

## The Australian Journey part I: text

### Introduction

It is a great pleasure to present the introduction to the 26<sup>th</sup> AABC Conference, here in the national capital. If you haven't gathered it yet, Canberra is celebrating its first 'centenary' – a major marker in anyone's journey. This place and this year is steeped in history, but it also stands poised at a moment when great change and prospects for the future are beckoning, including in the world of bonsai in Australia. This year marks the first year that Australia's National Bonsai and Penjing Collection is operating from its permanent home in the new and amazing National Arboretum Canberra! I know many of you have already visited both the Arboretum and the bonsai collection. I hope that those who haven't will be able to do so before they leave Canberra at the end of this wonderful Conference. It is a significant expression of where we are in the Australian Journey.

A wonderful friend and colleague of mine, Mr Double Gee, suggested to me that

“The Australian Journey is ‘mainly to Flower Power and Bunnings. Or maybe just to work, and home, repeat... repeat... repeat....’

I'm sure you are all familiar with that 'Journey', but I shall take you on another journey through time as seen through the eyes of a bonsaiist. I will sketch something of the known origins of bonsai some millennia ago. Then give some glimpses of what it might have meant to people in those early days. I'll indicate what they looked like, how they have changed, who had them, and why they wanted them. We'll look at how they '*came out the orient*' into the Western consciousness and then into one of the world's widespread artistic phenomena.

We'll take a glimpse of how and when bonsai reached Australian shores and when it finally took off as a significant pastime.

I should begin by defining a few terms I will use frequently.

**Firstly, *bonsai*.** I will use *bonsai* in the modern, widespread, international sense of 'a miniature tree with its container'. This will be largely without reference to any particular place of origin nor with any implied reference to a style or other artistic or aesthetic qualities.

***Penjing*:** I will use this specifically to refer to bonsai that have some particular reference to the Chinese origins or aesthetics of the practice of making and appreciating miniature trees in containers.

The Australian Journey

## 8<sup>th</sup> Century

### Where did it begin?

We take it for granted today, that the practice of growing small trees, or landscapes in pots, began with penjing in China.

We also take it for granted that the earliest positive record comes from a tomb painting of Li Xian, formerly Crown Prince Zhanghuai (654-684 CE) in the Tang Dynasty, which was built in 706 CE. The painting shows a procession of tributes for the Prince.

Amongst these precious items there are unusually shaped stones, as well as miniature trees in pots.

When I look at the offering to Prince Zhanghuai, I don't see beauty in the penjing. But I know that that offering must have been prized enough to be allowed to be presented. I can only shudder to think what would have happened if the object had been seen as of low quality and thus an insult.... I know that the artistic productions of the Tang Dynasty were technically very high, even as viewed today. But my question is, if money were not your concern, would you have

bought this for the Prince? If not, why not? What has happened in the intervening 1300 years of the Australian Journey? How has 'bonsai appreciation changed?

Who were the people who kept bonsai? Did they create them themselves, or did they arrange for others to do so and then purchased the ones they liked? We don't know the answers to these questions. But we can look at some parallel expressions of art and the cultural context of the time. They might at least give us a basis for imagining possibilities.

One of the easier possible sources of information could be the lives of the literati – the bunjin.

### **The Literati**

We in bonsai frequently speak of 'literati', and 'bunjin'. Usually we mean a particular style of tree, but in reality, the bunjin were living human beings. As their group name suggests, they were educated people, almost assuredly men, given the social structures of the times.

Much has been written about the literati and the views expressed are diverse. We can say that they were the educated class of court officials who really came to the fore during the 10-12 centuries CE in China, although they originated many centuries before that. They were also emulated in Japan through to at least the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries with for example the work of Ike Taiga who lived during the Edo era.

In China, these men were characterised by being highly educated in calligraphy, poetry, practiced painting, mostly as amateurs, but also where steeped in history and government. They usually would have passed the entrance examinations to become what some have called the 'Presented Scholars'.

In terms of art, what distinguished the literati was that they were considered *amateur* artists, in comparison with the *academic* or

*professional* artists. The latter were often technically superior, were paid for their art on which they depended for a living and were generally less well educated. On the other hand, the literati were appreciated for their freedom of expression. For them, their art was an expression of their individual selves and their ethical personality (R. Eno, Indiana Uni, 2008). It is that freedom of self expression that was most valued in their own lifetimes and continued through the centuries right to today.

