

**Oriental Society of Australia “World without walls”
Opening of conference at Women’s College, University of
Sydney, 3 December 2006**

“World without walls” – your conference theme evokes a powerful aspiration for East and West – how to value each other’s culture and differences free of impediment, internal or external. Not zealous to convert but as scholars seeking to understand each other’s history, culture, contemporary attitudes and convictions. The welcome to country we have so often heard at University gatherings speaks with that same sense of reaching out; to a landscape without walls or monuments, no desert Ozymandias¹ towering mid the spinifex. There is a parallel between the millennia of Australia’s indigenous relationship to an uncluttered landscape, mythic and of the spirit, and what Pierre Ryckman (alias Simon Leys) observed of contemporary China.

“ ... China which is loaded with so much history and so many memories is also oddly deprived of ancient monuments”²

That spiritually active but physically invisible dimension permeates the analects of Confucius. The narrative is a series of episodic conversational encounters initiated usually by the disciple with the Master, yet never set in any recognizable landscape or location. These are not stories of a Chinese dreamtime. Nor because of their didactic quality are they a Socratic dialogue. Rather Confucius is laying down the requirements for a properly ordered society. He ordains that “political authority should reside with the moral elite; with those who can demonstrate that they are morally and intellectually qualified” – “Junzi” or gentlemen.³ Confucius thereby laid the groundwork for a revolution of thinking whatever you may think of his gender language. That revolution denied real power to the aristocracy. It led eventually to the establishment of a bureaucratic empire of the intellectual elite lasting over 2 thousand years.

When the West in the form of traders, aided and abetted by missionaries like Dr Gutzlaff launched their assault on Chinese barriers to trade in the 19th century, they were driven by money especially from opium. That external pressure revealed how China’s bureaucratic empire was already showing signs of sclerosis. Jim Spigelman describes the opening of Shanghai in precisely these terms in his recent paper.⁴

Confucianism, as our Mabel Lee describes it, had by this time degenerated into an autocratic ideology alongside infrastructures that allowed it to permeate all levels of

¹ Ozymandias, Percy Bysshe Shelley

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

² Simon Leys “The Angel and the Octopus” in *The Chinese Attitude towards the Past* (1999)

³ *The Analects of Confucius* translated by Simon Leys, introduction Pxxvi-xxvii (1997)

⁴ “Shanghai and the West: First Contact” Warrane Lecture, 20 September 2006 by the Honourable JJ Spigelman AC

society.⁵ The individual from birth was conditioned to be subservient to a defined hierarchy of authorities. Bureaucratic walls constrained intellectual freedom. Social stability was and remains, the paramount concern of China and its elite. What is however remarkable about today's China is the growing confidence of the Chinese authorities in tolerating a greater degree of intellectual freedom. Greater indeed than was allowed Gao Xingjian in the 1980s, whom Mabel Lee translated so superbly. He survived the Cultural Revolution. He even was even successful in staging three of his plays in Beijing but this was not without considerable anxiety in the politically ambiguous 1980s. But he made a quick decision to flee Beijing in 1983 when trenchantly criticized for "spiritual pollution". He absconded to the remote forest regions, then wandered along the Yangtze River from its source to the coast, finally settling in Paris. There he is equally known for his large black and white ink paintings as for his writing, now also in French. So he crossed through the wall from East to West.

For a sense of contemporary China, beyond its booming economy and flood of rural immigration to the cities, I recall the law Dean of Tsinghua University. He spoke last year of reform of the court system, the training of judges; and of a powerful film about corruption in a local village, reaction to it and the breakdown of neighbourly relations it generates. He explained that Western legal values cannot be imposed; they require subtle and significant adaptation. Always social stability is placed above all else, for the Chinese leadership do not want to instigate a break-down akin to that which broke the Soviet Union apart, nor (though this is less clear) a system dominated by just a few capitalist oligarchs.

Your conference focuses on walls both actual and metaphoric. It was Konichi Omhae, who, as a Japanese management consultant and former physicist, wrote of the "Borderless World". It was no accident he did so from Japan, though an Indian software expert might equally have done so. The paradox of contemporary Asia is that at the very time the internet is breaking down information barriers there is a countervailing tendency to re-erect them—barriers of misunderstanding amid often good intentions.

There is a striking example of that in Sebastian Mallaby's account of how the World Bank under Jim Wolfensohn achieved greater success in China in alleviating poverty than anywhere else in the world.⁶ Yet the Bank came temporarily undone with the notorious Qinghai relocation project. As he explains, by the 1990s the World Bank's biggest client was China and for good reason: not only was China the world's most populous nation, it was also the most spectacularly efficient at eliminating poverty. The World Bank proposed to relocate 58,000 farmers from the hopelessly parched hillside in the Western province of Qinghai to an irrigated area in another part of the province. There a small dam would be built to collect melting snow for the relocated farmers, their re-settlement being entirely voluntary. Earlier, such projects had been hugely successful in reducing poverty. There was no obvious reason to suppose that this one would be different.

