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Circles and a Square

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By Brendan Shanahan

Sydney

In a studio behind his home in Sydney's working-class western suburbs, the painter Wang Xu recalls the day his life changed.

It was June 8, 1989, four days after the Chinese government crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations began in Tiananmen Square; violent clashes between armed soldiers and civilians left hundreds dead.

Mr. Wang was on his way to visit his parents. He paused to watch the chaos in the area near Chaoyangmen Bridge. Suddenly, a white van pulled up. "I saw a foreigner [get out]," recalls Mr. Wang, now 61 years old. "An American. He interviewed me—at that time I could speak a bit of English. I criticized the government and the killing. I said it was unacceptable, a crime. He asked a few questions then ran away."

It was to prove a fateful encounter. Soon after, in disgust, Mr. Wang got a tourist visa and headed for Australia. A while later he received a call from friends in the U.S.: They had seen his interview broadcast on television and thought the Chinese government might be looking for him. It wasn't mere paranoia: Xiao Bin, another interview subject who gave eyewitness testimony to the same American TV network, was hunted down and sentenced to 10 years (he was eventually paroled in 1994).

Like many in Beijing at the time, Mr. Wang—who later sought political asylum in Australia and eventually was allowed to stay permanently—was an individual swept up by the currents of history. And like a number of his contemporaries he would benefit from the Australian government's response to the events that took place 21 years ago this week.

On June 9, 1989, at a memorial service to victims of the brutal crackdown, then-Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke wiped away his trademark tears and announced he would extend the visas of all of the approximately 20,000 Chinese students in Australia. Meanwhile, in China, the Australian government began to issue a generous number of study visas to Chinese wishing to leave, swelling the total number to 45,000. With the subsequent arrival of their families, 145,000 people eventually qualified for permanent-residency visas, the largest Chinese influx to Australia since the 19th-century gold rush.

It was a move that would change Australian society, especially in Sydney, where most of the newcomers settled, and perhaps nowhere more obviously than in the visual arts.

The artists who arrived in Australia around 1989 cover a broad spectrum. Some, like Guan Wei, who paints cartoonish imagery drawn from Australian and Chinese history, and sculptor Ah Xian, famous for his ceramic and concrete body casts, are among the biggest names in Australian contemporary art and exhibit internationally. Both artists now spend much of their time in China but maintain studios in Australia.

Others, including painters Shen Jiawei, Jun Chen and Wang Xu, who still make Australia their home, used their training to become landscapists and portraitists. Still others stayed awhile then resettled in China, including Lin Chunyan, known for paintings of figures and flowers inspired partly by Australia, and conceptual artist Xiao Lu, famous for firing two bullets into her installation at Beijing's groundbreaking China/Avant Garde exhibition in February 1989. That act got the show closed temporarily, and seemed to presage the dark times to come.

Australia provided "a very nurturing environment" for the influx of Chinese artists, says Melissa Chiu, an Australian who is director of the Asia Society Museum in New York.

"They were immediately welcomed by the art world and

immediately given opportunity to exhibit their work and helped along with grants," says Ms. Chiu, who in 1996 founded the Asia-Australia Arts Centre in Sydney, now known as 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. "I'm not saying it was all easy, but I do think the Australian art world at that time was really interested in what Chinese artists had to say."

Groundbreaking exhibitions of the early 1990s included "Mao Goes Pop" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, "New Art From China" (a traveling exhibition) and the Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane. Much of this cultural exchange was made possible by the work of a small circle of Australian expatriates who lived in China in the 1980s; figures such as Geoff Raby, now Australia's ambassador to China; Linda Jaivan, a writer and translator; and Brian Wallace, whose Red Gate Gallery was among the first commercial art galleries in China when it opened in Beijing in 1991.

Perhaps most influential was Nicholas Jose, 58, a writer, academic and former cultural attaché at the Australian embassy in Beijing whose apartment served as both party venue and gallery for many of the most important artists of the period. "I think it's our position in the cultural world. We're not at the center," Mr. Jose says when asked why Australia was so interested in Chinese art of the time. "Maybe that makes us more open to things that are on the margins."

Although loosely referred to as the post-Tiananmen generation, few of the artists who arrived in Australia around that time had anything to do with the infamous events of June 4. Politics, however, was to touch them. Some, like painter Mr. Lin, now 48, already were settling into Australia when the Tiananmen pro-democracy demonstrations began. He protested in sympathy in front of the Chinese consulate in Sydney. Others took more dramatic action.

Before Shen Jiawei arrived in Australia as an English-language student at the age of 40—six months before Tiananmen—he was a self-described "official artist" and celebrated propaganda painter. His best-known work was a 1974 oil painting "Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland" of soldiers in a watchtower, which was widely reproduced, including as a poster. In his last job in China, Mr. Shen worked at a government studio in Shenyang, Liaoning province.

Once he landed in Australia, he set up on the streets of



Guo Jian stands between two of his trademark 'cynical realist' style paintings at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney: left, a work from his 'The Cast and Crew' series; right, 'On Set—Self-Portrait, 1979.' Below, another 'The Cast and Crew' painting. All three works are from 2010.

Adam Hollingworth for The Wall Street Journal



'Obviously now in China the art thing is really exciting,' says artist Guo Jian

Sydney drawing portraits for a few dollars apiece. After more than 20 years in his adopted country, Mr. Shen has become a well-known portraitist—former Prime Minister John Howard and Australian-born Mary Donaldson, crown princess of Denmark, have been among his subjects. Upon hearing the news of Tiananmen in Sydney he immediately wrote a letter resigning his Communist Party membership. When it was published in a Beijing newspaper Mr. Shen was blacklisted; his wife and child had to wait three years before they could leave China to join him. "I knew this would be the result," the 62-year-old artist says now. "But I thought, 'I have to do something.'"

Perhaps the artist with the most direct link to what became known as the Tiananmen Square massacre is Guo Jian, now 48 and known for large pop canvases in the "cynical realist" style that often feature dancers from communist operas. His story is, in some ways, emblematic of his generation.

Mr. Guo was an active participant in the protests of 1989: He undertook a seven-day hunger strike in the square, but says that when the military arrived he pleaded with students to leave peacefully. Later, after the violence started, he carried many dead and wounded to the hospital. One wounded man

was shot and killed while clinging to Mr. Guo's back.

Following his traumatic experiences, Mr. Guo, then an art student, became a figure of official suspicion. Blacklisted and unable to get a job, he joined the now-famous artists' colony near Yuanmingyuan, Beijing's old Summer Palace. "We had the police come and check us all the time," says Mr. Guo of the charged atmosphere within the colony in the days after Tiananmen. "Actually, we played games with the police. Today you think it's really good but at that time you hate it, hate it."

After three years the constant harassment became too much and Mr. Guo made preparations to emigrate. "So many artists were leaving. So I said, Why not?"

Mr. Guo describes his move to Australia, as opposed to anywhere else, as "fate": Most of his friends in Beijing were Australian but his knowledge of the country was mostly limited to his time in the army listening to Radio Australia, the international arm of Australia's national broadcaster. Nevertheless, the connection was immediate. "The first day I already felt at home. I had so many Chinese friends come to Australia at that time. They had culture shock. I think I was the only one who was really happy."

Australia's relaxed atmosphere appealed to Mr. Guo, and he