



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

TUESDAY, 31 MARCH 1981

OPENING OF THE CHINESE CLASSICAL PAINTINGS EXHIBITION

(Delivered for the Prime Minister by the Minister for Home Affairs and Environment, Mr. Ian Wilson)

It is impossible to stand in the presence of these priceless works - spanning 600 years - without being reminded of the intrinsic worth and value of human beings. We can see the worth and the greatness of mankind both in the people who are depicted in these works, and in the artists whose work they are.

The paintings are Chinese but they speak with a universal voice. They reveal something of the history and the ongoing development of Chinese culture and civilisation, yet at the same time we can all enter into the spirit of these works. They are unique because they are part of a unique tradition, but they complement and are complemented by other unique artistic productions which are in their turn parts of other unique traditions.

This is a truly magnificent collection of paintings, a magnificent exhibition. We have here paintings of the Ming and the Qing dynasties, spanning the 24th to the 20th centuries, 600 years of one of the longest national art traditions in world history.

Before I say anything else, Ladies and Gentlemen, let me say through you to the people of Australia that we have here a remarkable opportunity, and privilege, to view one of the finest artistic exhibitions which has ever been assembled. I have no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Australians will make sure that they see this exhibition, 600,000 people attended the Chinese archaeological exhibition which was brought to this country in 1977 and that must surely have whetted our appetites for more. This exhibition certainly provides Australians with a great deal more.

The paintings in this superb exhibition belong to a tradition which has its origins in ancient China and yet is still evident in modern Chinese art. An historical exhibition such as this provides not only a bridge between our respective peoples and cultures, but also a bridge across thousands of years of Chinese culture. Works included in this exhibition have been drawn from museums of twelve provinces and cities, and in particular from the Palace Museum in Peking. The works included illustrate not only the greatness of the individual artists, but also the range of skills of the Chinese schools, especially those of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Mr Chairman, we are doubly privileged on this occasion. For not only do we have this magnificent exhibition of paintings, but we are also delighted to be able to welcome the members of the Chinese delegation which has come to Australia for this special event. The Delegation is led by Mr Peng Yan, Deputy Director of the Palace Museum in Peking. Accompanying Mr Peng are two distinguished scholars from the Palace Museum, Mr Xu Bang-da, a classical painting researcher and Mr Tian Xui, an expert in classical painting history. We are delighted to have with us these distinguished guests representing the Bureau of Archaeological Relics, and the Overseas Archaeological Exhibition Corporation of The People's Republic of China. These two organisations have arranged for the collection to be made available for this tour of Australia.

It is also my pleasure to welcome on this occasion the Ambassador to the People's Republic of China, Mr Lin Ping and Mrs Lin Ping, and Mr Xu Zhongling and Mr Ai Zhigao who are specialist curators advising on the care and display of the art works during the tour.

The broad idea that an exhibition of Chinese classical paintings might be gathered together and made available for a tour of Australia arose several years ago - in the early days of the development of cultural exchange arrangements between Australia and the People's Republic of China. In 1977, the Australia Council entered into some specific discussions which were reinforced at Ministerial level by the then Minister for Home Affairs, who visited China in 1979. Detailed arrangements were carried forward by the Australian Embassy in Peking. Further stimulus was given to the project when Edmund Capon, a leading London authority on Chinese art and now Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, became a consultant to advise on the content of the exhibition. Mr. Capon has chaired the Planning Committee and written the exhibition catalogue in partnership with Dr. Pang, Curator of Asian Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, and I would like to say what an outstanding catalogue it is.

This exhibition is more than just an opportunity for Australians to view a great collection of Chinese paintings, it is a landmark in the developing links between China and Australia - links that are cultural as well as economic.

I believe that this exhibition will stimulate the ongoing programme of important exchanges between our two countries, exchanges between our peoples as well as between our cultures. We have already had the opportunity in Australia to welcome and enjoy a number of Chinese tours, including the archaeological exhibition to which I have already referred. In the past the Chinese people have welcomed many of our artists and performers and we now look forward to increases in the number and variety of exhibitions and performances by Australians in China. A small Australian photographic exhibition is currently touring China. I am told that it is proving to be a great success and that people are flocking to see the display. This indicates that there is a genuine mutuality of interest between the Chinese and the Australian people. It shows that our cultural exchange programme has a sound basis, because it reflects and helps develop the concerns and interests of the people of both our countries.

I would add that this exhibition has aroused great interest in the Australian-Chinese community and many of its members are participating in the presentation of something that is an integral part of their cultural heritage. I say let us have more of these exchanges which increase mutual understanding of our countries and our cultures, and which increase contact between our peoples.

The arrangement and management of this exhibition is the first production - if I might use that word - of the International Cultural Corporation of Australia. This is a new organisation created by the Federal Government under the Chairmanship of Mr. Jim Leslie - and with directors drawn from the private sector and the arts.

The objective of the Government in establishing this Corporation was to provide the machinery for the public and private sectors to join in the planning and presentation of major international cultural projects.

The Government's role in the operations of the Corporation is to underwrite ventures such as this. Accordingly, the Government has indemnified the works in this exhibition for a sum in excess of \$55 million. The Government is pleased to provide such underwriting, so that the people of Australia can enjoy the best of the arts of other countries.

The Cultural Corporation has made a fine start and I know it intends to maintain the highest standards in the exhibitions which it brings to Australia in the future.

The request of the Corporation to BHP to sponsor this exhibition brought an immediate and generous response from Sir James McNeill and his colleagues on the BHP board. We are indebted to BHP for its recognition of the place of the arts in promoting international goodwill and understanding. Assistance in bringing the exhibition to Australia has also been provided by the Australia Council, and by the Departments of Foreign Affairs, and of Home Affairs and Environment. The Australia-China Council has also assisted this project as part of its ongoing programme in support of Australia-China relations.

The exhibition will visit Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Melbourne following its debut here in Sydney. It is the policy of the Corporation that its exhibitions should be shown in as many cities as possible, and the wide exposure that will be given to these paintings is the result of close co-operation between the Corporation and the State Galleries.

We are delighted that this exhibition will be in Australia for ten months - and we are indebted to the Archaeological Relics Bureau of the People's Republic of China for this extended visit. I also thank the Chinese Government for permitting these works to travel abroad at all. It is the first time that such permission has been given, and we take this as a mark of Chinese confidence and esteem for Australia.

This exhibition has a scholarly component associated with it and I have no doubt that this will enhance the depth of its impact.

The Corporation has arranged, in association with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, an international seminar on Chinese painting which will bring experts from several countries to focus attention on the exhibition.

Among the distinguished visitors here with us this evening, are Mr. Wu Zuoren and Madame Xiao Shufang who are among China's leading contemporary artists. Mr. Wu is also Vice-Chairman of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and a Deputy of the National People's Congress. Mr. Wu and Madame Xiao are the guests of the Australia-China Council. They are spending some time in Australia viewing the landscape and meeting with local artists and scholars.

The fact that this unique exhibition is appearing in Australia reflects the excellent state of Australia-China relations. We confidently expect that contacts and exchanges between our countries will be further strengthened with the concluding in the near future of an agreement on cultural co-operation between Australia and China. The proposed agreement provides for co-operation between Australia and China in the field of culture, including the arts, crafts, media, sport and education. We welcome the growth in our relationship which this reflects.

It gives me great pleasure to formally open this exhibition and to wish it a successful tour of Australia.