⁵ See her introduction as translator to Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (2000) pp vi-vii

⁶ Sebastian Mallaby *The World's Banker, How James Wolfensohn changed the World Bank* (2004) at pp271-285. His account of the World Bank more generally should not be assumed to be wholly accurate. Qinghai was the same province from whose prison farms Gao Xingjian had fled 16 years earlier.

Yet the whole scheme was to collapse over the fact that Qinghai bordered Tibet and one million of Qinghai's five million inhabitants were Tibetan. In a campaign that did no credit to the World Bank's assailants, the Tibetan issue was allowed to derail the project. The assailants were a disparate coalition of pro-Tibetans outside Tibet, conservatives from the far right, and some NGO's. The end result was abandonment of the project. Subsequently the Bank recovered its position in China greatly assisted by its extraordinarily able Chinese co-managing director Shengman Zhang and the Bank's leadership, still under the inspirational Jim Wolfensohn at that time.

If ever an incident demonstrated the need for thoughtful consideration rather than a simplistic occidental reflex, this was such a case.

That leads me to the enhancement of Australia's capacity to understand Asia, for which conferences such as this can be so important. I observe that Alison Broinowski is one of your keynote speakers. James Mackie in the preface gives deserved praise to her pioneering work *The Yellow Lady*. It was, as you know, written in 1991 on Australian impressions of Asia. She sets out within a broad cultural context how those impressions of Asia have been formed, shaped and changed over the last 200 years. One cringes at the crude caricatures that even Sir Isaac Isaacs indulged in when he referred in a judgment best forgotten to the 'heathen Chinese'. But now we have the nuanced writings of a Christopher Koch on Indonesia or the music of Sculthorpe drawing on Indonesian ketchuk music. Yet just 6 years later Stephen Fitzgerald was still asking the question "Is Australia an Asian country?" with its subtext "Can Australia survive in an East Asian future?"⁷ More recently, as you know, Alison has written reciprocally on Asia's perception of Australia – as she explains Asia cannot be spoken of in crude monolithic terms.

I pause to note a striking fact; apart from Alison who comes from the Athens of the South (Adelaide not Melbourne) each of Koch, Sculthorpe and Fitzgerald (Stephen not CP) were originally Tasmanians. Perhaps there is something about living in close proximity to a larger island. It sharpens perceptions and sensibility about Australia vis-à-vis the potentially dominating Asia that surrounds us. Jim Wolfensohn has been addressing Sydney audiences recently on that economic domination to come – staggering GDP projections from China and India surpassing not only the mature economy of Japan, but eventually to overtake the United States. I stress GDP figures because the per capita income of China and India remains their greatest domestic challenge; its accommodation the only perceived brake upon that threatened dominance.

Yet is not Alison right, and Stephen too, in emphasizing that it is Australia's perceptions of Asia and their reciprocal in Asia's view of us that remains critically important? Jocelyn Chey has written to similar effect. Is it not ironic when again the leadership of the Australian labor party is at issue, there is barely a word spoken of the fact that Kevin Rudd is almost unique in Australian politics; not only as a fluent Mandarin speaker but a serious student of Asian history with deep connections to the Asian Region.

⁷ Stephen Fitzgerald *Is Australia an Asian Country* (1997) esp Chapter 10

Let me return now to those walls.

Your conference speaks of electronic walls, defensive walls, new Berlin walls, walls of oppression, class room walls, the only omission wailing walls. But above all, it is to “look over the wall”, in a discussion soon to be led by Professor Soumyen Mukherjee. Professor Mukherjee echoes the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe⁸ as they rail against the wall that separates them, so often the theme of East and West. So yearning Pyramus

*“and thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall
That stand’st between her father’s ground and mine
Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,
Show me thy chink to blink through with mine eyne” ...*

Then, denied his Thisbe, he curses “thy stones for thus deceiving me”. Finally the lovers meet so concluding with these words, metaphor for this conference.

*Wall “thus have I Wall my part discharg’ed so;
And, being done, thus Wall away doth go.
Theseus: Now is the mure raised between the two neighbours”.*

May this conference break down the walls so shedding light from East to West on this the 50th Anniversary of the birth of the Oriental Society of Australia; a society that has done so much to remove barriers to understanding. That birth we joyfully celebrate at Women’s College, here at the University of Sydney, a committed participant in your important work.

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⁸ Shakespeare’s A Midsummer’s Nights Dream Act V Sc 1