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Australia-China Friendship Society

Victorian Branch (Inc).ABN 39 746 574 225

Newsletter

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President's Report

This report comes after a busy period for the ACFS. Of particular note was the February 2026 Concert Featuring Shu Cheen Yu and the Lotus Wind Choir, with Sam Hartley as pianist. Held at St John's Anglican Church, Toorak, a programme with fourteen songs was performed. With several dignitaries also attending, the concert was followed by socialising. It must be mentioned that it was a good financial success for the Society which, as always, depends on the generosity of its friends and members.

One of the long-standing activities of the Australia-China Friendship Society as a national body has been organising trips from Australia to China. This year we were blessed with a trip to Guizhou and Sichuan with several members of the Victorian branch attending. A major article in this issue of our newsletter covers that journey in greater detail, but from the outset one must mention our appreciation of the national committee members who organised the trip, and to Friendship Societies in China who hosted us, arranged our internal travel, accommodation, and guides, and made very certain that we had the opportunity to experience the magnificent cuisine offered by these provinces.

Afterwards, members of the delegation went on their own way. Tower and I went to Wuxi to visit the Sunway TaihuLight system at the National Supercomputing Centre. This is an extraordinary system that held the world's #1 position for two years in succession, unprecedented at the time and an achievement that has never been repeated. That too, will be the subject for another article within the newsletter. Following Wuxi, your president then ventured to Shanghai where I met with members of the Shanghai People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, visiting the Shanghai Library East and the Shanghai Art and Design Academy. Hopefully, a connection between UNESCO -recognised cities in Victorian and Shanghai can come from this.

It is necessary to comment on the recent war initiated by the United States and Israel against Iran and the terrible loss of civilian life and infrastructure from this. Whilst some observers have noted that the war has provided a convenient distraction from US domestic issues, others also noted that, in addition to imposing compliance in the Middle East, the United States also engaged in the conflict with the hope of asserting power over China. China is the world's larger refiner of oil and at least 14 percent of that oil comes from Iran. However, things have not exactly gone to plan for the United States and Israel, and it is notable that Trump cancelled at the last minute what was going to be a mid-March meeting with President Xi of China.

Whilst the United States continues the war, China is making scoring a range of diplomatic successes. A zero-tariff agreement with 53 African countries was announced recently. This visit of European leaders has not gone unnoticed either, as China positions itself as a stable and reliable international partner. Further, the March 2026 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on research and development notes that China now surpasses the United States in scientific research spending. This is a position that the United States has dominated for the last eighty years. China's dominance in electric and autonomous vehicles, in robotics, in artificial intelligence, in civil and mechanical engineering.

Australia has a long-standing political and military alliance with the United States, back when the U.S. made serious contributions against fascism. Today, under an aggressive regime determined to enforce compliance from other states, there are certainly those who must be rethinking the value of such a commitment. Our role as a middle-power could certainly learn a great deal from the words of Canada's Prime Minister, Mark Carney, who at Davos in January emphasised the need for similar countries to work together to prevent wars of aggression, threats, and great power rivalry, in order to build a more cooperative that is focusing on social welfare. Australia should certainly be very attentive to those words and the outcomes that would result.

As a certain Chinese proverb says: "Peace replaces extreme evil" (否极泰来, Pǐ jí tài lái)

Lev Lafayette

Australia China Friendship Society (Victoria branch) President

Sichuan and Guizhou have undergone enormous changes for the better

In March, a group from Victoria, the Northern Territory, and Tasmania, visited Sichuan and Guizhou provinces in Southwest China. They are close to Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and India. The Australia China Friendship Society had been invited by its regional Chinese counterpart.

This account is far less about the many places we visited. References to them are few. The focus is on impressions of the enormous impact of the last decade of change on the lives of those who live and work there.

A good starting point is to understand that Sichuan, and especially Guizhou, had long been experienced among the poorest parts of China. Change has brought millions out of serious poverty. Visiting these regions and seeing it for yourself brings a deeper grasp on the reality than any second hand account. A lot of travelling by fast rail and by road gave a particularly good big picture view.

Eighty five percent of this part of China is mountainous. We experienced regionwide networks of tunnels through mountains, bridges high off the ground and sometimes crossing gorges and ravines. This is what first catches the eye and assaults the senses. These connect rail and roads, which are important, because they break down the isolation of communities. An extensive top-class internet network, and water availability, and energy to home and farm are just as important, playing a major role in the expansion of agricultural production. This and the rise of the entire regional economy has increased incomes across the board to the order of 300 percent over the last decade.

