

# AUSTRALIA-CHINA AGENDA 2013

## Building Cultural Relations

CARRILLO GANTNER, AO

Carrillo Gantner trained as an actor and director in the USA. He founded the Playbox Theatre Company in 1976 and served as Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing for several years from 1985. He was Chairman of the Asialink Centre at the University of Melbourne for fourteen years, President of the Victorian Arts Centre Trust for nine years, and he currently serves as President of the Melbourne Festival. Carrillo is a member of the Advisory Board of the Australian Centre on China in the World.

*THE AUSTRALIAN Centre on China in the World engages with the public and policy discussion of relations with the People's Republic of China and the Chinese world. Australia-China Agenda 2013 is our contribution to this important election year and on-going consideration of the bilateral relationship.*

*This is a relationship that touches on virtually every aspect of our national life. A mature and beneficial engagement of such breadth and depth requires the leadership and support of government at all levels, as well as public stewardship, media understanding, educational enhancement, and the strategic involvement of the business community.*

*Australia-China exchanges are also profoundly influenced by regional and bilateral relationships. Australia and China trade in goods as well as culture, politics and people, ideas and education, community and personalities.*

*Australia-China Agenda: 2013 brings to the attention of the public and the media, politicians and specialists some reflections and policy ideas authored by specialists with a professional interest and involvement in the relationship.*

—Geremie R. Barmé  
Founding Director, CIW

中  全球研究中心

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON  
CHINA IN THE WORLD



ANU College of Asia & the Pacific  
Canberra, Australia

2013

JANUARY 一月

FEBRUARY 二月

MARCH 三月

APRIL 四月

MAY 五月

JUNE 六月

JULY 七月

AUGUST 八月

SEPTEMBER 九月

OCTOBER 十月

NOVEMBER 十一月

DECEMBER 十二月

二〇一四年

PRIME MINISTER Julia Gillard led a major delegation to China in early April this year. She and Foreign Minister Bob Carr had meetings with the new leadership in Beijing and the accompanying delegation of Australian business leaders had considerable access to their Chinese counterparts. The visit was hailed in our media as a great success as out of it came the establishment of a formal annual leadership dialogue, closer

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military engagement with the People's Liberation Army and expanded business linkages. All of this is excellent news, but was I the only one to notice that not one report of the PM's visit gave even the most cursory mention to anything even vaguely related to Australia-China cultural relations?

Apart from the PM's photo opportunity secondary school visit in Beijing, I am not aware that her program, or indeed the program of any members of her delegation, had even the remotest cultural content, even if you define culture in very broad-brush terms. I will very happily stand corrected, but I imagine that the Prime Minister's advisors, like the majority of Australians, might well say, 'Who cares?'

## Who Cares?

The answer is that the Chinese care because they notice these things. Australians tend to define culture in narrow terms of entertainment and recreation. Culture is what you do on Saturday night. The Chinese, on the other hand, like people in most Asian societies, tend to think of culture in vastly broader terms: culture is who you are and how you live; it is your history, language and philosophy; your family and your food; your heritage and collective aspirations. It is therefore inextricably linked as a bedfellow with ideology and national vision. The arts exist to give tangible expression to this notion of who you are as a people, or sometimes what sort of people the government wants you to be. That is why the arts are so powerful. In China the arts matter. Mao Zedong wanted to use the arts to serve the revolution. It is also why today artistic dissidents such as Ai Weiwei sometimes receive such heavy-handed treatment. I think of this as a form of reverse flattery from a leadership that knows that the arts are very influential. In Australia, while a few artists are fawned upon as mass media celebrities and harnessed to give their name to various causes, the majority are largely ignored by government and much of the wider population.

## Going Backwards

In many ways, Australian cultural engagement with China has gone backwards over the last twenty years or so years. That matters. It matters because the depth of the relationship with China suffers without the cultural dimension and broad people-to-people links. The Australian government thinks of the relationship in strategic and economic terms; Australian business thinks in immediate transactional terms. But who is thinking of the understanding that is necessary between out peoples if we are really to enjoy a relationship that is enriched by knowledge and understanding, not just made wealthy by iron ore and coal? It is almost ironic then that there are great long-term strategic and financial benefits in building a broadly based relationship through culture, education and other values-based programs.

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There are a range of reasons why the cultural relationship has gone backwards. Perhaps most important is the failure of leadership at the very top. Not since Paul Keating have we had a PM who was remotely interested in the arts. I am talking bi-partisanship here: you could bottle the rare occasions on which John Howard, Kevin Rudd or Julia Gillard were ever heard to comment on the arts and when they did, you almost always wished they hadn't. Think of Rudd's bilious comments on the work of Bill Henson, which encouraged every nutter to come out of the closet. None of these PMs would choose to go to the theatre or visit an art gallery. None of them have endorsed, let alone put real resources behind, broad cultural engagement with countries in Asia. Apart from trying to be identified with sporting success (and I count sport as an important part of our culture), they have been almost proud of being cultural philistines and I have no doubt they have been surrounded by apparatchiks who advise them that no one will notice. But it matters because our leaders set the tone. Leadership matters.

