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Culture Fever: The Importance of the Arts

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Vice-Chancellor, colleagues and friends, thank you for inviting me here today and thank you for garlanding me with such kind words. Let me start by acknowledging where we meet, on the country of the Darug People of the Darug Nation whose ancestors have been Traditional Owners of their country for thousands of years. Let me pay my respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. That is only appropriate when my theme today is meeting, with respect and in hope.
When Prof Jing Han, Director of ACIAC, approached me about today's event, she suggested that I could just talk about myself. I usually don't like doing that. It's embarrassing. But today I'm going to do so and I hope you don't mind, because there is a larger point.

My first trip to Beijing was in 1983 with a student group from Canberra College of Advanced Education, as it then was. I had returned from postgraduate study at Oxford to a lectureship in English at ANU in 1978 and I had enrolled in Chinese as a hobby. I was inspired to do that by an American friend in Oxford, Alex Kerr, who had grown up in Japan and had gone on to study Chinese and Tibetan. He said if I wanted to be a citizen of the world I should study Chinese. What he meant was that Chinese thought, arts, culture, history and ways of doing things were such a large part of human civilisation by any definition that an educated person needed to know about it. Back in Canberra in 1978 I interpreted the idea as having more immediate relevance to Australia and to myself as an Australian. A geopolitical shift was underway. China, which had been largely closed for decades was now opening—a

word China itself used—with economic and political reforms, and intellectually and creatively too. I was curious. I wanted to go there. It would prove life-changing.
I had already been to Hong Kong and Taiwan, and spoken some Mandarin in a real-life situation in a stopover in Rangoon in 1980, when I reached Beijing in 1983. The opening up there was palpable. People shared their sense of optimism after the damaging years of the Cultural Revolution. I could actually meet people, actual people, individuals, some of whom are friends to this day. On the long train journeys around the country in that brief tour I listened to the stories people told, as I have done ever since, marvelling at life experiences that I struggled to compare with mine. How many deep conversations have begun from those candid questions asked of a stranger: Where do you come from? How old are you? Are you married? How much money do you make?

I returned to Australia determined to revisit China and by 1986 I was back with a visa to teach English and an idea of writing creatively about the experience. I was able do that with support from the Australia-China Council and the Australia Council, with help in putting it all together from Dr Jocelyn Chey, who was then the director of the ACC—an organisation created in the early years of diplomatic relations to encourage people to people exchanges, particularly in the arts, in the belief that a more holistic understanding between the two very different worlds of Australia and China would need careful nurturing and that shared creative interaction was one good way to do it. One of the Australia-China Council's early initiatives was support for students, and among the first was Claire Roberts, who studied Chinese painting at the Central Academy in Beijing in 1980—before going on to a successful career as a curator and art historian, with a focus on China. One of the ACC's best investments, you might say, or I can say, as we've shared our lives together in this space since first meeting at the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne in 1987. I'm happy Claire's here today.

Sadly the Australia-China Council, so respected on both sides, was retired in 2019, one year after its fortieth anniversary. That was not long after Malcolm Turnbull, then PM, reportedly confessed to China advisor Linda Jakobsen: 'China's just too hard'. And not long after Peter Drysdale, senior ANU economist, observed that China expertise among policymakers in Canberra was the thinnest it had ever been.

I was on a steep learning curve when I arrived in Beijing in 1986. I taught English and Australian literature at Beijing Foreign Studies University before moving on to Shanghai to teach at East China Normal University. The Australian Studies Centres at those two universities were among the first in a network that has since grown to 37 such centres in China, according to Prof Chen Hong, director at ECNU, in an interview earlier this month (21 May 2021) in which he noted increasing Chinese interest in studying Australia: 'Australia is indeed a country with noteworthy highlights in culture, society, education and politics', Chen said, perhaps including the cancellation of his visitor's visa last year, along with the visa of his Beijing counterpart, our colleague Li Jianjun, Director of the Australian Studies Centre at BFSU.