Add the incredible pace of home construction on a scale that ensure there is no housing crisis in city, town, or village. There were more than a few places where the residents have moved over to better housing and many of their old homes mostly stand empty. Here is a future opportunity for renovators.

Underdeveloped manufacturing has been transformed in city and country. The outskirts of the urban centres now have huge industrial zones. High tech is a big part of this. Most are Chinese brands. New industries are accompanied by a renaissance of traditional craft industries. For example, we visited two distilleries to learn about their rice spirits. Artisan shops and stalls stocked with a range of local crafts are everywhere.

Pandas are big in these parts. Being their native habitat, they are something of what Koalas are to Australia. We were lucky to visit the biggest Panda reserve and get fairly close to many of them. Most ignore the humans. But a few curious exceptions break the rule.

The rural scenery is spectacular. Massive pressure from the India plate and the Himalayas has pushed up what used to be a limestone bottom of the sea, into spectacular formations. There are forests and higher altitude mini mountains. Caves, high cliffs, ravines, and big rivers are commonplace.

Protection of nature is a high priority here so it is in the cities, where greening is abundant. Even in industrial estates. The air is clean because most vehicles are electric and industry mainly uses renewable energy. Waterways appeared to be clean.

Cultural life is rich. Traditional and new exist side by side. We saw that people are out enjoying life. The streets felt much safer than in many other countries. Footpaths were not littered with the homeless. There is the Sichuan style food that has gained fame around the world. Now there is even coffee.

Many within the growing population of foreigners working or visiting there, ask why their home countries can't manage to pull together and progress on a similar scale.

The big difference is planning the economic direction. Not just talking about it. Plans are converted into action. This provides a tremendous advantage for channelling investment towards building infrastructure and new industries. China's remarkable growth in recent decades would be impossible without this foundation.

Secondly, added flexibility to meet with ever changing conditions, to allow initiative, and build national unity, allows a positive relationship between the public and private sectors. This mix has proved to be successful.

Planning is in the context of economic development not being just for profit. Everything is conditioned in meeting social goals like fair distribution of income, ensuring affordable and adequate housing and extensive services need by the population. Including health and education. For example, Chengdu, the Capital of Sichuan, boasts 224 universities and polytechnics.

It's a no brainer that when a population is lifted in this way support for the changes is almost universal. But do the people we came across live in a democracy. The clear picture is that they believe they do. Its not unusual to be told that they have far more control over their lives and the future looks even better. They say that a consultative political system, based on shared aspirations, delivers far more than an adversarial one like ours.

We, I believe, we came away with the following gift. A deeper understanding about the enormous change we witnessed. A gift we can share here in Australia. China may not be perfect. Which country is? But its achievements cannot be denied. And our participation in countering the false narratives is a good way to build friendship between the peoples of both countries. One way we can do this is to encourage others to go and have a look for themselves.

Joe Montero



2026 ACFS (National) Trip to Guizhou and Sichuan Provinces

Luzhou: City of Liquour and Spice

The 2026 National ACFS trip consisted of visitors from Victoria, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory. Our first stop was at Guiyang, capital of Guizhou. A first evening meal together was at a local noodle bar where their servings were enormous and delicious, and the cost minimal. The store found itself short of coinage to pay Janet her change, so they absolutely insisted on providing a boiled egg instead! The following day, after a visit to a local traditional vinegar factory which included the history and manufacturing process, we took a fast train to Liuzhou for the China International Alcoholic Drinks Expo in Liuzhou, Sichuan. This city is famous for its beverages and even goes by the name “City of Liquor”, by which they primarily mean baijiu, a very strong rice, maize, or sorghum brandy. The Expo itself was enormous, spanning multiple pavilions and attracting several thousand people. Most of the stalls were for Chinese companies and drinks, but there was also a good number of French, Italian, and Spanish wines, along with an extensive range of Thai products as the guest country of honour. The conference opening was enormous, and the keynote speaker’s presentation hilarious, as he gave the impression that a “rational level of tipsy” was truly the sign of a “civilised society with enhanced emotion”.

That afternoon we visited two museums: the Luzhou Museum and Luzhou Laojiao National Treasure Cellars, which were also dedicated to baijiu production and trade. One provided a historical approach, noting that historians of technology (e.g., Needham) consider regulated fermentation with yeast to be one of China’s great inventions. An interesting aspect illustrated first-hand was how baijiu is partially produced in mounds of cellar mud, which enhances flavour. The second museum was more contemporary in style, providing a rather amazing collection of the grand variety of baijiu bottles which are often stylised for particular years, horoscope animals, life events, and sports. The highlight of this trip was the DIY production of a baijiu blend, combining relatively recent products of different strengths and three syringes of older brews.