It appears to be true that some of these officials were banished to places distant from the imperial court because of a range of political events: unwelcome or bad advice, change of political allegiances, fall of one emperor and rise of another etc. Those who were not executed but banished, often to southern China, often, though not always had wealth, were educated and well practiced in good governance and requirements of proper living under Confucian teachings. They were by definition schooled in the four major skills of calligraphy, poetry, the game of 'go' – a game of logic, and landscape painting. Penjing is not one of these core competencies. All that we know about penjing and later bonsai, is that they were occasionally seen as significant enough to include in paintings and sometimes referred to in poetry. Ours is an ancient art, but nonetheless may be viewed as marginal to mainstream art or in today's language, part of the 'fringe'.

It is fascinating to read what some of these bunjin wrote in their banishments or exiles. One good example is in the book *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China*, translated with annotations and an introduction by Richard E. Strassberg. What we can also gather, is that these works of art, both in China and Japan, were created to capture meaning and spirit, not just mere physical appearances. But like much great art, it is often copied until all creativity is washed away and becomes dull through repetition.

The threads of the Australian Journey move onwards.

## 9<sup>th</sup> Century

### Japan

Robert Baran reports that the first tray landscapes were brought from China to Japan at least twelve hundred years ago, as religious souvenirs. Bonsai practice in Japan has been heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism, which imparted an aesthetic of austerity and simplicity.

It's probably worth spending a little time exploring something of why penjing would be brought all the way from China to Japan as religious souvenirs. From various paintings and wood-block prints, it is clear that there was little divergence in aesthetic appreciation of the beautiful between China and Japan over a long number of centuries. The bonsai were the focus of meditation and appreciation of life and how the human spirit related to the larger world of nature.

### **The influences of culture and spirituality**

Penjing, and later bonsai, were each one created within an active culture of their time. Back in the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE) both Daoist and Confucianist philosophies were active. Also Buddhism had spread widely. Daoism had a focus on individual expression and a certain irreverence towards authority, whereas Confucianism was strongly about order, hierarchy and rules. Buddhism and Daoism both had some commonality in their focus on the importance of the present moment. These ideas, together with the presence of strong central governments that valued for the most part, the roles of philosophers and artists, created tensions between conformist and reactionary thinking. Intrinsic to Chinese and Japanese life is the concept of yin and yang. It pervades much of life and most of art. This tension between order and disorder in belief systems fits comfortably within this cosmic duality.

So we see the swelling and ebbing artistic styles from the exciting new styles introduced by irrepressible artistic explorers, followed by

much repetition and eventual ossification brought on by overuse and an over focus on craft at the expense of individual expression.

We might reflect for a moment on some of the central ideas in Zen art as presented by Hoseki Shinichi Hisamatsu in *Zen and the Fine Arts (1971)*. He notes that an *analytic separation* of these properties would not be in accordance with the Zen spirit and that they should rather be regarded as an inseparable whole.

- **Asymmetry:** For a Buddhist a perfect form is impossible. So it shouldn't be striven for in the first place.
- **Simplicity,** plainness and avoidance of complexity: A bonsai should not contain more than necessary.
- **Austere sublimity:** Removing all external splendour is supposed to lead into the heart of the message. The weathered branches of an old pine, lanky and emaciated by storm and snow, show this sublimity. [I find this particularly hard to get my mind around. I understand it, but to bring myself to force my need to demonstrate austere sublimity by emaciating an otherwise healthy living being, is a step too far for me. By this action, how much have I broken the mould of 'Zen' or is there another way?]
- **Naturalness:** This is a concept that needs interpretation. What is meant is not a pine which might occur as well in nature, but a pine that shows the essence of a pine, the prototypical pine. It should not look artificial or even artistic, but *effortless and informal*, as if it always had been that way and could not be different, as if it hadn't been styled by man.
- **Subtle profoundness:** The work of art should express more than the shown subject. The pine is not only a pine. It can symbolize dignity, perseverance, the season of winter, closeness to death or virility. It is desirable to have a richness of implications, associations, deepness of thought, innuendos that leave room for interpretation, that also have some vagueness. The tree should not be easy to see through. Its

essence might be hidden first and only reveal itself step by step.

