



My China project began in July 1983 when I visited China with a group from the Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAЕ), where I was studying Mandarin in my spare time. My interest in China already went back some way, but this was the first time I would be physically in the place that was real to my inspirational teachers but not yet to me. What I experienced in that month (and I'm still in touch with one or two of the people I met then) was a quality that I described to myself at the time as like a flower slowly opening. My classical Chinese teacher in Beijing, for example, was an accomplished calligrapher who delighted in sharing his art with us outside class time.

Things were getting better in China in 1983, after so many years of bitterness and distortion. The tentative hope was palpable, especially to a young Australian who was enthralled by what was offered. When I mentioned this to Tai-fang Rigby, whose husband, Richard, was first secretary in the Australian Embassy, she warned me with a smile to go back before it was too late. China very quickly takes over. Its new openness was directed towards the outside world, but also meant the internal reworking of relationships with the past and tradition, as well as promising fresh possibilities for individuals in their personal and professional lives.

Bronwyn Thomas was a senior member of our CCAЕ group. She had visited China before, with Marianne Baillieu (Director of Realities Gallery, Melbourne) in 1980, and mentored us, as we wandered through gardens and other tourist sites, on the long vistas of Chinese art and culture. The Chinese painting that had made the deepest impression on me at that time was Northern Song-dynasty artist Fan Kuan's *Travellers Among Mountains and Streams*, by which I had been overwhelmed in the National Museum in Taipei in 1981. But when I got back to Australia in 1983, I began reading about the new contemporary China I had found, starting with the 'Democracy Wall' period of 1979 and the poets, thinkers and artists who emerged then. I was plotting my return. My sense of what I had found is epitomised in a famous passage from Lu Xun's 1921 story *My Old Home*: 'I thought: hope cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It is just like roads across the earth. For actually the earth had no roads to begin with, but when many men pass one way, a road is made'. Somehow I knew that China's future and mine, and Australia's, and maybe even the world's, would be together on the road that was just then showing the first footsteps.

I was back in Beijing by early 1986, to teach and to write the novel that was published as *Avenue of Eternal Peace* in 1989 (revised edition, 2008). I brought with me the first edition of *Seeds of Fire* (1986), edited by Geremie Barmé and John Minford, a seminal collection of writings and images from the vanguard of post-Mao culture. Produced by filmmakers, cartoonists, poets, novelists, playwrights, journalists and dissident essayists, the work was darkly witty, viscerally inflamed, tough and exuberant in its cry for freedom. A painting by Ah Xian ironically called *Sense of security* graced the back cover. Geremie also provided me with an introduction to his friend Linda Jaivin, who was working for news magazine *Asiaweek* in Beijing. Linda and I met for lunch at a revolving restaurant in a hotel that overlooked the zoo. Through her kindness I met the poet Mang Ke, one of the early 'misty' poets, friend to artists from the Stars Group such as Ma Desheng, and others, like poet Bei Dao, who had been associated with the Democracy Wall. He acted as hospitable godfather to an informal network of creative types who took themselves seriously but also liked to walk on the wild side. With Mang Ke I met other poets, including Duo Duo and Yang Lian, writers, editors and artists such as Lin Chunyan

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## MY CHINA PROJECT

Ah Xian / China/Australia  
b.1960  
**(Disembodied hand,  
bandaged in lower register)**  
(from 'Heavy wounds' series)  
1993  
Synthetic polymer paint, ink,  
oil on wooden board / 50 x 40.5  
x 2cm / Gift of Nicholas Jose  
and Claire Roberts through  
the Queensland Art Gallery  
Foundation 2008 / Collection:  
Queensland Art Gallery



and Ah Xian, who included me in their artistic journey into new dimensions of personal expression and social possibility. As rebels and bohemians who were also a young urban elite, many with their education disrupted during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), they had the heady conviction of holding China's future in their hands, even while they pushed defiantly at the boundaries.

Politics was everywhere, and artistic energies became political in the act of claiming the right of expression. There were no gallery spaces for these 'unofficial' artists, for instance, so exhibitions were rare and fleeting, usually by invitation only. You could see artists' work at home, but that could be problematic, not only because of the cramped conditions, but because the neighbours would be watching. Foreigners who were not subject to the same restrictions as Chinese citizens, especially diplomats with large apartments, offered a solution, and so the artistic salons began. All this added to the fermentation of a scene in which the art that was emerging had power, passion and a driving originality.

