. McDonald saw in these "ribald, satirical images" an attempt on the part of the artist to "[exorcise] the demons of his four traumatic years spent in the People's Liberation Army" as well as a wry comment on "the tidal wave of kitsch being produced in the new, consumer-friendly, sex-mad world of a China that has opened its doors to capitalism."³³ Hynes saw evidence of the "disillusionment with mainstream politics [that] led to [Guo's] metamorphosis [from PLA soldier] to Tiananmen Square protester," sowing the seeds of a narrative that would come to full fruition after the artist's 2014 detainment and deportation.³⁴ For both critics, his sexualisation of propaganda imagery could only be read as a satirical comment on the corruption and hypocrisy of Chinese politics, defusing contemporary anxieties of a resurgent communist state.

Shen Jiawei, too, has frequently spoken of the formative influence of the years he spent as an official propaganda artist. While Guo's talents lay in the creation of morale-boosting posters, however, Shen found early fame as a skilled practitioner of Revolutionary Realist oil painting. In his memoirs, *Painting History* (2018), Shen recalls the enthusiasm with which he answered Mao's call to revolt when the Chairman launched the Cultural Revolution in May 1966, joining a faction of Red Guards at his secondary school. In 1969, he was enlisted to train peasants in revolutionary painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, where he gained "special access to the library [and] all kinds of foreign art catalogues." The following year saw him assigned to the Heilongjiang Production and Construction Corps far to the north on the border with the USSR, where he spent several months with a student collective at the Great Northern Wilderness Printmaking Studio.

Reframing the post-'89 generation of Chinese artists in Australia



ALEX BURCHMORE



Reframing the post-'89 generation of Chinese artists in Australia

He remembers this fondly as time spent “[working] collaboratively on paintings... like going to art school without paying tuition... a stroke of good luck, sheer enjoyment.” His first major painting, *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland*, was selected in October 1974 for the Second National Art Exhibition in Beijing, where it earned praise from the formidable Jiang Qing herself – chief architect of the artistic components of the Cultural Revolution, including the Model Operas that Guo so admired.³⁵ These years of ideological conflict were profoundly destabilising for China and catastrophic for many of those swept up in the violent frenzy of political persecution, with frequently fatal consequences. As the experiences shared by Guo and Shen indicate, however, they were also a time of boundary defying personal exploration and experiment when old hierarchies were forcibly inverted, and widespread disorder provided the perfect cover for transgressive and even potentially subversive behaviour.

Shen continued to develop the techniques he learned during these years following his move to Australia in early 1989, dedicating himself to the pursuit of realist history painting as an art of public record and a means to work over the inherited assumptions of the past. In paintings like his monumental *At the Turn of the Century* (1998), Shen applied his past training to the national mythology of his new home. Yiyang Wang identified this triptych in 2002 as a marker of Shen’s metamorphosis into “a politically conscious citizen in Australian society,” comparable in ideals and ambition to Heidelberg artist Tom Roberts’ iconic *Opening of the First Parliament of the Australian Commonwealth* (c.1903).³⁶ Other assessments of Shen’s work, however, were not so flattering. In the same year, writing for *The Australian*, Genocchio described Shen’s equally monumental *The Third World* (2002) as “clumsy and contrived” and criticised what he saw as the artist’s “lack of engagement with... Australia, or an Australian perspective... almost as if Shen has been working in Sydney but living in China – mentally commuting each night back home.”³⁷ Bruce James, writing for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, scolded the artist for “technical deficiencies that a painter of [his] experience should be avoiding” and found little to praise in *The Third World* and other works “in every way as propagandistic and as conservative as their epic predecessors,” marred by a “turgidness of touch and confused aims.”³⁸ The timing of the first showing of this work at what was then Gallery 4A (now 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art), in *Zai-jian Revolution* (2002), as well as Shen’s inclusion of Osama Bin Laden among the assembled third-world leaders depicted in his canvas, may have partially inspired such judgments. There is an unmistakable note of patriotic fervour and ideological rigour in these remarks.

