



PRIME MINISTER

FOR PRESS

18 JANUARY 1977

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PRIME MINISTER'S ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF THE
OPENING OF THE CHINESE EXHIBITION, MELBOURNE, 18.1.77

The Exhibition, which is to be opened today is of exceptional significance, both artistically, and in the development of relations between Australia and the People's Republic of China.

This is by far the most significant exhibition ever to come to Australia.

It is the third major archeological exhibition to be shown overseas by the Chinese Government.

It is the first comprehensive exhibition to be mounted solely for one country, and includes selected pieces from exhibitions sent previously to Europe, North America and Japan, together with some important items which have not previously been out of China.

The generosity of the Chinese Government in making it possible for Australians to see the exhibition has been great. Our appreciation of this generosity is increased by the fact that preparations for the exhibition went ahead despite the tragic earthquake China suffered during them.

It is notable that it is the present Government of China which has done so much to explore and unearth China's past.

The extraordinary quality of the exhibits - all of which have been unearthed since 1949 - demonstrate the commitment of the Chinese people and Government to preserve their cultural heritage, and the recognition of the continuity of China's history. It is a tribute to the skills and care with which Chinese archeologists, historians, and technicians have scientifically excavated historically significant sites and reconstructed their past.

This exhibition is remarkable for the period of time it covers. It ranges over 600,000 years from the fossilised skull of Lantian Man to works of the 14th century Yuan Dynasty.

The richness and diversity of styles and materials of the 233 pieces in the collection make it a major event for the scholar, the artist and the layman. These cultural relics are not only of great archeological interest, but often of incomparable beauty. Archeologically, the earliest pieces tell us something about our early predecessors, their hunting and domestic implements, their use of fire. Later pieces reveal the existence of written language in China before the 14th century BC, show us something of early technology and the development of Chinese society over many centuries. They fill significant gaps in our knowledge of China and will be particularly important for specialists in Chinese history, art and archeology who have hitherto been unable to see them.

Artistically, the exhibition is a superb display of man's responsiveness to colour, style and order in the artifacts with which he surrounds himself. The pottery, bronzes, porcelains jade and other pieces show remarkable skill and dedication to artistry from very early times. These treasures, products of a civilisation noted for its many splendid achievements reflect not only aspects of the life of the nobility in China in earlier times, but also the outstanding facility of ordinary craftsmen and artisans in working in bronze, clay, gold, and other materials.

The exhibitions the Chinese Peoples Republic has sent across the world are part of the wider range of contacts which are now developing between China and the international community. These relations had been arrested for too long, and it is of great importance that there be increased communication, consultation and understanding between the international community and China. One of the reasons for the difficulty of communication may have been external powers attitudes towards China, and their treatment of the things the Chinese people valued, including China's art treasures in the 19th century and early 20th century.

When I was in Peking, I saw some of the work of the allied soldiers who broke into the forbidden city in 1900. The bayonet marks they had left on large water urns in their attempts to scrape off the gold with which the urns had been plated. These days are fortunately gone, and contact and communication between China and other countries is increasing. The fact that contacts have been limited in the past make it even more important that we work to develop them now, and in the future.

If relationships between countries are to endure and develop, they must be based on a foundation of mutual understanding and respect. Cultural exchange programmes are an especially important means for laying that foundation. We also look forward to increased contact between our two nations at all levels, so that there can develop a greater understanding between our two Governments and our two peoples.

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The last major exhibition seen in Australia was the Modern Master's Exhibition from New York. The even more significant Chinese Archeological Exhibition marks a further stage of contact between Australians and the art of other societies of bringing overseas art exhibitions directly to hundreds of thousands of Australians. This development has been made possible by the co-operation between Governments and people.

I am delighted to welcome here today the members of the official Chinese Delegation, and leading Chinese Journalists, who have been able to visit our country.

I am sure that we would all like to acknowledge the contribution which many Chinese experts, and particularly the working party who travelled with the collection to this country, have made to the exhibition's success. We should also pay tribute to the work of Australia Council officers, the Directors of the Australian Art Exhibition Corporation which was established by the Government through the Australia Council, to organise the exhibition on the Australian side, the professional staffs of the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and to the work done by our Embassy in Peking. Finally, Mobil has played a significant part by undertaking to sponsor the exhibition and underwrite its costs.

This is a particularly important indication of the development of substantial co-operation between the private sector and the various spheres of Government in support for the arts. It is through a diversity and plurality of support for the arts that they can be strengthened in the interests of all. This objective is basic to the Government's policy towards the arts.

The exhibition contributes admirably to the fulfilment of key objectives in our policy of support for the arts, the promotion of excellence, the fostering of wide access, enjoyment and appreciation of the arts, and their development as a medium of international understanding.

I have the greatest pleasure in opening the Chinese Exhibition.
