

DUNLOP MEDAL DINNER

Friday 5 February 2021

Your Excellency

Ms Frances Adamson, Secretary of DFAT

Mr Peter Varghese, recently appointed Chairman of Asialink

Diane Dunlop, Granddaughter of Sir Edward Dunlop

Valued Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Claire Spencer, CEO of Arts Centre Melbourne who has been cooking for us all afternoon

Distinguished Guests – You have to be distinguished to be here this evening!

Thank you most sincerely. To receive this Medal in the name of Weary Dunlop is a great honour. To do so with my wonderful wife, is doubly so. Knowing that we represent the first Dunlop Medal recipients from the arts and cultural sphere doubles yet again the honour and the pleasure. I take it as a tribute to every artist who works in this field. Artists make great ambassadors for our country because they speak a common language of the heart. They teach us about the 'other' and about our shared humanity.

I want to speak briefly about two people - 'Weary' Dunlop and my wife. The Governor has spoken beautifully about the importance of Weary's life and the lessons he can teach us. I just want to add a personal anecdote.

When I finished my undergraduate studies at Melbourne University in late November 1965, to fill in my year until commencing graduate studies at Stanford the following September, I went to work as a primary school teacher in the Highlands of New Guinea. Some months later, in a remote village setting two days walk out of Mt Hagen, I came down with a bad case of Hepatitis. After about ten days in a sleeping bag with my head in a bucket, I flew back to Melbourne where I was put straight into Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital.

Who was chosen to oversee my case after I was released because they knew about tropical medicine? Of course, it was Weary Dunlop! He was physically a very big man [– not surprising when you recall that he played Lock in the Wallaby's rugby union side that was the first to conquer the mighty New Zealand All Blacks and win the Bledisloe Cup in 1934.] But he was also gentle, softly spoken, steady, good humoured, even eccentric. He would arrive at his surgery in his large, battered Mercedes, and step out in his baggy dark suit and homburg carrying his medical files in a "Little Red Riding Hood" wicker basket.

Even then I knew his reputation not just from the War but, as importantly, for his work to build constructive relations between Australia and the Asian region. In my rather crude and youthful way, I recall asking him once if he still hated the Japanese? He hesitated, then said words to the effect that he could never really like them, but he knew that Australia's future depended on our ability and our willingness, to engage actively and positively with our region, and forgiveness was the best place to start. [He worked assiduously at this – he travelled to Japan and other regional neighbours; he involved himself in friendship associations and medical causes with Asian counterparts;] he argued publicly for healing and

the rebuilding of trust between countries as much as for the healing of the bodies and minds of his fellow prisoners of war. His was an extraordinary example of wise, generous leadership and foresight. Would that these qualities were better reflected today among those in positions of influence in politics, the media and other circles.

I have had the good fortune to have three Asialinks as central parts of my life. My first Asialink has been my work in the theatre and the decades of active cultural exchange with China and other countries in the Asia Pacific region. The second is the great Asialink organisation that is hosting this evening's dinner. This Asialink is by far the most influential all-Australian non-government organisation working in the field of regional engagement, helping Australians navigate our own way through the complexities of our region to a more secure, successful and sustainable future. I give thanks to the University of Melbourne and successive Vice Chancellors for their partnership with The Myer Foundation in the establishment and continuing support of this Asialink.

My third and daily Asialink is my dear wife Ziyin. I had had previous practice, but Ziyin challenged me to become a much better husband. We have been married for twenty years – not an Olympic record I know, but it is a Personal Best. Ziyin comes from a deeply cultured family. Her father, Wang Zheng, was a noted playwright, essayist and Secretary General of the Chinese Dramatists Association, frequently in trouble with the Party, twice sent to labour camps on the edge of the Siberian border, always warm and welcoming to me. Ziyin's mother, Fang JuFen, who died only a month ago, was a very famous actress, President of the China National Theatre for Children for twenty years, then a senior member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the second tier of Parliament if you like, with particular responsibility for women's and children's issues.

From a very young age Ziyin herself was brought up on a diet of the Chinese classics, but also on Shakespeare, Dickens, Bronte and others, first in translation and later in English. She is vastly better read than me in any language. Being from an intellectual family, the "Ninth Stinking Class" in the colourful vocabulary of the times, she was made a welder in a huge chemical plant during the Cultural Revolution and then, when that calamity had passed, in 1976 she entered the National Film School from which she graduated with the directing class several years later.

Ziyin came to Australia in 1985 to pursue graduate studies at the Swinburne Film School, now part of the VCA, after which she had an outstanding career directing and producing a wide variety of shows for SBS, Film Australia, the ABC and Southern Star Entertainment where she produced some wonderful children's animation series in partnership with Chinese studios, and a wide variety of documentary programs, frequently about China, which sold in Australia and around the world.

When we married, Ziyin gave up her senior role at Southern Star and moved to Melbourne. Since then, she has been an active producer in film, television, music, theatre and dance, creating some of the most beautiful shows you will ever see that bring Australian and Chinese artists together in joint productions, and building successful partnerships with arts organisations, festivals and other major producers in both countries. I think of *Dragon Child*, a show for children with environmental lessons from the animals of the Chinese

Zodiac; a bilingual musical theatre version of the *Cho Cho San* story with a new Chinese score; and *One Infinity*, a sumptuous cross cultural music and dance.

All of Ziyin's work is about giving voice, about the need for clear and shared communication across the gulfs of difference in language, history and understanding. She is currently working on a new TV series about sassy young Chinese women in Australia, a couple of feature film projects tick along in script development, and a new theatre work is being imagined.

Ziyin is a natural and gifted producer. Having lived in Australia longer than in China, she moves fluently between languages and cultures. She always wants to work with the very best artists, and then gives them freedom and support to do what they do best. She loves beauty in art, as in food and in people. I am the beneficiary of her skills, her passions, her networks and her refined intuition.

I have also been very fortunate to be welcomed into the rich Asialinking of a Chinese family. My failure is not to be able to speak Mandarin with more competence. I did nine years Latin and five years French at school and university. I would be a much more useful citizen if that young energy and brain had been invested in learning Chinese, Japanese or Indonesian. With respect, John Howard was wrong when he said not long ago that Australians do not need to worry about learning Asian languages because English was the lingua franca of the region.

In fact, we need much *more* focus on Asian literacy and languages. We also need curiosity and courtesy, generosity and humility. Even when the Australian government is slow to seize our national potential, we as individuals must build our own bridges to Asia in whatever field we work.

I have given up hoping that Australia might establish an independent and focussed entity to promote Australian culture abroad, and especially in our regional neighbourhood. It will happen one day but by then we will be a beautiful honey coloured people, living prosperously and thinking proudly of ourselves as part of an Asian orbit rather than as an insecure outer branch office of Western imperial decline. Put simply and crudely, Australia's future security and prosperity lies in Asia. The big question then, is what can each of us contribute to get us there more swiftly and more safely?

Thank you.

Carrillo Gantner AC