I attended Lin Chunyan's first exhibition at the Old Observatory in Beijing in 1986 and bought one of his darker paintings (*Two figures climbing a tree*) 1985, though there was no formal selling arrangement. I saw Ah Xian's early work in his and his wife Ma Li's crowded apartment at his parents' work unit. I saw Guan Wei's *Wo yu (Kneeling fish)* 1986 in his narrow corridor of a studio. I tracked down any exhibitions I could find. In trying to understand the Chinese world around me, in all its transformative contradiction, in listening for messages from the heart and soul of the people I was mixing with, in seeking my own way in, I turned to the art of these committed, independent practitioners who, with limited access to training and resources, were determined to speak to and for their world, now that the opportunity was there.

Debate about the future directions of Chinese art was raging in the academies, research institutes and editorial offices as the state's cultural dictates changed or weakened. Evidence of this could occasionally be seen in official exhibitions too, at the National Art Museum of China and the Central Academy of Fine Arts, in the years from 1986 to 1989. I was struck, for example, by Wang Youshen's bold, ambivalent rendering of the proverbial 'Old Man Who Moved The Mountain', which I saw in a student show at the Academy. I wrote him a letter and we met to discuss it. Later he let me acquire the work *Yu Gong and his later generations (Yu Gong he tade zizi sunsun)* 1986. Wang went on to become art editor for *Beijing Youth News*; an important curatorial role that he maintained alongside his own evolving, photography-based practice. Sensing that things could be looser in the provinces, I visited remote Acheng in the snowed-under north-east to meet Shen Shaomin in his printmaking workshop, and returned with works from his 'Sunflower' series.

After teaching at Beijing Foreign Studies University and Shanghai's East China Normal University for a year and a half, I was appointed Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy at the end of 1987. Visual art became a key area of cultural exchange. During my briefings back in Australia that year, I met Claire Roberts at Melbourne's Museum of Chinese Australian History. Claire had studied at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1979–81, where she was a contemporary of Xu Bing, Yuan Yunsheng and Chen Danqing, who were later the first generation to go to the United States after the Cultural Revolution. Claire and I became friends and were able to share a keen and growing interest in the then little-known area of contemporary Chinese art.

Part of my work at the Embassy was to implement the official biennial cultural agreement between China and Australia, which in those days was how things happened. The Australian art world's interest in China was more or less limited to the glories of traditional Chinese arts and crafts — which were in a pretty sorry state in the 1980s — and the varieties of collective and functionalist engineering of art's links to industry. A golden opportunity to change this came when an arts education delegation was agreed and Betty Churcher, Geoff Parr and David Williams signed up to visit China in 1988. I made sure that their itinerary was broadened to include some new art. When they returned to Australia they became staunch advocates for what they had discovered. Geoff Parr excitedly called Guan Wei 'one in a billion' and promptly initiated residencies for him, Ah Xian and Lin Chunyan at the Tasmanian School of Art (where Parr was director) early in 1989. Another welcome visitor to China was William Yang, who met contemporary Chinese photographers while exploring his own connections there. By that time I had talked to Bernice Murphy and Leon Paroissien at the embryonic Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, who were also eager to explore China's new art. Back in Beijing, meanwhile, Australia had joined France (whose Cultural Centre in Beijing was the first place to show Guan Wei), Spain and Mexico among the diplomatic missions with a reputation for involvement with contemporary Chinese art.