- **Freedom from attachments** to mundane things, habits, conventions customs or rules: Zen does not accept constraints of thinking or acting. The transgression of conventional ways of thinking is an essential feature of Zen. A pine that obviously has been designed according to the classical rules of a formal upright tree doesn't satisfy the requirements of the Zen aesthetic. This doesn't mean that the rules wouldn't have any value though. They might be useful for a beginner. But if it enhances the Zen character of a bonsai, the rules should be broken. Rules should enable, not restrict.

For us, we may have a sense that Zen is something we should at least learn about, and maybe even let come into our bonsai lives a little. Whether we can subscribe to accepting the 'whole' may be a step too large or maybe just what we've been waiting for.

Wherever you stand with respect to these values, you will almost certainly note that many of them infuse your thinking of bonsai as it is practiced today. It is certainly part of the bonsai journey, including the Australian Journey.

## Modern Historical

So how did bonsai move into the Western Culture?

### 17<sup>th</sup> century

Robert Baran reports on the first record of bonsai in printed form in the West:

***Vocabulario de lingua de japam*** published by the Jesuit mission press in Nagasaki (1603-1604), originally in Portuguese:

f.25 defines *Bonção* (*bonsan*) as "a stone or rough piece of wood" which serves as the base of a miniature landscape made with "green mosses, & a tiny tree planted there, &c." Or (by another translation) '...a Japanese-style arrangement of dwarf trees, stone, and green moss to represent a rock in water.'

Robert Baran's work also shows that from 1604:

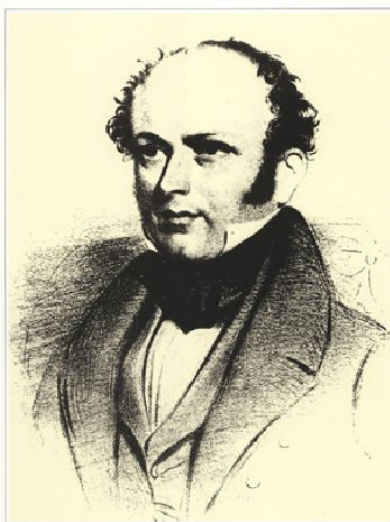
' , there was a description in Spanish of how Chinese immigrants in the tropical islands of the Philippines were growing small ficus trees onto hand-sized pieces of coral.

However, the earliest-known English observation of dwarf potted trees (root-over-rock in a pan) in China/Macau was recorded in 1637. Subsequent reports during the next century also from Japan were root-over-rock specimens. Dozens of travelers included some mention of dwarf trees in their accounts from Japan or China.'

By about 1800, penjing were being sold into Europe from Canton (Baron: *Gothaer Penjing Album*).

### 19<sup>th</sup> century

In the early 19th century, Sir John Francis Davis, second governor and commander-in-chief of the colony of Hong Kong wrote in a book *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and its Inhabitants* (1836) about 'some other curiosities of Chinese gardens are less natural, as their flower-pots containing stunted stems with full-grown fruit....' He described the process of air-layering used to produce small trees in pots, laden with flowers then fruit and offered for sale.



(from notes by Robert Baran).



By the 1860s, the famous Veitch horticultural family from England sent John Gould to collect from Japan. Amongst his reports he describes Japanese gardens:

*...Every house it seemed had a garden, however small, like a miniature imitation of a wilderness, with dwarfed trees, rockwork, a mini-lake and lawn. Note that the description is in a most positive tone.*

In the same time-frame, we have Sir William Hooker, Director of Kew Gardens, London, writing about materials sent to Kew by John Gould:

*...that he was particularly interested in 'some curious dwarfed things' found in the packages sent to Osborne. One was a Thujopsis dolabrata and also a podocarpus, 'the whole tree not a foot and a half high, quite covered with innumerable little crooked branches'. These dwarf trees or bonsai soon became quite a novelty, much sought after and very expensive. John Gould found it 'quite astonishing to see that amount of industry and perseverance which the Japanese must have devoted to the production of these ancient, miniature firs and pines'.*

Hideo Marushima, in the International Scholars Symposium of 2002, reported that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a major book was published in Japan by Tadanori Mizuno called *Simoku-kin-yoshu* (a book of plant collections). Of great importance to bonsai form is the section dealing with bonsai.

