New Century Garden:
Talking About Public Art in Chinatown

Guest speaker — Nicholas Jose
What is a (Chinese) Garden?

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A garden is a conceptual as well as a physical space, a constructed environment, a zone of play or reflection. In Chinese culture the garden is an art form too, with a rich tradition of both creation and appreciation. The experience of the garden in body, mind and heart is central to understanding the concept. That includes the after-impression of the garden, what renewal is achieved, what encounters and ideas can be taken away. In Chinese culture the symbolic dimension has overtaken the physical space of the garden, intensified through a long association with personal cultivation. In the literati tradition you show your refinement in the way you are able to read the garden. The line that connects writers and artists with gardens goes back to the poet Tao Yuanming (362-467) and the fabled harmony of his simple country life. Such gardens are typically a place of retreat from the cares of public life, private spaces, spaces within. It makes sense to consider a New Century Chinese Garden from a literary point of view if that means to think of it conceptually, as a place inscribed by the imagination, a space that transcends itself. The Orchid Pavilion is an archetypal Chinese literati garden because it inspired a text written in exemplary calligraphy attributed to Wang Xizhi (309-c365), that was copied for generations until it became so venerable it was meaningless, as the contemporary performance artist Qiu Zhijie shows in *Copying Lantingxu 1000 Times*, 1990-1995. The black sheen on his voided page of overwritten script is the ultimately conceptual Chinese garden.

Turning now to the space in Thomas Street, in Sydney's Chinatown, let's start by saying that, quite contrary to a literati garden, it is not a private or interior space, but rather the opposite, an urban hub, an intersection of many pathways, in the centre of a busy twenty-first century city. Its storylines go back in time, to the deep history of a colonial port, in a society constructed on exclusionary racial lines that produced enclaves of difference, and that extend to ancestral homelands and diaspora. This Chinatown has been a first destination for migrants, refugees, students, tourists. The Chinese-Australian writer Sang Ye calls Chinatown 'a flowerpot simply placed here', where no one puts down roots, because 'the soil in the flowerpot is segregated from the soil here' (*The Finish Line*, 1995). But that's only part of the story. That flowerpot has been in Australia as long as any European garden. In any case, Chinatown is only partly Chinese. For many visitors to Sydney it is the most cosmopolitan place they can find, the only place they feel at home, as depicted by Matt Huynh in his graphic novel *Chinatown*. Rather than inner space, Thomas Street is a version of 'outer space' in a special sense.

It is also remnant space, like backyards and decks and inner urban courtyards throughout the city, left over space that calls for imaginative reclamation. In that sense its limitations, its layers and intersections, are its virtue. One of the best writers about contemporary space is Yi-Fu Tuan, Professor of Geography at the University of Wisconsin Madison. Tuan's approach is partly formed by his growing up in Sydney, as he shows in overlaying Indigenous and Chinese concepts of space onto Western ones. He refers to the paradox of the Ming garden that was at once quite small but 'had cosmic pretensions'. 'To overcome the actuality that this space was bounded by the blank face of a wall, imagination must come powerfully into play' (*Passing Strange and Wonderful*, 1993). If the space in Thomas Street is bounded by walls, it has few of the features normally found in a garden, except in a conceptual, non-organic, obliquely referential way, which calls the imagination into play more vividly.

Yi-Fu Tuan quotes a connoisseur's experience of a Ming garden. Imagine it transposed to Thomas Street:

> In certain lights—at dawn or dusk, or sometimes in the blinding glare of summer noon—the wall might even seem to have melted away altogether, leaving the rocks and bamboo floating in ... horizonless and vaporous distances ... Shrinking himself to the size of an ant, the connoisseur could wander in these misty wastes among rocks now grown into mountains, and shrubs and grasses as big as trees and forests. And as he walked and paused, the landscape unfolded around him as if he were taking a three-dimensional stroll through one of his own paintings, slowly unrolling the horizontal scroll from right to left. (Maggie Keswick, Foreword, Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, 1988).

Imagine if the artwork was not a horizontal scroll, but a moving projection, or an installation, and if the vegetation was hallucinatory in a different way, making the city disappear.

The New Century Garden continues the adaption of the Chinese garden in re-used space, pushing its conceptual character. The Japanese Zen garden already points the way, with its radical reduction of elements, daily destroyed and renewed. The hybrid Australian version of Chinese gardens also points the way. I'm thinking less of Chinatown's own Chinese Garden, though that popular spot is interesting in identifying Sydney as a southern-style place, not only through the acknowledgement of Guangdong as homeland to many Australians, but through aesthetic and botanical affinity too. In Australia historically the Chinese garden has been a market garden, remnant testimony of which lives on across the country today. One remote example is Adel's Grove, at Lawn Hill National Park on the Gulf of Carpentaria, where the lychee, mango and tamarind trees in the camping ground record the garden that was there before the Aboriginal-Chinese family that established it was moved on early last century. Sydney still has Chinese market gardens visible on land too close to the flight path for real estate development in Arncliffe, fertile remnant land not far from where Joseph Banks speculated on the possibility of productive agriculture when he stepped ashore in 1770. That Chinese garden suggests a link with the market garden that once existed in Thomas Street itself.

