

Chinese Arts Centre

Celebrating 21 years of arts & culture

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In 1986 a group of artists, all of British-Chinese descent, frustrated with a lack of recognition from the mainstream arts community organised a festival to highlight their work, called *Chinese View*. It incorporated over 30 artistic and cultural events, and was the first festival of its kind in Manchester. The following year, Manchester City Council and Arts Council England put forward the funds to establish the Chinese Arts Centre.

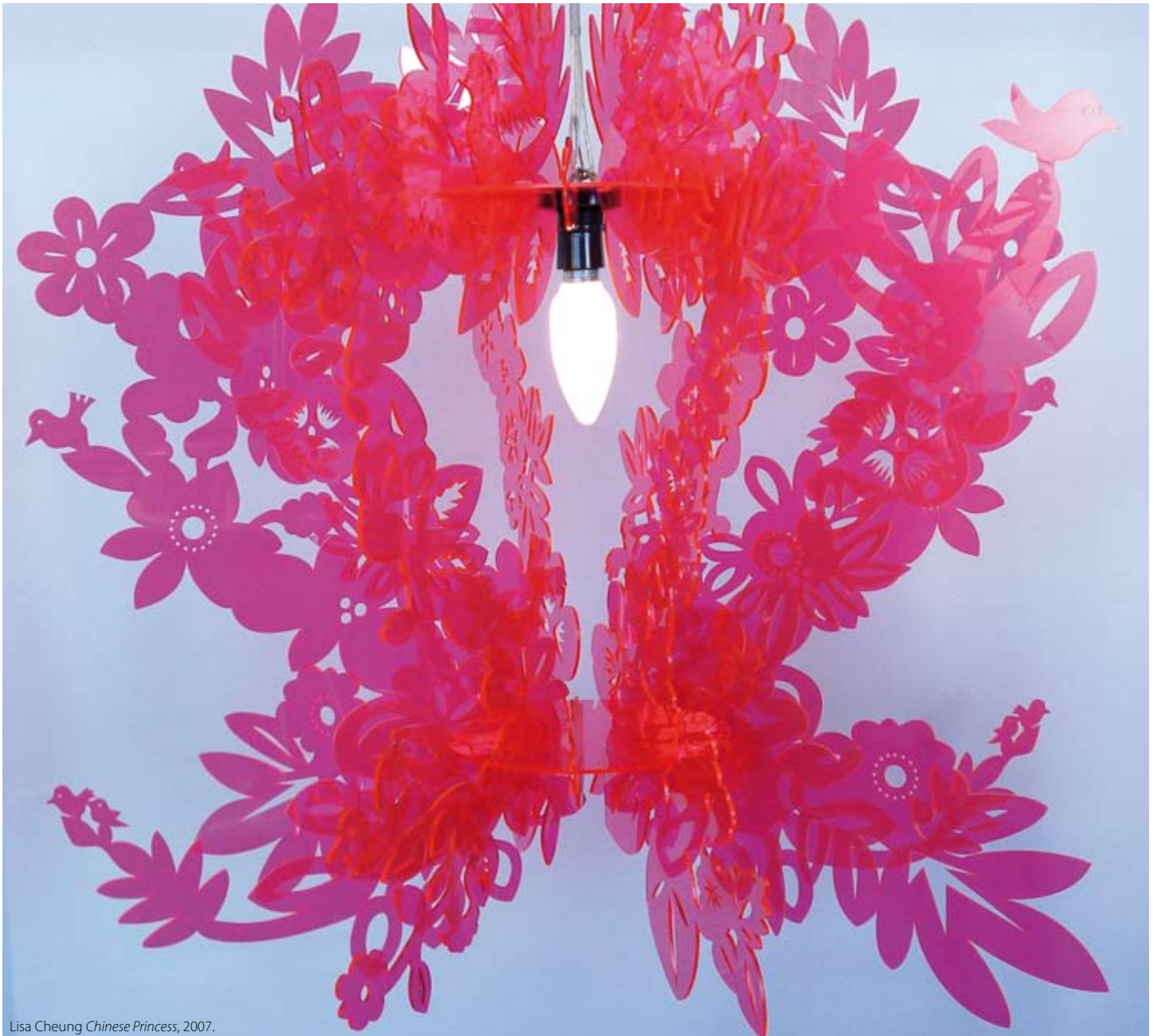
Sarah Champion, CEO of the centre, explains the ethos behind the organisation: "When we first set up, I was asked what our ten year plan was, I said: 'To shut down.' My ultimate goal for the centre was for it to become redundant, because we wouldn't be needed any longer. Everything we do is trying to get the work of British-Chinese artists accepted and supported by the mainstream art world. If that happened the centre wouldn't be necessary."