Mention must be made of the Howard Johnson hotel where we stayed; it was modern, stylish, and with an incredible guest lunch on our arrival and a successive buffet feast three times a day after that. Sichuan province is, of course, famous for its chilli with a variety of colours and strengths, and for the powerful Sichuan pepper, which numbs the lips and tongue. Add to these liberal doses of garlic, ginger, star anise, wuxiang, fruit peels, spiced salt, and you’ll quickly find out why the region’s capital is a UNESCO City of Gastronomy. When combined with baijiu, it is clear that the people of this city, in particular, and of this province, in general, like their flavours to have a kick like the strongest mule. Whilst it was a brief visit to the city, one really got the sense that this indeed deserves the appellation of “city of liquor and spice”.

Guizhou: Beautiful Geography, Wondrous Projects

The next four days were spent in Guizhou, a south-western inland district of China. The physical geography is nothing short of stunning, with most of the area covered in lush woodlands over karst hills and mountains, which, even in spring, are often shrouded with cool mists underneath grey skies. One such area includes the Huangguoshu Scenic Area with its numerous waterfalls; the main one (at 100m wide and 78m high) includes a cave system behind the waterfall. This is also the location where, according to legend, the classic story “Journey to the West” begins, and the site has many monuments to this tale. What little flat land exists in Guizhou valleys is home to packed population centres and intensive farming. As always, the physical geography has a profound influence on social geography, with Guizhou being home to numerous ethnic minority groups, such as the Buyi, Miao, Dong and Yao, whose language and culture are not just recognised but celebrated and are prevalent in locations such as the Qingyan Ancient Town.

In more recent years, Guizhou has become home to some truly remarkable projects, which we also had the opportunity to visit. This includes the world's longest and highest bridge at Huajiang Canyon, which was completed last year. Over 2km in length and a deck height of 625m, the bridge has a walkway underneath with a magnificent view. Another project of note is FAST, the Five-Hundred-Metre Aperture Spherical Radio Telescope (FAST), the world's largest and most sensitive single-aperture spherical radio telescope and includes a well-designed Astronomical Experience Museum, which includes a theatre, planetarium, and a special exhibit on black holes. FAST is in a radio-quiet zone, which means no digital cameras, mobile phones, or even gate buzzers. The surrounding Tianyan Scenic Area more than makes up for this minor inconvenience, and one could easily spend at least a week here. Finally, Guizhou is also home to the first National Big Data Pilot Zone, which makes a great deal of sense given some of the scientific projects that are occurring nearby.



Although often overlooked by foreign tourists, in many ways, Guizhou represents a remarkable combination and harmonious balance between ancient and modern China. This is a place which, whilst clearly self-sufficient due to soil and rainfall, was less developed than the populous big trading regions of the eastern and southern coast. It is certainly a place that could cultivate a slower-paced and peaceful life, and unsurprisingly features heavily in classical Chinese artwork as well as being a home for the contemplative and ecologically-minded. New constructions, such as the projects just mentioned, and the extensive fast train networks with their tunnels and bridges abound, have all been introduced gently and alongside the natural environment.

Sichuan: Land of Abundance

After Guizhou, the next leg of the China journey has involved a return to Sichuan for several days. Nicknamed “the land of abundance” the province receives this appellation initially on account of fertile agricultural plains surrounded by mountains. This is still very important to the province, but these days

it is also due to the bustling commercial activity in the capital, Chengdu, and the industrial heartland of Dujiangyan. Like other Chinese cities these have a marvellous mix of old and new and because of the way such cities are designed (i.e., no suburban sprawl) they also provide numerous opportunities for nature to flourish. Visited examples, in order, of such a combination include the Wuhou Temple, dedicated to Prime Minister Zhuge Liang and Emperor Liu Bei, political leaders of the Kingdom of Shu in the Three Kingdoms Period some 1800 years ago; Zhuge's story is particularly impressive.

China is famous for pandas, and no province more so than Sichuan, which is almost overwhelming in panda promotion. One particular site is "Panda Valley", a research, breeding, and rewilding centre that is home to dozens of giant pandas and scores of red pandas. The location, as expected, is quite scenic, with its lush, cool environment providing a pleasant home for these impressive and gentle beasts. Nearby is Mount Qingcheng, one of the most sacred sites to religious Taoism, specifically Zhang Daoling's "Way of the Celestial masters". The mountain area is astoundingly beautiful, with many Taoist temples and shrines well integrated into the environment.