To be fair, near the very end of Howard's eleven years as PM, in response to sustained lobbying from the sector and more particularly the joint submission of Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Arts Minister Rod Kemp, Howard announced new support of \$20,000,000 over four years to take Australian performing arts to the world and especially to Asia. The Rudd government came to power shortly thereafter and imposed a two percent 'efficiency dividend' on all federal departments. Guess what? The first money that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) surrendered was this hard-won funding for the arts. DFAT has never placed a very high value on cultural exchange (I would argue it shouldn't even be their role) and it is reasonable to assume that they believed no one would notice this program's deletion before even the first \$500,000 had been committed.

## The Australia Council

Another critical reason our cultural links with China are so weak has been the abysmal failure of the Australia Council to use more than a very small percentage of its international funding to support exchange programs with Asia over the last twenty years. In the Howard years, Asia fell off the Australia Council's map. When he was Arts Minister (and he was a very good one) Simon Crean understood the importance of the cultural dimension in Australia's engagement with our region. He went to China to reinforce this point through his program and discussions with the Ministry of Culture. And he stood on the toes of the Australia Council to make them rebalance their international funding towards Asia. The Council's new Chairman, Rupert Myer (my cousin), understands the issue and various worthy Asia-centric statements have come out of the Council in recent months. We are yet to see, however, whether these translate into significant change. There are hardly any Australian arts managers with

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real China experience or knowledge, let alone language proficiency. There are certainly none at the Australia Council.

Australia used to have specialist arts people as cultural counsellors in our major Asian embassies. I worked in this capacity in Beijing for three years from 1985 to 1987. I had a fluency with the Australian arts sector and strong cultural networks in both countries, allowing me to make

real connections and support the wide ranging initiatives of others from both sides. I had Australian government endorsed 'clout' with cultural and government circles in China. I had the strong support of an activist Ambassador, Ross Garnaut, who was focused on results. In the Howard years the Cultural Counsellors were removed from our Beijing, Tokyo and Jakarta embassies as a DFAT cost-saving measure, but no one put the real cost on the loss. No doubt they thought no one would notice. Perhaps in Australia that was so, but the Chinese government noticed. There is still a specialist and well-connected Cultural Counsellor in their Embassy in Canberra.

## The Australia-China Council

Our Federal Government expects the Australia-China Council to be responsible for the support of all aspects of the people to people relationship with China including culture, media, education, science and technology, Australian Studies programs, law, conservation – you name it. It is meant to do this on about \$700k plus a year, less than it received when it was established about twenty-five years ago. It is an almost frivolous amount of money for the task but no government has had the guts to address

the issue. The same is true for the Australia Japan Foundation, Australia Korea Foundation, Australia Indonesia Institute and the other bilateral councils under DFAT. In recent years, I suggested that at least the three North Asian bilateral councils might be combined so that their meagre funds might be used more strategically and outside of the silo mentality that currently exists in each. I was told by a senior DFAT officer that while it sounded logical and beneficial to have one strategic pot of \$3-4m instead of three \$1m+ pots, this would only encourage the government's toe cutters to slash the funding. With the current pathetic funding in each individual council, the toe cutters were restrained as they didn't dare cut any more for fear of provoking severe criticism from the focus country.

The Australian International Cultural Council (AICC), which is funded by DFAT and chaired by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, was meant to fill part of the cultural vacuum but as DFAT's own departmental funding, and not least funding for its Cultural Relations Branch, has been hacked away by successive governments, the AICC budget has been a secretive honey pot used to replace or replenish other departmental program funding while its own cultural programs have gone into virtual abeyance. The cultural section of the White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*, said one of the government's aspirations was to revive the AICC as an active player on the cultural field but, as nothing further has been heard of this, it seems reasonable to assume that the Foreign Minister has so far shielded this nest egg from the hands of the Minister and Department of the Arts.