HAPPY HYBRIDITY

*[This is the] shadowed and complex... terrain of the cross-cultural traveller [moving] in the darkness... between the bright lights of urban clarity... [a] world of partial views and stuttering speech [where] realm moments of illumination may occur.*³⁹

Writing about the critical reception of Asian-Australian theatre at the turn of the millennium, Jacqueline Lo coined the term “happy hybridity” to describe a tendency to ignore any potential for unsettling conflict or tension. This perspective, she explained, instead sought to emphasise “a fusion of disparate elements... to settle cultural differences and contestations,” cultivating a “political indifference to underlying issues of political and economic power” and providing, intentionally or otherwise, “a kind of ‘whitewash’ for the status quo.” Lo contrasted this with the “intentional hybridity” – a phrase borrowed from Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin – practiced by those critics

who sought to “dismantle hegemonic relations [by emphasising] the processes of negotiation and contestation between cultures.” Unlike the desire for fusion without tension that continues to prevail in much public discussion of cultural difference, this model of hybridity exposes “the complexity of local histories and cultural-specific knowledges in all their density, contradictions, and contingencies.”⁴⁰ Although Lo identified these attitudes in writing on Asian-Australian theatre, they can be discerned as well in the reception of Asian-Australian art, including that of the Post-'89 Generation. The description of this art, and of the artists who created it, in terms suited to a narrative of multicultural integration comparable with Lo's model of happy hybridity has already been noted, with reference specifically to Guan Wei as a “juggler of systems” capable of creating new syntheses of East and West. As the quote used to open this section suggests, while Fan Dongwang's art has been deployed in the service of similar aims—in *Shanghai Star*, for example—his strategic foregrounding of unassimilable difference has also frustrated a critical desire for fusion.

At first glance, Fan's paintings present a relatively straightforward merging of diverse cultural styles and motifs. Like Guan Wei's frequently cryptic “pictorial puzzles,” they seem to invite us to join the artist on “a treasure hunt for meanings,” to crack the code needed to open these mysterious “boxes within Chinese boxes” through a process of “retrieval, sorting, re-sorting, and excavation.”⁴¹ This is also how several notable critics have framed his art. McDonald, for example, remarked in 2002 that Fan was “aware that the ‘exotic’... element in [his work] is a powerful source of its appeal,” seeking to achieve “a mixture of traditional Chinese motifs and contemporary technique” with his “images of robed mandarins and emblematic dragons, filtered through a ... Pop Art palette.”⁴² Wilson, too, though aware of the extent to which Fan's public image as a ‘good migrant’ is a journalistic fiction, nonetheless defined his paintings in similarly reductive terms as a fusion of “ancient Chinese technique and western contemporary art... [combining] the old and the new.”⁴³ Many writers on Fan's work, including Wilson, have highlighted his professional training in calligraphy, ink painting, and, especially, ivory carving as the foundation of his artistic practice, a ground of tradition that he then ornamented with European-inspired points of reference following his relocation to Australia. The sheer quantity and wide range of sources that these writers have identified as influences in Fan's paintings, however, belie the ease with which they believe he can traverse multiple disparate cultural spheres. French Impressionism, Tibetan *thangka* painting, pop music, animation, commercial branding, ink landscapes, Baroque tapestries, Renaissance frescos—these are not differences that can be easily reconciled within a harmonious fusion.

In the two major bodies of work that Fan created during the 1990s, *Descendant Bodies* (1996) and *Shifting Perspectives and the Body* (1999), fragments of these various traditions and visual vocabularies couple and decouple within the disorientating illusionistic space of his canvases. In *Descendant Bodies* #1 and #2, androgynous yet classically proportioned nude figures float freely within a dazzling brocade-like void, shifting between the intersecting pictorial planes of the composition and even appearing at times to detach entirely from the surface of the image. These swirling arrangements of partial torsos and amputated limbs could be mistaken for cut-out collages, if not for Fan's strategic overlapping of ground and figure. Fan further highlights the meticulous artifice of these works by pairing his classical nudes with strangely pareidolic, machine-like motifs. In *Descendant Bodies* #1, these are scattered across the canvas with little sense of meaning or order; in the second painting, however, they have merged with the nude figures to create a race of androgynous human-animal-machine hybrids. This combination of mechanistic and biomorphic elements appears again in *Shifting Perspectives and the Body*, a frieze-like sequence of five canvases in