Nearby is a particularly grand example of ancient engineering Dujiangyan Irrigation System, built over 2,200 years ago and still in use today, a credit to the lead engineer, Li Bing, who managed to see this built without explosives. As the oldest and only surviving no-dam irrigation system in the world, it involved the building of an artificial island that redirected waters during the flood season and released them during the drier months. Since it was built, the Chengdu plain has been free from flooding, and the "water dragon" has been tamed. Unsurprisingly, it is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Sichuan is also home to numerous ethnic minorities, including the Qiang people who live in the forested mountains in western Sichuan, and have their own autonomous county, their own language, religion, and practise their culture, including colourful embroidery. After an interesting and lengthy bus trip, our group stayed at Shiyi mountain village, which included quite a greeting ceremony with local chanting, drumming, and firecrackers at our arrival, and in the evening, a bonfire and dance. It must also be noted that the village was reconstructed after the devastating Wenchuan earthquake. Finally, there was a visit to the Sanxingdui Museum, with its impressive collection of Bronze Age artefacts dating back over 3,500 years. It seems that Sichuan has been a "land of abundance" for many centuries.

Concluding Remarks

The trip to Guizhou and Sichuan by the ACFS showed us all a part of China that is perhaps less well-known compared to the southern and eastern cities, and gave us the opportunity to witness a marvellous collection of old and new, of people and the environment, of remarkable progress and respected traditions. We were treated wonderfully by our hosts in every location, and real credit must go to the Guizhou Provincial Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the Sichuan Provincial People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, and the city-based associations. In each and every stop of the tour we were provided exceptional cuisine, wonderful accommodation, and perfect assistance from our guides. One simply could not wish for a better experience and everyone on the journey has returned home with happy memories, friendships, and an even greater knowledge of China.



Supercomputing up close: A visit to Wuxi's Sunway TaihuLight

By Lev Lafayette April 14, 2026

The role of supercomputers is often overlooked when people think about progress in their daily lives. They seem so distant and carry such mystique that they are almost otherworldly. But their economic benefits, often indirect, have been calculated at a 44:1 return on investment through cost savings or innovations.

Whether through climate and weather modelling, materials science and engineering, the life and health sciences, and many other disciplines, supercomputers enable us to run massive simulations that can then be applied to real-world products.

The contemporary supercomputer has a relatively simple, but clever architecture. Server-grade commodity system units (involves the use of large numbers of already-available computing components for parallel computing) are racked and cabled together with a high-speed interconnect between the individual units. A software layer unites the interconnected individual servers so that the entire system can run as a single unit. This provides massive capacity, the ability to run many tasks simultaneously, and the capability to run very big tasks.

The most famous supercomputer in China, the Sunway TaihuLight, is hosted at the National Supercomputing Centre in Wuxi. This system came to global attention in June 2016, when it topped the top 500 list of the world's most powerful supercomputers (measured in total processing speed), far surpassing the second system (also Chinese, the Tianhe-2A), let alone the third (Titan, from the United States).

Not only that, Sunway TaihuLight held the top position for an unprecedented and never-repeated two years in succession. Almost 10 years later, Sunway TaihuLight has remained not only a top 500 supercomputer but also in the top 25 systems (placed No 24 in November 2025) without any change to the original hardware configuration.

I have been involved in supercomputing in Australia for almost 20 years, originally at the Victorian Partnership for Advanced Computing and then at the University of Melbourne. In that time, I have worked on several systems that have also been in the Top 500, including Spartan, the general-purpose system at the University of Melbourne, whose innovative cloud-HPC architecture caught some attention at the time, just as Sunway was taking the global lead.

During these years, I have literally taught thousands of researchers from around 20 Australian universities and research agencies how supercomputers work, how they are useful for their research, and how to use them.



Lev Lafayette stands by the Sunway TaihuLight at the National Supercomputing Centre in Wuxi.

[Photo provided to wuxi.gov.cn]

I consider myself very fortunate to have received an invitation to visit the National Supercomputing Centre in Wuxi and see Sunway TaihuLight for myself at the end of March. With the deputy director and other staff acting as friendly and informative hosts, I was provided both a tour of the facilities as well as receiving answers concerning the activities and architecture of the system.

Proving the effectiveness of a scalable system, Sunway TaihuLight has dozens of applications that could, in theory, use the entire system at once and early scaling examples included atmospheric and oceanic simulations using millions of cores (an individual processing unit within a Central Processing Unit (CPU) that reads and executes program instruction).