The forceful currents that would converge violently in June 1989 could already be felt in the preceding year or two, though they were moving with such swirling energies that it was difficult to find a position from which to be analytical or clairvoyant. My sardonic reports on the cultural scene to the Friday morning Embassy meetings were noted for sometimes being at odds with the optimism



ABOVE  
Left to right: Xu Bing, Kong Yongqian, Li Xianting, Gu Wenda, Leon Paroissien, at 'Mao Goes Pop', Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1993 / Image courtesy: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

Linda Jaivin and Geremie Barné in Ah Xian and Ma Lihong's apartment, Beijing 1989 / Photograph: Alex Kerr

Artists' salon, Janguomenwai, Beijing, 1988. Left to right: Liu Pin, Guan Wei, Ah Xian, Masami Nakabayashi, Barbi Lock Lee, Guo Xiao Mei, Lin Chunyan, Ren Hua, Shen Shaomin

OPPOSITE  
Painting class, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, 1988 / Photograph: Geoff Parr







expressed elsewhere. The poet Duo Duo, who was a peripatetic rural journalist by day, advised me in 1988 to stay on for another year if I really wanted to see something. Perhaps we should have noticed, in the huge take-up of the chance to study English in Australia late in 1988, an edge of desperation in people's determination to get out of China if they had the money.

What was happening in art appeared to be a prophetic microcosm of what was happening in the society at large. The forces came together in the extraordinary event called 'China/Avant-Garde' at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing in the New Year holiday period of 1989. The exhibition itself, curated by scholar-critics Gao Minglu, Hou Hanru and Li Xianting, was remarkable enough, with the first public appearance of many of the future stars of the contemporary Chinese art phenomenon including Xu Bing, Zhang Peili, Fang Lijun, Liu Xiaodong, Ding Fang, Li Jin and others. But the actions surrounding it indicated more alarmingly that the Chinese cultural and political space had entered uncharted territory. Artist Xiao Lu fired a gun at her installation work during the opening festivities and the show was closed down by the authorities (to reopen after due investigation). Behind the scenes there were machinations and manoeuvres as participants from across the country, from inside and out of the academy — practitioners, theorists, cultural politicians, activists, entrepreneurs and officials of every stripe and status — worked out their positions. The media were in attendance, too, fascinated as they broadcast these events to the world. All this would play out on the much larger stage of Tiananmen only a few weeks later, from April to the tragic finale on 4 June 1989. Later, avant-garde art would be blamed as a factor in the 'counter-revolutionary turmoil' that could only be halted by force. For that reason it is not possible to speak of contemporary Chinese art without reference to its historical trajectory through political drama and social upheaval, with 1989 as its pivotal moment.

Those of us who were as exhilarated by the art as we were appalled by the political situation were determined that the China that had been silenced inside the country should be able to breathe outside. That included supporters in Australia. When Johnson Chang, scholar and director of Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong, and Li Xianting started to investigate ways of taking a version of 'China/Avant-Garde' to international audiences, Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art quickly agreed to collaborate. An exhibition was curated that included key artists and works from the 1989 exhibition together with new works and artists. It was presented in Australia in 1992–93 under the title 'Mao Goes Pop'. Zhang Xiaogang was a haunting presence in that show, as were Yu Youhan, Li Shan, Wang Guangyi, Ah Xian and Guan Wei. The latter two had also showed locally by then, with Liu Xiao Xian in 'Echoes from China: Beyond the Bamboo Curtain' in 1991, and again with Liu Xiao Xian, joined by Shen Shaomin, Ren Hua, Xiao Lu and Tang Song, and Jia Yong, in 'Orientations: The Emperor's New Clothes' in 1992, curated by Claire Roberts, both at Sherman Galleries, Sydney. Like Lin Chunyan, Shen Jiawei, Wang Zhiyuan, Guo Jian and many others, these artists had relocated to Australia, in some cases in the wake of the tragic Tiananmen Square events and as refugees.

For those who stayed in China, the post-Tiananmen period was tense and difficult. The upward curve of liberalisation since 1978, vicissitudes notwithstanding, seemed to have slammed into a wall. Many leading figures were abroad, mainly in the United States. Others suffered official harassment in their places of work. Shang Yang, for example, who had been the centre of an innovative artists' group in Hubei, was transferred to Guangzhou in a forced internal exile. Others were closely watched. Artists met in small private groups, producing intimate work on metaphorically suggestive themes, such as 'wind' and 'frame' (Wang Youshen's *Portrait series – Frame* 1990 is an example). At the same time, connections with the outside world became more important than ever. The Hawke government's policy for Australia — in a context where exchange arrangements with many countries were frozen, thus tending to isolate China — was to maintain cultural and educational people-to-people channels as far as possible. Renowned Sydney-born pianist Roger Woodward's visit in 1990 was perhaps the first official cultural visit from a Western country after Tiananmen and he was applauded like a hero for his electrifying performances. Roger went out of his way to express support for avant-garde artists and arranged for Ah Xian, Liu Xiao Xian and Wang Youshen to show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in his Sydney Spring International Festival that year.