Reframing the post-'89 generation of Chinese artists in Australia

which religious icons and historic figures compete for attention with sporting heroes and ornamental emblems. In these works, the restless motion of pictorial planes that Fan introduced in *Descendant Bodies* finds echo in a parallel mobility of meaning as these conflicting motifs alternately emerge from and sink back within the dense morass of writhing forms. Both bodies of work disclose “a provocative synthesis—not really a fusion, but [a] kind of montage,” confronting the viewer “with as many conflicting perspectives of an object or image as possible.”⁴⁴ Fan’s aim with these works, as art historian Rod Pattenden has astutely observed, is not to develop a “new hybrid personality” but to draw attention to the tensions and contradictions that arise in the process of negotiating cultural difference. Their meaning, therefore, cannot be decoded by identifying specific motifs but must be sought in the points of connection and disconnection *between* these motifs, the “shadows, gaps, and separations in [their] folded and complex anatomy.”⁴⁵

As such, in addition to the inadequacy of the prevailing ‘happy hybridity’ mindset, Fan’s works also force us to acknowledge what Sarat Maharaj has termed the “untranslatability” of cultural difference. Like Lo, Maharaj decried a tendency in the public discourse of the 1990s to ignore conflict, “narrowing [hybridity] into a reductive, celebratory term” rather than “an unfinished, self-unthreading force... shot through with memories and intimations of the untranslatable.” He urged those who sought to meaningfully engage with this force to account for the “opaque stickiness” of that which cannot be seamlessly translated from one cultural sphere to another, “like blood stains in a fairytale [that] cannot be rubbed off.”⁴⁶ A comparable untranslatability and commitment to the politics of intentional hybridity can be found in Shen Jiawei’s *Suddenly Back to 1900* (2000) and Liu Xiaoxian’s *My Other Lives* (2000). In each of these works, Liu and Shen project their own visibly Chinese features into Australia’s colonial past, thereby drawing attention to the ‘blood stains’ of institutionalised racial prejudice that the ‘happy hybridity’ of the 1990s sought to smooth over. Shen’s *Suddenly Back to 1900* is one in a series of portraits depicting prominent Chinese-Australians or Anglo-Australians with a connection to China that he completed throughout the decade, seeking to counter a persistent “historical amnesia.”⁴⁷ While most of these depict friends—as in *Mabel Lee* (1991), *Dr John Clark in Black Kimono* (1992), *Hedda’s Camera: Portrait of Claire Roberts* (1993), and *Guo Jian and Elly* (1998), or historic figures as in *Try Quong Tart’s Tea* (1996)—this work is notable as a portrait of the artist himself, wearing Qing-dynasty Manchu robes and standing in front of a pastiche of King Street in Sydney’s inner west at the turn of the nineteenth century, a sulphur-crested cockatoo sitting contentedly on his head.

My Other Lives also exposes historical absences. While Shen’s witty self-portrait softly eases the viewer into a realisation of an overlooked past, however, Liu’s appropriation and digital manipulation of an authentic nineteenth-century stereograph print is jarring and potentially unsettling. Stereographic prints enjoyed widespread popularity during the colonial era and were intended to be studied with the aid of a stereoscope, through which the paired frames, each taken from a different focal point, would merge into a single three-dimensional image. By altering one of these prints, Liu denies this fusion. If viewed through a stereoscope, his image would fail to coalesce, and the divergent gendered and racial features of the artist and the anonymous subject of the photograph would overlap, creating a disorienting intersection of perspectives comparable with that found in Fan’s paintings. Writing about *My Other Lives* for *The Sydney Morning Herald* in February 2001, Richard Jinman found these images both amusing and “vaguely disturbing,” noting the uncanny composure of the sitters, “unaware of the stranger who has suddenly materialised in their midst.”⁴⁸

ILLCIT VENTURES

*Guo Jian restages China as a theme park, a pleasure resort... where anything goes... people are perpetually high, [and] excess turns beauty into ugliness and ugliness into endless play... We get high just looking at his brilliant playgrounds of flesh.*⁴⁹

While the crassness of Guo's canvases has been read as a satirical comment on the contrast between the rigorous enforcement of public morals in China and the depraved antics that CCP members are rumoured to indulge behind closed doors, the above comments penned by Nicholas Jose indicate their capacity to exceed these narrow political boundaries. In addition to the hypocrisies of party rule, Guo's works force viewers to confront the repressed appetites and desires animating our own subconscious fantasies. As such, they could simultaneously be read as images of the 'Illicit Space' that Broinowski has identified with Australian visions of Asia. "In [this] Adventure Zone," she writes, "Western men [could enjoy] erotic experiences with women" like those who dominate these paintings, sexually available and apparently willing to "be manipulated, abandoned, or bought off."⁵⁰ Guo's 'Illicit Space' also perhaps evoked the "corruption, crowding, cheap labour, exploitation, [and] lack of humanity" that Jose has appended to Broinowski's trope, "a fouled nest, the flipside of Asia the Beautiful... that lotus land [where] to be sleazy [is], after all, only to be polite."⁵¹