As well as my teaching responsibilities I wanted to write a novel that had connections between China and Australia as part of the story, which was also part of my family story. My grandfather was born in Ningbo in 1893, child of missionaries. The novel would be published in 1989 as *Avenue of Eternal Peace,* my third, and filmed for television as *Children of the Dragon*. But what was happening on the ground in Beijing became part of the story too. I immersed myself in the city, determined to communicate as best I could. Two books helped me understand what was going on: *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution* (1982) by historian Jonathan Spence, which took the story of China's artists and intellectuals up to the Democracy Wall period of 1978-79, and *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience*, edited by translators Geremie Barmé and John Minford, both linked to ANU, published in 1986, which gathered together a new generation's creative dissent, some of it produced by people living right near me in Zhongguancun. That year in Beijing I was privileged to meet people whose life and work appeared in both books. It was the best possible incentive for improving my Chinese. I had caught 'culture fever'.

'By 1986', writes Monash University scholar Gloria Davies, ' "culture fever" had become the term of choice for the burgeoning intellectual discourse and related forms of cultural production' that developed alongside China's economic reforms. 'Culture fever' was hailed as a '"New Enlightenment" movement' that brought 'the thrill of discovering the human condition anew' (*A New Literary History of Modern*

China, edited by David Der-wei Wang, 2017, p.763). For me this took the form of unofficial art exhibitions that came and went quickly, books, videos and cassette tapes that were copied and passed on, poetry readings that were like rock concerts and, yes, Democracy salons in which intellectuals of all ages and types debated future options for China. I remember one packed poetry reading in an outdoor auditorium at Peking University in 1988 where the students chanted: 'Who do we want? We want Nietzsche!' Did I imagine it? By then I was working as Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy and I would report such things at our weekly meetings to raised eyebrows.

I don't know how I got that job. I credit it to the visit to Beijing by Susan Ryan as Education Minister in 1986 when Ross Garnaut was Ambassador. I was invited to dinner at the Embassy by Carrillo Gantner, the Cultural Counsellor, because I was teaching Australian Studies and the Minister was interested in that, especially Australian literary studies in China, as part of a widening educational exchange program. I could see the potential too, as Australia opened in response to China's opening. That educational relationship would become part of my job as the next Cultural Counsellor from 1987 to 1990.

The point is that while some people reach a view of China through economic or political analysis, my sense of what was going on around me came largely through the arts and education. Such differing perspectives contribute to a multi-dimensional, balanced, sometimes contradictory illumination of China in all its complexity and variability. The arts were my education. The visual art I saw communicated with shocking immediacy and inventiveness telling a different story from both the official China and the China that was visible in Australia at the time. The fact that this art could be made and shown at all was an indication of ferment and potential, and dramatically challenged stereotypes. It was one of the so-called Misty poets who, a year in advance, predicted the massive unrest that would erupt in 1989 and warned me not to miss it. The arts have intuitions and insights like nothing else, revealing energies at work beneath the surface. Open and supported channels of cultural and educational exchange give us access to that. That's why I'm pleased to speak here today at the Australia China Institute for Arts and Culture which has such an important place in our present difficult landscape.

The Chinese ‘culture fever’ of the late 1980s reached Australia as creative exchanges gained momentum. It provided the context in which exciting new Chinese artists were welcomed here, including Guan Wei, Xiao Xian and his brother Ah Xian, Xiao Lu, Shen Jiawei and more, many of whom showed at Sherman Galleries in the 1990s. As the ‘culture fever’ spread in Sydney, a creative re-definition was underway that saw new cultural interactions not just with China but with other parts of Asia and the Pacific, including those communities within Australia, across all the art forms in an increasingly diverse and boundary-crossing expression of who we are and what we can do.

