

**Community history, Chinese
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Artists and intellectuals**

Zhou Xiaoping (b. 1960)

(from interviews with Diana Giese, Melbourne, 1994, and ORAL TRC 3491, 1996, *Post-War Chinese Australians*, National Library of Australia, and Diana Giese, *Astronauts, Lost Souls & Dragons*, University of Queensland Press, 1997, pages 69-72)

‘Zhou had trained as a traditional Chinese brush painter, learning from a venerable and famous master. After his 1988 exhibition in Victoria closed, he thought he should do some work based on his Australian experience. He had seen Aboriginal bark and cave paintings for the first time, and was curious.

Zhou Xiaoping: I didn’t understand them at all. They were not like fine arts, like a design. But I thought, “This is art.”

From his first encounter he was intrigued by Aboriginal people. “I got off the bus at Alice Springs and saw black people in Australia for the first time. They looked at me—because I looked at them. These people, you can see from their eyes, the face, not smiling very often, they have so many experiences of life. Their experience is maybe very hard, very difficult...”

He quickly met some Aboriginal artists. He asked them, “What’s the meaning? Why are you doing paintings like this?” He came to realise that “the Aborigines never answer your questions. They only give you an answer that is very simple: ‘This is our work’ or ‘This is a bush potato’...”

Now he has lived and worked in Arnhem Land, the Kimberley region of Western Australia and north Queensland. On one trip he arrived in Maningrida in Arnhem Land with only the necessities: “Backpack. Sleeping bag. Noodles and rice. Paint brushes. Rice paper. Sketchbooks. That’s all.”

Zhou Xiaoping: Two or three pigs came in and ate my bag: rice, noodles, ink, paper. Quite big pigs. Bush pigs. See my bag? This is pig art. Ink on the bottom. Next day, I went to another outstation. They said to me: “Ink, ink. Ink, ink.” At first I didn’t understand. Then I thought, because ink is very important to me, and it’s all gone, you know: problem for me. So I said: “Ink. My ink.”

Zhou’s time in Australia has taught him that to fully engage with Aboriginal life takes persistence, energy and time. Very early on he took in the essential point that art for Aboriginal people is an integral part of a different way of living. He could never have visited for a month, done a few sketches and left. In his most recent work there’s much hard observation born of long scrutiny of the people he depicts. It shows a relationship far beyond the aesthetic.

In late 1995 Zhou travelled in northern Western Australia with Aboriginal artist Jimmy Pike...Drawing and painting on the trip alternated with other pursuits such as hunting. He was shown how to identify local animal tracks...

Zhou’s real diary of the trip is in his sketches. They were later “transplanted to paintings”. “Pike drew a person. He said, This is you.’ I said, ‘Okay, I am drawing you on the same painting.’ Then we painted trees, anthills, land..”

Zhou Xiaoping (diary): 7 August. I am watching Pike painting. Now we are sitting near the river. Pike is facing it, doing painting in his way. He paints something which we cannot see, but we know is there. He teaches me to do a painting in his way. We are painting under trees, sun and moon, very hard, six, eight or ten hours a day.’