Unlike the interpretation of these works as a satire on government corruption in China, which does much to reinforce the association of Post-'89 artists and especially Guo with a flight from authoritarian persecution, their imaging of the 'Adventure Zone' is more difficult to reconcile. To recognise the full satirical potential of these works, Australian viewers must acknowledge and come to terms with their own latent inclination to regard China, and Asia in general, as a 'brilliant playground of flesh' where they can indulge their most outlandish fantasies without judgment or consequence. In the fractured social context of the 1990s and early 2000s, when ideals of unimpeded cultural fusion coexisted with fears of inundation provoked by the basest forms of racial prejudice, this realisation divided critics. Art critic Sebastian Smee was an early advocate for Guo's work, revelling in the gleeful audacity of paintings "so debauched, so limitlessly venal [that] moral structure—even the idea of authentic individuality—goes into meltdown."⁵² Jose, too, as the above comments indicate, realised the value of Guo's perspective as "a subversive outsider... exposing the disorder rather than the order of things" in the "garish sexuality and gross comedy" of his work.⁵³ A note of distaste or even discomfort arises, however, in Hynes' assessment of Guo as an "outlandish renegade" whose "images of debauchery [may] tickle the fancy of some [while] others may find them unpalatable and disturbing," due to their "in-your-face eroticism and barely contained hysteria."⁵⁴

While the kneejerk reactions of delight and discomfort alternately provoked by Guo's brazen canvases confirm the persistence of an 'Adventure Zone' mentality in Australian visions of Asia, the women who populate these canvases notably subvert another of Broinowski's tropes. The 'Illicit Space' desired by the thrill-seeking tourist, she explains, is typically one inhabited by an "emotional, instinctive, subservient, and exploitable" race forced to endure the cruel whim of despots legendary for their "tyranny, luxury, artistry, and sensuality." The women of this race are imagined to be inherently fragile "china dolls [who must be] broken... a commodity, a victim, and dispensable."⁵⁵ The women in Guo's paintings, however, are far from vulnerable. In works like *National Anthem* (1999), they meet the viewer's desiring gaze with their own, entirely conscious and in control of their seductive power. In addition to our own fantasies of adventure and indulgence, Guo's canvases therefore compel viewers to recognise the agency of those who they would seek to

Reframing the post-'89 generation of Chinese artists in Australia

reduce to a sexual fetish, and even the complicity of these would-be *femmes fatales* in the construction of their allure.

Wang Zhiyuan also drew attention to the persistent attraction of 'Illicit Space' and the 'Butterfly Phenomenon' for many admirers of Post-'89 art. Initially, in contrast to Guo's explicitly crude and confronting canvases, Wang's interpretation of this theme seemed more reserved. In his *Beauties Captured in Time* (1994) series, he translated the evocative poetic moods portrayed in a volume of eighteenth-century Chinese erotic prints encountered by chance in a second-hand bookshop into an uneasy vision of suppressed desire.⁵⁶ The 'Illicit Space' of these works is entirely contained, first within the recessed perspective of the image itself and then within a surrounding brocade-like painted border. The enigmatic women who inhabit this space are comparably confined, unable to stand without stooping or to fully extend their arms and legs. At the same time, each woman skilfully avoids the viewer's gaze, turning instead to enjoy the antics of her captive companion, to admire the beauty of her own figure, to contemplate the artistry of her folding a fan, or simply to stare impassively at the featureless wall of her prison. While this avoidance may seem to return a measure of choice to these women, almost playful and even flirtatious in their studied postures of demure restraint, this impression is abruptly dissolved by the realisation that the shadows moving across the walls of each box don't match the movements of those within.

