

JOHN DENG

laughter is
the best
philosophy

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PHOTOGRAPHS TONY SHEFFIELD

JOHN DENG HAS AN OPTOMETRIST'S chair in his shed. He says it's the perfect seat in which to recline with a cup of coffee and get a perspective on the big issues of life. The chair is one of myriad eclectic paraphernalia stored in what is really a two-storey double garage that John uses as a workspace as well as a storage area. Many of the items that clutter the building from floor to rafters seem to be children's large plastic toys. John delights in talking about the seat. Truth to tell, he delights in talking about many things. His words tumble out in a passionate torrent, punctuated by frequent hearty laughs. And all the while, his lightly bearded face is a constantly changing kaleidoscope of expressions, among which broad smiles predominate, as though much about life is fun or funny, to be enjoyed to the fullest.

As I learn during a three hour chat with him in his shed, this impression of exuberance is more than skin deep. It comes from an appreciation that life can be pretty unfunny at times and that only through acknowledging the reality of human nature, accepting that humans can be evil as well as good, can one be free to be happy. It's a philosophical standpoint that underpins not just his life but also his work.



John Deng, formerly of Beijing, now settled in Goulburn, is an artist, sculptor, designer (of buildings and interiors), husband to an optometrist (hence the spare chair in the shed) and devoted father to two young daughters. Though bread-and-butter money comes from the occasional house design, currently he is achieving some success, in Australia as well as overseas, with a series of whimsical bronze sculptures of laughing Buddhas that manifest his philosophy. As he says, pointing to a photograph of one of the sculptures in a catalogue, "This Buddha is me".

It's a long way geographically, psychologically and philosophically from Goulburn to Beijing. It's a long way, too, from John Deng to Deng Zhong, his pre-Australian persona, and from Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution and later the horror of Tiananmen Square, to the unremarkable house in a back street of Australia's first inland city. Beijing was part of the life he led till his mid-20s, a life so different that it might as well have taken place on another planet.

The son of a middle-ranking officer in the People's Liberation Army, Deng Zhong was born in 1964 and grew up in a military compound, a relatively privileged child in what was supposedly an egalitarian society. By his own account, he was a loner interested more in intellectual pursuits than the warlike games of his peers. Even so, he was not immune to the persuasive effects of communist propaganda.

"When I was five my only ambition was to die gloriously



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for my Chairman Mao, brandishing my machine gun, liberating the miserable people of Taiwan," John says. "I wanted to make everybody equal in the world. We were filled with the spirit of equality, of love for all humanity."

Mostly an indifferent student (in performance as well as in attitude), Deng Zhong excelled in one subject: drawing. His mother fostered his talent during his primary school years by getting him private lessons, such that he caught the eye of his high-school teachers. As with many things, though, he puts a humorous twist on the tale of his artistic progress, attributing his inspiration to his first sight of a female nude in an art textbook.

"That opened my eyes. I just had to do this kind of drawing! Sometimes in life silly things lead to great things. The naked lady did a wonderful job for me."

She led, in the end, to Deng Zhong being accepted to study interior design at Beijing's Central Academy of Art and Design (now part of the prestigious Tsinghua University) and then, on graduating in 1987, to getting a job with the Beijing Architecture Institute, a government body employing some 2000 architects and designers.

The late 1980s was a time of political foment in China. The country was moving from strict communism to a capitalist version of it, and it was fitting that at the institute Deng Zhong should come face to face with such capitalist realities as cost analysis and budgeting.

"I loved interior design. Most people confuse it with interior decorating. It's interior architecture, an art.

"I believed great artists weren't concerned with money. Money was dirty. But large-scale design involved money, budgets and so on, and I found it so dirty. Surely artists weren't expected to stoop this low. That's how naive I was!"

Nevertheless, he allowed himself to retreat from idealism enough to take on private work on the side. Through this he made enough to pay for an airfare overseas. Although he had set his heart on going to the United States, friends in Australia were beckoning him here. All he knew about Australia was that its people wore Akubra hats and shared their country with millions of sheep.

While he was preparing to leave, student protests erupted that were eventually to lead to a government crackdown and the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 1989. Deng Zhong joined protest marches, but though he witnessed violence, he wasn't in the square at the critical time.

"I'm not a hero. I had nothing against the communist ideal. I was just disappointed with the government at the time and the way humans behaved. I said, 'China, I love you. You are my motherland. But why are you doing this to your children?'"

Arriving in Sydney on a student visa soon afterwards, Deng Zhong enrolled at an English language college. It was there that he underwent the name change that came to symbolise his break with the past.

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“Things had become so different in Beijing that I was stunned and cried all the time I was there,” John says. “Everyone talked about money. They’d look at me and say, ‘Nice jumper! How much?’”

JOHN DENG USES THESE FIBREGLASS BUDDHA SCULPTURES (SMALLER PHOTOGRAPHS) AS SAMPLES OF HIS WORK. ONCE A CLIENT HAS CHOSEN A PARTICULAR SCULPTURE, THE FINAL WORK IS CAST IN BRONZE (BOTTOM RIGHT) AND MAY EITHER BE PLAIN OR HAVE AN ENAMEL PAINT BAKED ONTO IT.

“My teacher suggested I choose an English name. A Cantonese lady recommended Richard, because it was close to rich, meaning lots of money. So I chose Richard, but when the teacher called out that name in class, I looked around, thinking, ‘Who is this Richard?’ So I decided to pick something sounding more like my real given name, Zhong*. It’s pronounced Chung, which is close to John. So I became John Deng.”

John Deng’s new life could not have been more different from the one he left behind. Gone was the privileged existence of an army officer’s son in a secure government job with perks. In its place was a struggle for survival. Dossing down in friends’ rooms around Sydney, even sleeping on the street, he took any job offered, whether it was cleaning toilets, washing mung beans, or working as a kitchenhand and later as a waiter in a Japanese restaurant.

As time went by he began to use his artistic talents to make a living too. He drew portraits in Darling Harbour (without much success) and sketched houses, selling the finished products to the houses’ owners – turning out more than 3000 drawings in a two-year period. In 1992 he held an exhibition of paintings executed in traditional Chinese style. Out of 30 paintings hung, 25 sold on the opening day. Finally, in the mid-90s, he ended up getting a job with Yoram Gross Film Studios as a background

designer working on an animated version of Blinky Bill.

By then he was thoroughly Australianised. He went around barefoot in a torn t-shirt and baggy shorts. It had not taken him long to realise that Australia was a place where he could be himself but also, more importantly, could enjoy the kind of solitude that was impossible to find in China.

Australians were invariably kind to him and willing to help; in return he wanted only to do the right thing by them.

“When my friends asked if I felt Chinese or Australian, I’d say China is my motherland. She’s like my mother. I love my mother, but I don’t live with her. I love Australia like I love my wife. I choose to live with my wife. China’s my mother, Australia’s my wife.”

In fact, by this time he also had a human wife. She was Czech-born Eva Krillova, the optometrist in his life. She had been working in a Newtown eye clinic that he visited one day for contact lenses. She gave him an eye test and things just went from there. Now she was dividing her working week between the clinic in Newtown and another in Goulburn.

When Eva’s work in Goulburn became full-time, the couple rented a house there. Despite this apparent commitment to shared domestic bliss, though, Eva and John were destined to spend long periods apart. From the Yoram Gross studio in