One of the marvellous things about the Sunway TaihuLight is how much of the architecture is “home-grown”. Using a Chinese-designed SW26010 64-bit RISC processor, each chip contains an impressive 260 cores, arranged as four clusters of 64 Compute-Processing Elements (CPEs) in an eight-by-eight array. These CPEs support SIMD instructions, making the chip (at a very high level) seem like a blend of a traditional CPU and a GPU architecture.

Each node has 260 cores, and there are “supernodes” of 256 nodes; each cabinet holds four supernodes. There are 40 cabinets in total, providing over 10 million cores. Sunway has its own interconnect, with a five-level integrated hierarchy, a custom-built Sunway Raise OS, based on Linux, and a customized version of OpenACC.

The Sunway TaihuLight will be remembered alongside other systems that are “giants” in history for their performance, architecture, and lasting impact, and contributions to science, such as ENIAC, UNIVAC, CDC-6600, Cray-1, Beowulf, and RoadRunner. All the engineers and administrators who have built, operated, and maintained this system deserve enormous respect for their contributions.

And to add a bit of nature to this story, my visit to Wuxi also fell during the city’s Cherry Blossom Festival, where the Taihu Lake and its scenic parklands were a place of human enjoyment and natural beauty. I am very happy to visit Wuxi again and honoured to visit the city’s supercomputing centre.



Modern Chinese Culture

The ACFS-run tour to China was, without a doubt, a treat for anyone interested in Chinese culture, history and society. But it was also an incredible experience for an avid consumer of Chinese pop culture, applying a pop culture lens, tracking current Weibo trends, following the latest C-drama obsession as it unfolded, observing the latest product craze and taking the pulse of contemporary society.

Arriving in China at the tail end of the Chinese New Year’s festivities, with spring couplets and

decorations still in place, I was especially excited to witness two trends that had been dominating Weibo in the weeks prior.

The 2026 CCTV (CMG) Spring Festival Gala once again stunned audiences at home and abroad with its showcase of advancements in humanoid robotics. Robots from several Chinese startups performed alongside humans - dancing, executing wu shu movements and acrobatics, with noticeably improved synchronisation and motion control compared to previous years. Their martial arts routines, complete with swords and sticks, took everyone's breath away.

While the Gala has showcased China's advances in robotics and AI for a few years now, there was clear progression this year, and it is no surprise that embodied multimodal large models that were on display are already available for purchase online and include models for domestic use, sales assistance and factory production.

To further promote these robots, one company involved in the showcase, Galbot, has set up kiosks in China's major cities, featuring a very talkative robot wearing a Chinese New Year hat and scarf while serving bottled drinks. We encountered two such stalls, one in Guiyang and one in Chengdu. While curious onlookers gathered, they seemed reluctant to try it themselves, so I volunteered. After selecting a drink on the touchscreen and tapping my Alipay, the robot glided to a shelf, retrieved a bottle of tea and deposited it at the counter in front of me, all while chatting incessantly. AI automation is here.

Another trend that I was really looking forward to seeing with my own eyes was the viral plush mascot of the Year of the Horse, the affectionately named "crying horse" or kū kū mǎ (哭哭马). This red plush horse, with its downturned mouth, became a sensation on Chinese social media ahead of the Spring Festival. Originally designed as a cheerful New Year decoration, a manufacturing error (or was it?) turned its smile into a frown. According to the shop in Yiwu, where the sad horse first appeared, "a worker sewed the mouth on upside down by accident".

But soon enough the image of the horse made it online and netizens embraced it as a symbol of overworked and stressed employees. Demand for the frowning horse surged. A happy mistake or an intentional act of rebellion, kū kū mǎ (crying horse) captured the mood of many young workers facing job insecurity and economic pressure, echoing recent trends such as 'naked quitting' (裸辞), 'lying flat' (躺平) and the self-deprecating term used by workers, "cattle and horses" (牛马), constantly labouring and easily replaceable. And with the Chinese New Year just passed, it wasn't long before I found a shop in Qingyan selling the adorable toy.

In Chengdu, there are two images you cannot escape. The first is the panda – appearing everywhere



from statues climbing buildings, 3D images nosing curiously from every corner display, soft toys in every imaginable form, to the city's famous research and breeding centres.

The second is Ne Zha, the rebellious child-deity and one of the most popular characters in Chinese mythology. From the 1979 movie to early 2000s animated series, Ne Zha has had many incarnations in popular culture. But never did he gain such widespread, global popularity as with last year's record breaking release of animated movie Ne Zha 2 that went on to claim the titles of the highest-grossing film in Chinese cinematic history, the highest-grossing animated film of all time worldwide and the fourth highest-grossing film of all time worldwide.