Wang returned to this play of seen and unseen, seduction and constriction, in his *Underpants* series (2001) of 'sculptural paintings' in which the complex symbolism of *Beauties Captured in Time* is condensed into a single object: a pair of exaggeratedly feminine underpants. As an item of clothing intended to conceal as well as allure or entice, Wang's pink fibreboard lingerie most visibly recall the painted silk robes worn by the women in his earlier series. Yet a parallel could also be drawn between these sculptural adornments and the perspectival space of the paintings—both imply a covering or containment of something desired, inviting the viewer to imagine the pleasure of opening and gazing within. The shadow cast by the fibreboard onto the wall of the gallery recalls the apparition haunting *Beauties Captured in Time*, implying that the viewer has become the viewed, watched by a hidden observer within the confines of the museological white cube as they stop to admire Wang's work. These are best understood, then, as fetishes in the Freudian sense of the term: erotic stand-ins for an absent object of desire. This symbolism is clearest in the most sexually suggestive piece in the series: a crotchless and disconcertingly anthropomorphised thong that confronts the viewer with a pair of parted lips. The fetish, Wang reminds us, is not only a focus for transference but also a source of anxiety and unhealthy attachment that can consume the desiring subject if they become too obsessed. As in Guo Jian's riotous playgrounds of flesh, then, Wang's *Beauties Captured in Time* and *Underpants* imbue the fatalistic and objectifying logic of the 'Butterfly Phenomenon' with an air of threat and reciprocated lust that complicates the easy indulgences of the 'Adventure Zone'.

Guo Jian, Shen Jiawei, Fan Dongwang, Liu Xiaoxian and Wang Zhiyuan are now highly sought-after and widely respected figures in Australia's contemporary arts ecology. For much of the 1990s and even the first years of the current century, however, critical reception of their work reflected the broader tensions between multicultural integration and anxious prejudice that coloured Australian impressions of China during that decade. These tensions are all too easily forgotten or overlooked, yet careful analysis can tell us much about attitudes and assumptions that continue to influence our public discussions and private understandings of China today. As we mark the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Australia, it is now more important than ever that we acknowledge the sources of our preconceptions and challenge inherited narratives.

ALEX BURCHMORE

Notes

- ¹ Nicholas Jose, 'Australia's China', *Chinese Whispers: Cultural Essays*, Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1995, p. 45
- ² John McDonald, 'The Cultural Revolution', *Australian Financial Review*, 29 November 2002
- ³ Benjamin Genocchio, 'Enrichment from a Chinese wave', *The Australian*, 2 July 1999
- ⁴ Nikki Barrowclough, 'Lost in translation', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 July 1996
- ⁵ Neil James, 'Altered Images', *The Australian: Review of Books*, 9 April 1997, p. 11
- ⁶ Anna King Murdoch, 'The China Syndrome', *The Age*, 21 March 1998; Michael Reid, 'Drawing on Views from East', *The Australian*, 30 June 2001
- ⁷ Reid, *ibid.*
- ⁸ Timothy Kendall, 'Exporting Australian Educational Services to China', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 26, no. 1, 2004, pp. 23–30
- ⁹ Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, Milan: Charta, 2006, pp. 8–9
- ¹⁰ Geremie Barmé, 'Exploit, Export, Expropriate: Artful Marketing from China, 1989-93', *Third Text* vol. 7, no. 25, 1993, pp. 72–73
- ¹¹ Michael Smith, 'Amnesia and Nightmares', *Australian Financial Review*, 1 June 2019
- ¹² Madeleine O'Dea, *The Phoenix Years: Art, Resistance, and the Making of Modern China*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2016, p. 276
- ¹³ Smith, *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Nicholas Jose, 'History Repeats: Ernest Morrison's China', *Chinese Whispers*, p. 79
- ¹⁵ Sue-Anne Wallace, 'Postcards from Asia', *Art Monthly Australia* no. 40, 1991. p. 15
- ¹⁶ Judy Annear, 'Juggler of Systems', *Asian Art News* 5, no. 5, 1995, p. 55
- ¹⁷ Evelyn Juers, 'Spirit-Man Guan Wei', *Art & Australia* 33, no. 3, 1996, pp. 431-32
- ¹⁸ Kon Gouriotis, foreword in Lisa Havilah (ed.), *Shanghai Star* (exhibition catalogue), Casula Powerhouse, 2007, p. 4
- ¹⁹ For a summary of these arguments with specific reference to the reception of Chinese-Australian art, see Alex Burchmore, 'Guan Wei's "Australerie" – Ceramics and the Binary Bind of Identity Politics', *Index Journal* no. 1, 2020; <https://index-journal.org/issues/identity/guan-wei-australerie-ceramics-and-the-binary-bind-of-identity-politics-by-alex-burchmore>
- ²⁰ McDonald, 'The Cultural Revolution'
- ²¹ Rodney Chester, 'China art flowers in a new land', *The Courier-Mail*, 29 November 2003
- ²² McDonald, 'The Cultural Revolution'
- ²³ David Wilson, 'Working class, my arts', *Sunday Morning Post: The Review*, 15 August 2004
- ²⁴ Nicholas Jose, 'The Embarrassment of the Kangaroo', *Chinese Whispers*, p. 26
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26
- ²⁶ Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, second edition, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. xii
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 49–50, 119–120
- ²⁸ James, p. 11
- ²⁹ Nicholas Jose, 'Green Oil: Media Images of Australia/Asia', *Chinese Whispers*, pp. 167–168