The market garden is the opposite of the rarefied literati garden, but in Australia the two meld as an aesthetic and functional intervention. My friend Michael has created a garden of this kind on his balcony in Redfern, from found plants and pots, from stuff left in the street, making a transformed space of his own to block out the Eastern Distributor. The Chinese-Australian public garden works to reconfigure and recycle, promoting civic values, useful knowledge and friendly exchange. Townsville's Perfume Gardens reclaims a dodgy pocket of CBD badland into a safe place to eat lunch,

connect or pass through. The relocated colonial structure at one end attracted a sister-city Chinese gift at the other, with explanatory plaque in Chinese. The Chinese Herbal Medicine Garden at the Bankstown Campus of the University of Western Sydney where I work used Japanese architecture and, curiously, European culinary herbs such as rosemary, thyme and chamomile outnumber the Chinese citrus, that 'opens the orifices' according to its plaque, and juniper.

It's only one step from here to the kind of public art that philosopher Martha Nussbaum advocates as a way to encourage civic virtues of community, belonging and respect for diversity. Can art do this? Or is it better at critiquing such high-minded utilitarianism? There's a strong American tradition, deriving perhaps from the puritan reverence for the written word, of edifying texts being carved in stone in public places whose significance is amplified by the inscription. At Freedom Plaza in Washington DC uplifting quotes are literally laid down in the stones you walk on. At Harvard the entrance to Emerson Hall is carved with the Bible's words: 'What is man that thou art mindful of him?' (Psalm 8:4). That might have given those philosophy students pause for thought—especially the girls.

China has a version of this tradition too in which significant words which also work as visual images are carved in stone in a landscape, as if to inscribe a timeless conceptual significance that unites the human and the natural in cosmic harmony.

If the role of public art in a New Century Garden in Chinatown is to connect people with an inspiring, transforming set of possibilities, the stimulus of concepts will be powerful, as abstract ideas are presented in an economical, mysterious, provocative, edgy way, as part of the symbolic architecture, with space around them for imagination to take off. The Chinese American architect I. M. Pei, whose family roots go back to Suzhou, home of some of China's most exalted gardens, shows how architecture, art and design can work together symbolically, as in his new Museum of Suzhou with its highly illusionistic mountain and water landscape garden. Years earlier, when the Chinese characteristics of his architecture were less overt, he designed the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library in Boston. It ended up being away from the city centre, on Columbia Point, overlooking the Atlantic. The most memorable thing about this commemorative building is the vast central atrium that looks through a complex lattice at the vaster ocean: abstracted landscape, form and void, enclosure that is not enclosed.

Art is an agent in reconceptualising a Chinese garden in place and time. The transformation includes writing that interprets and intervenes, as it participates in what critic Wang Guanglin, speaking of Brian Castro's novel *The Garden Book*, a book about Chinese writing and Australian bush, has called 'the garden of transcultural life'. Perhaps the New Century Garden will only exist in the imagination, in the space of respite it gives us. Such a garden was described by a Ming scholar in the sixteenth-century: 'the Wuyou Garden - which means "The Garden-that-does-not-exist." ... What difference is there between a famous garden which exists no more, and this particular garden which never existed at all, since in the end both the former and the latter are known only through the same medium of the written word? ' (Pierre Ryckmans, *The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past*, 1989) And the future.

The space can be marked by story, text, idea—all in a word, deftly inscribed, changing from language to language, floating: a neat way to free up space for reflection.

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Nicholas Jose is a novelist, essayist, playwright and is currently a Professor at the Writing and Society Research Group at the University of Western Sydney where he also holds a Chair in Writing. From 1986 to 1990 he worked in Shanghai and Beijing where he was Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy from 1987 to 1990. Jose's thirteen books include the novels *Paper Nautilus*, *Avenue of Eternal Peace* (shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award), *The Custodians* (shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize) and *Original Face*; two short story collections; a volume of essays, *Chinese Whispers*; and the memoir *Black Sheep*. His work has appeared in HEAT, Asian Literary Review, The London Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement, Far Eastern Economic Review, Art Asia Pacific, and The Sydney Morning Herald among other publications. A past president of International PEN Sydney, he is general editor of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, and was Visiting Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard University in 2009-2011.