Pursuing this somewhat paradoxical goal the organisation gained momentum until 2001, when the National Lottery awarded them a £2.5 million grant to construct a purpose-built centre, which was completed in 2003. The following year the building won a RIBA architectural award, and was praised for its "spatial flexibility and a feeling of the Orient." "In terms of recognition," reflects Sarah, "I consider the new building to be our greatest success. It made people look much more carefully at the work we were doing." Visitor numbers increased, and now the centre receives over 14,000 visitors a year.

As well as being 21 years since the centre's beginning, this year also sees the ten-year anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong to China. That historical event was accompanied with a flurry of media attention in the UK. As Sarah recalls, "the handover was probably one of the most significant things to happen to us. Fashion

was suddenly everything to do with China; it was a real media frenzy. The UK has always benefited and suffered from its relationship with China, in that we have a very set, traditional view of what China is and about its culture. Suddenly, with the handover, we had a contemporary vision of China rather than a traditional one. It really helped us to reach the mainstream."

As well as commemorating the handover's anniversary, a special exhibition dubbed *Boutique* has been organised to celebrate the centre's 21st birthday. Four British-Chinese artists: Anthony Key, Lisa Cheung, Nina Chua, and Pamela So have been invited to participate in the exhibition. Anthony Key explains: "Previously, I was an interior designer, and much of my work still has that product design aesthetic. The exhibition brief presented a chance to play without too much of a heavy message behind it." Anthony's work makes playful use of



Lisa Cheung *Chinese Princess*, 2007.

ready-made objects in order to explore and challenge the stereotypical perceptions of Chinese identity. One of his recent works, *Battle of Britain '07* features a map of the UK with flags set upon it in the style of a war map; these flags mark the positions of Chinese takeaways.

Key continues: "It's a way to deconstruct stereotypes. If somebody has seen my artwork, they might, in a normal conversation find themselves using stereotypical terms like "yellow peril" or "Bruce Lee"; the image of my work might come to mind and change their perception. It dislodges the habit of using stereotypes when people are exposed to my work."

Nina Chua, another artist participating in *Boutique*, offers her understanding of the show: "The ideal would be to think about how an artist takes a raw material, and transforms it into something special. In this particular piece, I've taken a different approach; I allow

an idea to develop from interacting with the material, rather than bringing an idea to the material." Nina graduated from Manchester Metropolitan University, having completed an undergraduate course in embroidery; since then she has remained in Manchester, and sees her artwork as a chance to get involved with the local community. "I do work through schools and colleges and I did workshops as well so being involved in the community is a very big part of my art." In the future, Nina hopes for a chance to spread into other media: "I'd like to do a lot more that's film-based or based on other media. There's always a way of linking it back to textiles, but I'll definitely be expanding into other media."

Sarah Champion also envisages a similar expansion for the Chinese Arts Centre. "Over the past 21 years, we've been working with the visual arts, but now we're seeing an international shift to performance art.

"You can be a visual artist in your bedroom, but to be a performance artist brings greater needs. For example, you need to be more collaborative; you need more technical equipment, rehearsal space, and so on. I think the Chinese art movement has expanded, and Chinese artists are looking more toward performance art, and that's something we're definitely going to be involved in. I'd still like to shut us down, but I don't think that's going to happen..."

Boutique runs at the Chinese Arts Centre from 5 October to 24 December. For more information visit: www.chinese-arts-centre.org.

Shaun Gardiner