## What can we do?

- Increase and focus funding through every related agency, of course (I can hear the cries: 'You would say that, wouldn't you.');
- Establish quotas for Australia Council and DFAT Cultural Relations funding allocated to Asian cultural engagement. This is in the national interest. The Asian Century White Paper suggested quotas and targets for various Asian strategies in business, education and other areas, but its recommendations in the cultural field were woefully vague;
- Promote and support creative collaborations between Australian artists and their Chinese counterparts. If I might be allowed a personal example, last year, Ziyin Wang Gantner, who happens to be my wife, initiated and produced a bilingual musical theatre work *Cho Cho* with the National Theatre of China and Arts Centre Melbourne as partners. It has a cast of actor-singers drawn from China and Australia, an Australian script, director and designer working with a Chinese composer and lighting designer. It is a genuine and challenging cross-cultural collaboration which has produced a superb show seen already in Beijing and Shenzhen, with

Australian and other Chinese cities to come. The Ministry of Culture in Beijing sees it as a model project and has given it major support. The Australian partners are yet to receive one cent of Australian government funding. We need lots more of these initiatives and they need to be supported;

- A senior Australian based cultural director recruited from the ranks of professional arts and cultural managers should once again be appointed to our Embassy in Beijing;
- Programming decisions need to be made with a detailed eye for the tastes of the target audience. This obviously requires knowledge and experience of the ‘Other’;
- We would benefit greatly from the strategic framework and coordinated program delivery that would result from bringing all related Federal Government funding together into one externally focused international cultural agency. This model works very successfully for many other countries but existing Australian agencies seem to guard their territories and resist change with far more vigor than they apply to promoting in depth cultural engagement;
- The principle of reciprocity is as important for the new agency as it is for every individual and organization working in this field. A good example in the early days of Sister State relationships was the Victoria/Jiangsu link under which the presentation in Australia of major arts companies from Jiangsu built trust and led directly to broader dealings in education and business. Recent reciprocal cultural commitments between South Australia and Shandong seem likely to yield similar positive results;
- A new international agency might also work more closely with Australian business to encourage them to understand the long-term benefits of richer cultural engagement with China. Some Australian businesses are making billions in their dealings with China but they invest only peanuts in support of broadening the bilateral relationship through people to people programs so that it can withstand the inevitable ‘bumps’ along the road. It should surprise no one that many of these ‘bumps’ arise directly from a lack of cultural understanding;
- We need to reinforce the importance of regular and agreed ‘Implementing Programs’ under the Cultural Agreement with China and these need to operate with known and agreed reciprocal financial parameters. DFAT removed these years ago

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to cut its own costs but the costs for every Australian arts company and touring management dealing with China increased as every deal had to be negotiated from scratch. Where is the benefit for Australia in that?;

- Every Australian tertiary arts training institution should develop China related content in their core curricula including study of cultural history, art forms and both traditional and contemporary practice. They should be engaging visiting Chinese artists and teachers as well as providing opportunities for their own students and faculty to undertake exchange programs in China;
- It is important to develop strong personal relationships with counterparts in China, whether they be in the Ministry of Culture, in provincial cultural agencies, cultural associations, touring managements or arts companies. This requires time and travel; and,
- Working with China, we need to develop a more strategic focus, longer-term plans and a more patient understanding of the time frames necessary to achieve valuable outcomes. These are Chinese strengths we could well learn to emulate.

In short, real leadership backed by strong strategic commitment are needed if we are to maximise the benefits of broader and deeper cultural engagement with China. If there is a change of government in September this year, will things improve? We always hope the next government will be better than the last, but we are so often disappointed. I am not holding my breath, yet I remain a battered but eternal optimist.

#### AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON CHINA IN THE WORLD

The Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW), College of Asia & the Pacific (CAP), The Australian National University (ANU) is an initiative of the Commonwealth Government of Australia in collaboration with ANU, a university with the most significant concentration of dedicated Chinese Studies expertise and the publisher of the leading Chinese Studies journals in Australia. CIW is a national research centre that is jointly managed by a body of academics that includes scholars of China at universities in Adelaide, Brisbane, Hobart, Melbourne and Sydney.

The Centre is a humanities-led research institution that is engaged with the broad range of social sciences to produce academic work that, while relevant to the full spectrum of demands of international scholarship, also relates meaningfully to those in the public policy community, and to the broader interested public, both in Australia and overseas. It values a New Sinology, that is an intellectual, cultural and personal involvement with the Chinese world (be it in the People's Republic, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan or globally) that is underpinned by traditions of academic independence, local fluency and disciplinary relevance.

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#### CIW sites

<http://ciw.anu.edu.au>  
<http://www.thechinastory.org>

#### CIW publications (also available online)

*China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*,  
October 2013

*China Story Yearbook 2012: Red Rising, Red Eclipse*,  
August 2012

Stephen Fitzgerald, *Australia and China at Forty—Stretch of the Imagination*, 澳大利亚与中国已届四十年—舒展的想象力, February 2013

*Australia and China: A Joint Report on the Bilateral Relationship* 中国和澳大亚：关于双边关系的联合报告, with the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), February 2012

#### CIW journals

*China Heritage Quarterly*  
(<http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org>)

*East Asian History*  
(<http://www.eastasianhistory.org>)

*The China Journal*, co-published  
(<http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/chinajournal/>)

*Danwei*, affiliated  
(<http://www.danwei.com>)