

Multiculturalism is a fine art for true-blue Chinese

CHINESE artist Jiawei Shen is disappointed that his entry for this year's Archibald Prize — a self-portrait — didn't make the finals as his work has done so many years before. Shen, who has painted Denmark's Crown Princess Mary and Melbourne Lord Mayor John So, did make it to the finals of the Sulman Prize with his work *1894*. This combines two portraits linking Australia and China in that year, one of Australian journalist George Ernest Morrison, who was based in Beijing for *The Times* newspaper during the Boxer Rebellion, and the other of a nine-year-old Chinese boy who came to Sydney from Guangdong province during the gold rushes and lived with an Australian family.

"This year I am very sad because my [Archibald] entry has been rejected," Shen said this week from his home in Bundeena, south of Sydney.

But he takes some consolation that his self-portrait is now on show at Sydney's S. H. Erwin Gallery. And he is happy that some of his friends — several other Chinese artists — made it to the finals of the Archibald, which was won by Sydney's John Beard yesterday. These included Xu Wang, who painted former University of NSW chancellor and children's medical specialist John Yu and former pediatrician and art collector George Soutter; Zhong Chen, with a self-portrait; and Adam Cheng, with a portrait of arts patron Brian Sherman.

As Australians take a critical look at the virtues of multiculturalism, it is all too easy to overlook some of the quiet successes of the policy. One of the most rapidly growing segments of our migrant population in recent years has comprised people from mainland China, such as Shen.

Shanghai-born Shen came to Australia in early 1989 as an English language student and became one of the beneficiaries of Bob Hawke's commitment to allow Chinese students to stay here after the bloody Tiananmen Square confrontation.

Before Tiananmen, many of Australia's Chinese migrants came from Hong Kong, a trend accelerated by fears of what would happen after the handover from the British to the Chinese in July 1997.

But the combination of allowing students to stay because of Tiananmen and the policy of Australian universities to recruit fee-paying students from mainland China — who then seem to have an easy passage to

residency once they graduate — has dramatically increased the number of migrants from the Middle Kingdom.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show migrants from mainland China have increased from about 121,000 in 1996 to about 200,000 in 2006, a rise of more than 5 per cent a year.

People from China now represent the fourth largest source of migrants to Australia, after those born in Britain (1.13 million); New Zealand (about 500,000) and Italy (about 230,000). But the figures from Britain and Italy are on the decline.

The total from Hong Kong has also eased off from about 77,000 in 1996 to about 76,000 as some have returned home for a more financially prosperous life (and a low tax rate) as fears of what might happen under Chinese administration have abated.

The increasing role of Asians in Australian society was highlighted this week by the news that some of the key groups in John Howard's middle-class electorate of Bennelong — which takes in the very upmarket Hunters Hill — were not the so-called doctors' wives but Koreans and Chinese. The electorate also includes regions such as Chatswood which have become popular with the upwardly mobile Hong Kong Chinese and some areas around Macquarie University, popular with Asian students.

In Sydney, which has attracted most of the mainland Chinese, the Mandarin-speaking migrants tend to live in the cheaper areas of the inner city and inner west. They are not quite as wealthy as the Cantonese speakers who have a much longer track record in Australia. But, mostly, they are putting their heads down and getting on with their lives, almost never hitting the headlines but determinedly earning a living.

Shen came to Australia with \$45 and supported himself for the first few years doing portraits for tourists at Sydney's Darling Harbour. He has been entering the Archibald since 1992. He first made it to the finals in 1993 and is now an established artist. Shen says he is lucky, as being an artist transcends any issues of language, making it easier for him to work here.

I asked him this week if he had difficulty settling into Australia in the early days. "Not much," he said. "It was step by step. I am now feeling very happy to be finally so well received here in art circles."

**GLEND
KORPORAAL**



Walking around the Chinatowns of Australia — and some of the university areas — it is possible to detect a lot more of the melodious Mandarin than the harsher Cantonese. An increasing number of Chinese signs in Australia use the simplified Chinese characters as opposed to the attractive but complicated traditional characters used in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

My local shopping centre has a wonderful tailor from Shanghai. My friend recently hired a married couple from Shanghai, who operate a house-cleaning franchise, and who have earned enough to make regular Christmas trips home.

My local computer repairers are two mates from Beijing. Over the years we have known them, we have seen them become more and more Australian.

But the latest shock was to see them, over the summer, both glued to their computer screens watching the cricket.

“When’s Ricky Ponting going to bring on the fast bowlers?” one of them demanded of my cricket-tragic husband.

You don’t get much more multicultural than that.



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Talent: Sydney-based artist Jiawei Shen