

Case Study: International Engagement/National Stories

Trepang: China and the Story of Macassan-Aboriginal trade.



Melbourne Museum

Building international relationships

Trepang: China & the story of Macassan-Aboriginal trade is currently on exhibition at the Melbourne Museum. The exhibition, which was developed with the support of Rio

Tinto, explores the first recorded history of trade relations between China and Australia. Macassan traders developed relationships with Aboriginal clans on the north Australian coastline, obtaining permission to harvest trepang or bêche-de-mer - a dried or smoked sea cucumber, and process it for the lucrative Chinese market long before the British arrived in Australia. Historical artefacts, paintings, maps and photographs sit alongside contemporary works in the exhibition to tell the fascinating tale of Aboriginal and Asian exchange that centred on the trepang trade from the early 18th century to the early 20th century.

The exhibition is founded on a longstanding friendship between classically trained Chinese artist Zhou Xiaoping and highly respected Indigenous artist, the late John Bulunbulun. After years of collaboration, dating back to 1988, these two artists; inheritors of ancient traditions, have brought together their understanding of historical events that entangled their ancestors across cultures and the seas and archipelagos between China and the northern coast of Australia more than two centuries ago. The story of this interaction is told in artworks such as paintings and ground sculptures, song cycles and sacred design.

The exhibition was launched at the Capital Museum in Beijing earlier this year and is part of *Experience China - The Year of Chinese Culture* in Australia, an initiative of the Chinese Government which offers a series of cultural events for Australians to "experience China". The experiences are aimed at strengthening relations between Australia and China and promoting a mutual understanding of the two cultures. It was supported by Rio Tinto which emphasised the importance of such cultural exchanges at a time when Australia is building a strong working relationship with China.

See: <http://museumvictoria.com.au/melbournemuseum/whatson/current-exhibitions/trepang/>

Image above: John Bulunbulun, *Trading with Macassans*, 2008