Reframing the post-'89 generation of Chinese artists in Australia

- ³⁰ O'Dea, pp. 63–64, 68–69, 86
- ³¹ Guo Jian, 'All Those Women in Shorts! Guo Jian in Conversation with Linda Jaivin', *Mama's Tripping* (exhibition catalogue), Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 2000, p. 11
- ³² Victoria Hynes, 'Brash Strokes', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 2002
- ³³ McDonald, 'The Cultural Revolution'
- ³⁴ Hynes, 'Brash Strokes'
- ³⁵ Shen Jiawei, *Painting History: China's Revolution in a Global Context*, Mabel Lee (ed.), New York: Cambria Press, 2018, pp. 1–10
- ³⁶ Wang Yiyang, 'History, Portraiture, and Cultural Citizenship', Aaron Seeto (ed.), *Shen Jiawei: Zai-jian Revolution* (exhibition catalogue), Gallery 4A, 2002, pp. 7–8
- ³⁷ Benjamin Genocchio, 'Not All About Mao', *The Australian*, 12 October 2002
- ³⁸ Bruce James, 'Artist with awesome promise must escape the mosh pit', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 October 2002
- ³⁹ Rod Pattenden, 'Culture is Difference: I only see shadows', *Vantage Point: The Art of Fan Dongwang* (exhibition catalogue), Macquarie University Art Gallery, 2005, p. 5
- ⁴⁰ Jacqueline Lo, 'Beyond Happy Hybridity: Performing Asian-Australian Identities', *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media, and Popular Culture*, Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, Lisa Law and Mandy Thomas eds, Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000, pp. 152–154, 158
- ⁴¹ Juers, 'Spirit-Man Guan Wei', p. 432; Charles Green, 'Guan Wei: Nesting, or the Art of Idleness 1989-1999', *Art & Text* no. 67, 1999, p. 94
- ⁴² McDonald, 'The Cultural Revolution'
- ⁴³ Wilson, 'Working class, my arts'
- ⁴⁴ Bernice Murphy, 'Constellations from Shanghai', *Shanghai Star*, p. 30; Benjamin Genocchio, 'Dong Wang Fan', *Australian Art Collector* no. 14, 2000, p. 66
- ⁴⁵ Pattenden, pp. 5–6
- ⁴⁶ Sarat Maharaj, "'Perfidious Fidelity": The Untranslatability of the Other', *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, Jean Fisher (ed.), London: Kala Press, 1994, pp. 28–30, 34
- ⁴⁷ Nicholas Jose, introduction to *Shen Jiawei: Zai-jian Revolution*, p. 4
- ⁴⁸ Richard Jinman, 'Photo Synthesis', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2001
- ⁴⁹ Nicholas Jose, 'Guo Jian: Mama's Tripping', p. 6
- ⁵⁰ Broinowski, p. 147
- ⁵¹ Jose, 'The Embarrassment of the Kangaroo', pp. 25–26
- ⁵² Sebastian Smee, 'Grotesque Ire', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 1998
- ⁵³ Jose, 'Guo Jian: Mama's Tripping', p. 6
- ⁵⁴ Hynes, 'Brash Strokes'
- ⁵⁵ Broinowski, pp. 117–122
- ⁵⁶ Claire Roberts, review of Wang Zhiyuan, *Art Asia Pacific* no. 15, 1997, p. 92