With Ne Zha's mythological origins open to interpretation, several cities and regions, including Tianjin, Henan and Anhui, have rushed to proclaim themselves the birthplace of Ne Zha to boost tourism. But no one has staked a bigger claim than Sichuan Province, with over 20 sites, such as Ne Zha Palace on Cuiping Mountain, Jinguang Cave on Qianyuan Mountain, Nanguang Town and Tianchi Park's Resurrection Pavilion, directly related to the myth.

The film itself is closely tied to Sichuan. Produced by Chengdu Coco Cartoon Studio and co-funded by Sichuan Province, it is regarded as "Chengdu-made" and statues, billboards, tourist knick-knacks and books featuring Ne Zha and his counterpart, dragon prince Ao Bing, can be found everywhere. In the film, Master Taiyi speaks in Sichuan dialect and the comedic duo of the film, the two green boundary guardian beasts, are based on regional Sanxingdui artefacts. Seeing these real artefacts - bronze heads and gold masks of the ancient Shu civilisation, dating back over 3,000 years - at the Sanxingdui Museum in Deyang City was definitely one of the highlights of the tour.

We were also fortunate to visit another location crucial to the astronomical success of Ne Zha 2 - the Gui'an Supercomputing Center of the National Big Data (Guizhou) Comprehensive Pilot Zone in the neighbouring Guizhou Province. More than 40% of the special effects in Ne Zha 2 were rendered using computing power generated in Guizhou - the immense volume of data required for a 3D animated film requires a massive render farm with thousands of computers and Gui'an Supercomputing Center was up to the task, signalling a real breakthrough in yet another industry we can expect bigger and better things from.

Guizhou itself is undergoing a transformation. Once considered relatively underdeveloped due to its mountainous terrain, too remote and hard to access to compete with other parts of China, the province has seen a massive infrastructure upgrade, with tunnels, bridges and high-speed railway turning days of commute into mere hours, and has repositioned itself as a major hub for big data and computing. Major companies, including China's telecom giants as well as firms like Huawei and Tencent, have established data centres in the region particularly suitable because of its cooler climate and ample power resources. And from data storage the focus is now shifting toward artificial intelligence and intelligent computing.

One of the jewels in the crown of Guizhou's development is undoubtedly the Five Hundred Meter Aperture Spherical Telescope, FAST, the largest single-dish radio telescope in the world, built within a natural karst depression deep in the mountains of Pingtang. Among other missions, FAST is scanning the universe for signals, including possible messages from extra-terrestrial civilisations. It was impossible to stand on the platform above the massive, 500-metre-wide dish and not be transported to the world of globally acclaimed Liu Cixin's Three-Body Problem novel (三体). While FAST is not the location of the fictional telescope used to establish contact that puts humanity on a collision course with the Trisolaran civilisation, if there was such a contact established in the future, it is likely FAST would be the at the centre of it.

Guizhou province kept on surprising, from the largest single dish telescope in the world to the highest suspension bridge in the world, Huajiang Canyon Bridge (花江峡谷大桥), sitting 625 metres above the

canyon floor. While the province may not yet top most travel itineraries, it quickly became obvious that Guizhou has always held a notable place in China's cultural and economic landscape. Kweichow Moutai, the most famous Chinese liquor, is in the modern pinyin spelling actually Guizhou Moutai (贵州茅). And another household name around the world originated in Guizhou - the famous chilli sauce, Lao Gan Ma (老干妈).

An unexpected emotional moment hit hard during our visit to Shiyi Qiang Village (石椅羌寨) in Beichuan, Sichuan. Hosted by members of the Qiang ethnic minority, we experienced a traditional welcome ceremony, grass weaving and dancing around a bonfire.

We stayed overnight in a beautifully built accommodation with a breathtaking view of the mountains surrounding the city of Beichuan. Yet standing on the balcony overlooking the valley, it was impossible not to recall 12 May 2008 when the devastating Wenchuan earthquake tore through Beichuan and Wenchuan Counties, destroying not only homes but mountains, leaving more than 87,000 dead and missing, another 375,000 injured and 5 million homeless in its wake.

What followed was one of the largest state-led recovery operations in Chinese history. Despite some criticism of dubious construction practices that may have contributed to such a huge death toll, the post-earthquake reconstruction became a symbol of national unity and solidarity, with Qiang cultural practices registered as intangible cultural heritage and reconstructed Qiang villages such as Shiyi transformed into heritage tourism destinations.