As Cultural Counsellor I was able to share that ‘culture fever’ with Australians who visited China. I helped William Yang, for example, with his first trip to his ancestral homeland when he travelled with Inner Mongolian photographer Bao Naiyong. There was a visual arts education delegation in 1988 consisting of Betty Churcher, Geoff Parr and David Williams, all in senior positions at the time, who were so impressed by what they saw that they envisaged a new international art network in which Australia could play a role. That led in time to Queensland Art Gallery’s ground-breaking Asia Pacific Triennial.

In 1988 I helped organise the first Australian Studies conference in China, held in Beijing, attended by Donald Horne as Chair of the Australia Council, poet Fay Zwicky and other Australian writers. This accelerated the translation and publishing of Australian books, and Chinese writers and publishers were invited to festivals and residencies in Australia in turn. In time an Australian Writers’ Week in China was initiated by Geoff Raby, in 2007, when he was Ambassador.

It was not always easy. Difficulties on both sides have to be recognised. If we are a nation that tends to forget the past, the Chinese have longer memories. Back in Australia I was interested in carrying forward the possibilities for interaction that had emerged in those years of ‘culture fever’. There were new initiatives in Sydney, with 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, for example, and with *HEAT* magazine and then Giramondo Publishing, and with the Sydney Centre of International PEN, of which I was president, in a new involvement with Chinese writers. I worked with Ivor Indyk, Ien Ang, Annette Shun Wah, Melissa Chiu and others and connected with

what was happening at Western Sydney University. There were translation workshops and residencies in China and novels by Julia Leigh and Gail Jones were published in Chinese translation as a result. I kept writing my own work.
The China Australia Literary Forum began in 2011 as a partnership between the Chinese Writers' Association and Western Sydney University's Writing and Society Research Centre building on what had gone before. Li Yao, who had previously translated Patrick White, saw his translation of *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright launched by Mo Yan in Beijing in 2012. The Literary Forum, known as CALF, has grown into a regular meeting involving distinguished writers in both countries, including Nobel laureates J M Coetzee and Mo Yan in dialogue in Beijing in 2013. Each time it has seemed like an experiment, as its most recent convenors Anthony Uhlmann, Jing Han and Kate Fagan will attest. It is the nature of literature to ask questions and it is the work of translation to seek answers. CALF then fed into the larger ARC funded project that Anthony Uhlmann led on 'Other Worlds: Forms of World Literature', of which *Antipodean China*, the book we're launching here, is a product.

The Arts? I use the term to refer not only to the creative arts but The Arts more generally as we speak of them in the academy, also known as the Humanities. The Arts are an indispensable part of educating ourselves for life in the world. Here too China offers guidance. My subtitle: The Importance of the Arts alludes to Lin Yutang's popular book *The Importance of Living*, written and published in English in 1938 in the middle of world crisis. The author's list of arts includes 'The Art of Reading', 'The Art of Writing', the arts of food and drink and flower-arrangement, the art of conversation, even 'the art of lying in bed': the arts of living as understood in Chinese tradition. Important among them is 'The Art of Thinking' on which the book concludes, 'humanised thinking', a 'spirit of reasonableness', in Lin Yutang's words. He ends with the hope 'that eventually we shall be able to live peacefully because we shall have learned to think reasonably'. (p 463) The arts of peace rather than the art of war.

The Arts invite us into a conversation—as children have their curiosity aroused—and guide us in how to respond and take it further. It's a conversation that connects the living with the dead in 'one channel of vitality', in the words of Laozi that I quoted in

Avenue of Eternal Peace. As an intense form of communication the Arts create communities, imagining how we might live, together, how we might change things, across difference and distance. Yes it's hard, but the Arts make difficulty interesting and productive. The Arts keep communication possible when other lines are down. Artists and scholars can always take each other's phone calls. These things are so obvious they shouldn't need saying. Right now there's a lot at stake. There's work to do. Thank you for being part of it by being here. In this long game the best may still be to come.