For me, that policy framework also meant cautiously keeping in touch with artists and curators, despite being under surveillance myself. I got to know Liu Xiaodong, whose painting *Smoker* 1988 I had loved in 'China/Avant-Garde', and his wife Yu Hong. Like other artists, he was keen for his work to enter public collections outside China as a way of protecting it. Thus I was entrusted with *Smoker*, subsequently acquired by Queensland Art Gallery. Similarly with Yu Youhan's *Flowery bicycle* 1989, with its 4 June associations. He was keen for Claire Roberts and me to take it with us from a studio visit in 1991. And Fang Lijun expressed the wish that his pencil drawings find their way into public collections outside China, since it was unlikely at the time that any public institution in China would be in a position to hold them. Li Xianting, who was under investigation for his role in the events of



OPPOSITE

**Li Jin** / China b.1958

**Fish** 1988

Ink / 38.5 x 49cm / Collection:

Nicholas Jose and Claire Roberts /

Photograph: David Bishop

ABOVE

**Guan Wei** / China/Australia

b.1957

**Wo yu (Kneeling fish)** 1986

Oil on canvas / 86.5 x 46cm /

Gift of Nicholas Jose and Claire

Roberts through the Queensland

Art Gallery Foundation 2008 /

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

1989, directed me towards the modest Beijing Concert Hall Gallery run by Qian Cheng, a graduate of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, as one of the few places in Beijing where I might still view interesting art in that subdued period. I consulted with Li about works that might need safeguarding. With Qian Cheng's help I was able to bring paintings by the 'other' Gu Wenda, formerly of the Tianjin Academy, to Australia for preservation. Li identified these works as key precursors of the political pop and cynical realism phases of the later 1980s and early 1990s that made contemporary Chinese art internationally desirable. Gu Wenda's tragic circumstances prevented full recognition of his work in his lifetime, and these deteriorating paintings might well have disappeared. Ding Fang was another artist recommended by Li Xianting: his brooding metaphysical paintings of the Great Wall suited the sombre mood.

The first exhibition of contemporary Chinese art to be seen in Australia post 1989 was 'New Art from China: Post-Mao Product', curated by Claire Roberts for the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Queensland Art Gallery in 1992. This groundbreaking show featured Xu Bing's masterwork *A book from the sky* 1987–91, pencil drawings and monochrome paintings by Fang Lijun, installations by Lü Shengzhong and Ni Haifeng, woodblock prints by Chen Haiyan and paintings by Xu Hong, mostly on their first showing outside China. A third of the artists in the exhibition were women: probably a record, as well as a statement about the odds against which women continue to struggle in the Chinese art world. Claire had moved to the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney in 1988 and initiated a curatorial exchange with the Shanghai Museum in 1990. During that time she and I were able to work together, developing our involvement with contemporary Chinese art and artists. In the process we have had art works in our custody which reflect the major cultural and social shift that China has gone through — a transformation that artists have not only witnessed and documented but also which, in specific and powerful ways, their artistic creativity and intelligence have driven.

Contemporary Chinese art has moved unimaginably since then, becoming professionalised and even opulent, with the fortunes of some artists matching the confidence with which they began; those grins say it all. Claire and I are pleased and proud that much of our collection has found a home in the Queensland Art Gallery alongside other key works of contemporary Chinese art. The Gallery has helped to create a road that visitors to 'The China Project' will go down, and that scholars and audiences from here, China and around the world, will travel into the future.



ABOVE  
Nicholas Jose looks at Chairman Mao, news photography exhibition, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, 1988 / Photograph: William Yang

OPPOSITE  
Nicholas Jose, Ah Xian, Wang Youshen and Liu Xiao Xian at the Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes, Beijing, 1988 / Photograph courtesy: Liu Xiao Xian