Depicted in several films and documentaries, the fateful day was also the theme of one of the most successful Chinese animation series, Link Click (时光代理人), incorporating real-life imagery of news reporters choking back tears and the mother hugging her child under the rubble. The animation, seen as a serious answer to Japanese anime, was praised extensively for its faithful depiction of the earthquake, bringing the significance and emotion of the day to younger generations and serving as a dignified tribute to the victims.

Another notable trend that is obvious everywhere in China, but perhaps especially in Chengdu, is the continued rise of anime, comic and gaming culture, with a special nod to the danmei (耽美) genre. It is no secret that the recent rise in popularity of Chinese dramas and novels in the West is in no small part due to this genre focusing on romantic relationships between male characters. But while discussions in the West often focus on censorship of same-sex romance, they tend to overlook that the genre is insanely popular and extremely visible in China.

Major retail centres, stores such as 天府红 in Chengdu, BOM 嘻番里 in Beijing and 次元结界 in Chongqing, feature extensive merchandise, pop-up events and themed stores dedicated to manhua and donghua characters, the vast majority from danmei works. Bookstores prominently display vast danmei literature and major retail chains such as Miniso and Green Party frequently collaborate with these franchises. Late last year, one of the most popular danmei couples was plastered on coffee cups across China decked in red wedding attire, in a promotional tie-in with Luckin Coffee, the biggest coffee chain in China.

While there is no denying that LGBTQIA+ rights and representation in China remain complex and evolving, the reality on the ground is that China is a lot more open and celebratory of same-sex relationships than the Western discourse would have us believe.

Finally, throughout our trip, another cultural phenomenon quietly unfolded in the background - the release of Pursuit of Jade, one of the most popular and record-breaking C-dramas with a massive global impact. With daily episodes airing, massive billboards featuring the show's couple, daily trending topics and reports of the cast of the drama being pursued relentlessly by fans inside airplanes and at train stations, the show became a constant presence. It even rekindled the national debate about what



constitutes masculinity, with debates whether an idol wearing make-up and looking unbearably pretty (dubbed “foundation general”) could adequately represent a real-life Chinese martial hero dominating the online space.

Recent viral TikTok trend of “Chinamaxxing”, with participants claiming to be in a “very Chinese time of their life” may seem dubious and hypocritical, especially in the light of all the hate received by Chinese people for decades and especially since COVID, but the upside is that China’s soft power is finally finding purchase. Chinese TV dramas, animation and games have broken into the global mainstream, and at least Gen Z no longer sees China as the source of everything bad - buying Chinese electric cars, putting sci-fi city of Chongqing and the ‘gay capital’ of China, Chengdu, on the travel itinerary signals that the younger generation, for one, is beginning to see through the Western propaganda and is willing to give China a real chance.

Suzana Dewa

Chinese New Year Concert

Hamer Hall, Saturday, February 21, 2026

If you have been around orchestras and classical concerts for a while, the biggest difference between a grand success and an abject failure is the energy of the conductor. It is not a question of physicality, but the energy or *qi* they bring to the orchestra under their control.

Youthful conductor **Li Biao**, who has visited Australia before, brought such vitality to the Chinese New Year concert celebration at Hamer Hall. His personal affability belies his energy, control and mastery of those under his baton. His blending of east and west orchestral techniques shows a true understanding of music regardless of origin. The difficult piece “*Torch Festival*” from a Yunan tone poem, covered emotional as well as tonal ground, moving from quiet passages to excitement with deft guidance and knowledge of the score, resulting in an emotionally satisfying result. It is also surprising that he was only given several days notice of this concert, when the original conductor fell ill, unable to travel. To familiarise himself with score and orchestra within days is an amazing feat in itself.

Mindy Meng Wang is a famous *guzheng* artist. Playing the well known “*Butterfly Lovers*”, she moved the audience with her virtuosa performance. While it would be relatively easy to play a celebrated piece, to reach the hearts of those who know it well is a difficult feat which she performed with ease and consummate skill. Her lightning touch and unfailing accuracy were superb, and, as with any master musician, appeared totally effortless and engrossing.

The cello is a demanding instrument and **Zlatomir Fung** proved authority over it and the music of Saint Saëns. Moving between speed and sonorous tones, he produced a sound picture flowing easily despite the difficulty of the music which is often quirky, a trademark of the composer. Technique apart, it was obvious he greatly enjoyed the piece he was playing, and transferred the energy to the audience.

Then came the second half. Little needs to be said about **Li Biao's** rendition of Beethoven's 7th, apart from the fact it was no less than one would expect from one who has dedicated their life totally to music in its essence and form rather than origin. The work carried the vigour, grandeur and boldness associated with the major works of Beethoven, demonstrated perfectly with the maestro's control.



There is a joke which says one must be a true lover of classical music when hearing the William Tell Overture and not thinking of the Lone Ranger! As a tribute to the *Year of The Horse*, it was to much amusement and enjoyment of the audience that this piece was played, complete with hoofbeats. There was a roar of appreciation and several standing ovations.

Travel safely and gallop well in this Year of the Horse, with thanks to **H.E. the Consul-General Mr Feng Xinwen** for his continued support of the furtherance of friendship, respect and understanding between the peoples of China and Australia!

Anthony Leong

Confucius Institutes in Victoria (CI)

Ian Parker

Until recently a number of ACFS Vic members were studying Chinese (Mandarin) at the Confucius Institute Melbourne University). Then in late 2024 came the announcement over 'loudspeaker' that UOM would not be renewing the contract with Nanjing and lessons would cease and by continuing to be offered by Asialink at UOM. Albeit with reduce class time and a significant increase in fees. The scuttlebutt was that pressure was brought to bear on UOM to cut ties with China. So, I thought this may warrant some investigation.



What is a Confucius Institute (CI) (孔子学院 kǒngzǐ xuéyuàn)? Confucius was a Chinese Philosopher (551–479 BC). Confucius Institutes are public educational and cultural programs that focus on China. The aim of which is to promote Chinese language and culture, support local Chinese teaching internationally, and facilitate cultural exchanges. Beginning in 2004 under the management of the Chinese International Education Foundation. The first opened in Soel, South Korea in 2004 (no longer active) followed by the University of Maryland in the USA. (Wikipedia). According to Chinese International Education Foundation (CLREF) by the end of 2023 498 Confucius Institutes in 160 countries had been establish. Resulting in 773 classrooms. Funding was provided by the brand to educational institutions to help run language and cultural

classes on a 5-year program. Confucius Institute is a protected brand name and permission to use the brand is granted to all Confucius Institutes around the world. UOM establish it's CI in 2007 in conjunction with Nanjing University. Very quickly 6 Australian Universities had established Confucius Institutes, including University of Melbourne, RMIT University, Latrobe University and Victoria University. According to an article in the Conversation by Dr Jeffrey Gil, senior Lecturer in ESOL/ TESOL, College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Flinders University, schools that host a Confucius Classroom receive up-front funding of \$10,000, as well as books and other materials to the value of about \$10,000 each year (his article is lengthy, but well worth a read). I became aware of CI in Melbourne while studying at Nanjing University.

Then came the politians and deriders accusing the Chinese Government of using the institutes as a conduit to influence peoples of foreign countries, with the assistance of the media, you know the ones, who honestly and accurately report information about the world around us. People began to fear any and everything associated with China. I studied at UOM CI for more than 9 years and never once was the mention of anything else but language and culture. Further UOM CI ran many functions over the years teaching us more about Chinese Culture. I also attended some classes at Victoria University's Confucius Institute and the same, language and culture only. The ABC's Dr YiYing Li, noted in an "Article in April 2025, "What are Confucius Institutes and why are some universities cutting ties?" The federal government began ramping up scrutiny of Confucius Institutes in 2023, eventually saying that it would not allow any more of them to open their doors in Australia, amid fears over their links to the Chinese Government. Li also noted "Academics warned policymakers may make questionable decisions regarding Confucius Institutions because of a lack of knowledge about China". In some cases, required Universities to register Confucius Institutes on the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme. Can't help thinking this was the catalyst for so many Confucius Institutes not renewing contracts with their Chinese partners. Not once in 9 years was any attempt made to exert CCP doctrine on students at UMO CI.

Dr Gil said "opportunities for engagement with Chinese culture outside formal education would be reduced, as Confucius Institutes generally ran cultural activities and events that were open to the public".....hey! isn't that what we (ACFS) do? Here is an opportunity to fill a gap in the marketplace if we can find a way to tap into all former CI students.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucius_Institute#History, viewed 25/4/26

<https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-are-confucius-institutes-and-do-they-teach-chinese-propaganda-114274>, viewed 25/4/26

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-02/what-we-know-about-confucius-institutes-explainer/105121890>, viewed 25/4/26

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Promote mutual understanding through friendly exchanges between the people of China and Australia. Strengthening ties with travel, the exchange of ideas, information and trade between the two countries.

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