He writes: “The classic pine form of bonsai (*Kofu-tsukuri-matsu*) is discussed and illustrated in the book. Similar ‘regulated-type bonsai’ were found in the Konan region of China, but no records linking the two are currently known. He later goes on to write that:

(P 16. )The concept of *art* in bonsai appreciation in Japan, dates from the Meiji era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when western concepts of art became more important than the study of Chinese ideas. By this

he seems to mean that the idea of beauty began to supplant the idea of 'meaning'.

Hideo also tells us that the word 'bonsai', though dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when it just meant a plant in a pot, came to mean a styled plant in a pot during the Edo period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Interestingly, Thomas Elias writes that when Japanese bonsai sellers were sending trees to the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they did not use the word bonsai. Rather they used 'dwarfed' 'trained' or 'naninised trees', a Latinised form meaning small trees.

## Out of Japan

There are probably two major periods when bonsai culture moved out of Japan. The first was in the late 19th century, with the restoration of the Meiji and the opening up of Japan to the West. Japan desired to display its trading wares which included showcasing certain aspects of its culture. The second was in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century after the second world war.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, amongst the things that Japan chose to display and sell to the west at International Expositions, were bonsai. It appears that the Chaba noki (or *Chamaecyparis kinoki*) had fallen out of artistic favour amongst Japanese bonsaist and significant numbers of specimens of these trees were sold into the USA, England, France and elsewhere in Europe. Even trees centuries old were shipped and sold. What is breathtaking to us today is that knowledge of how to care for these trees was inadequate and it appears that all the hundreds of trees that survived the long ship journey, and eventually even the shorter rail journey, died in the following few years of new ownership.

The reception of this new art form was mixed. It should be seen in the wider context of a strong interest in things 'oriental', which

included many different art objects (prints, furniture, fans, paintings), including bonsai. Also, there were certain cultural antagonisms, especially between the British and the Chinese, with colonial impositions and finger pointing at the 'other'.

So we see bonsai being favourably received in France, but not at all appreciated by at least certain elements of the British society. But even in the latter, the reception appears to have been mixed. Yes, there are published articles that indicate that the bonsai aesthetic was simply not understood, and the small trees were seen only in terms of deformities and revulsion. However, that was not uniform. For example, The good sales that the Veitchs had for their imports attests to some people finding them desirable to own.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The Twentieth Century started clearly, but slowly with respect to bonsai in Australia. Clearly some people were fully aware of both bonsai and penjing by this time. However, the number practicing, or owning bonsai were small and public exhibitions rare and limited. One of the earliest records has been found by Lindsay Farr. An article in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*, from 1903 reports on a garden party held by Lady McEacharn:

At Goathland is a fine collection of Japanese art works. The big bronze Buddhist temple lanterns in the garden were much admired, also the dwarf trees in pots, some of the trees being over a century old, a dwarf maple showing its autumn tints only a few inches high and a "matsu" (pine tree) being two of the best.

But it was not until after the second world war, and more particularly, not until the 1960s that bonsai began to develop within active clubs around the country.

Many well known names in bonsai clubs around the country date from the 1960s and 1970s. Jennifer Motley will introduce you to these quite soon.

You might wonder what Australians considered good bonsai half a century ago.

Here is a photograph taken in the 1960s at a bonsai display in Melbourne, provided courtesy of Frank Hocking. You will still see trees like these in club shows today, but also most club shows now include many trees that both are and look older. Also, the bonsai appreciation has changed. You will also see in a moment, a couple more images of historic bonsai in Australia.

Several books had a significant impact on Australian bonsai:

Sunset Bonsai, 1957 onwards

Yuji Yoshimura and Giovanna Halford, 1965 onwards

John Yoshio Naka, 1976 onwards

Bonsai Down Under, 1977 – 1988

Bonsai, Its Art, Science, History and Philosophy, 1984; Note, one of the rare occasions in Australia where poetry and bonsai are combined in the same presentation. This is a clear harking back not only to Japanese tradition, but to Chinese tradition as well. I wonder how would the Australian bonsai journey change if our bonsai artists also became experienced in reading or writing poetry that matched their bonsai?

But it was the visiting, of foreign 'masters' of bonsai, to clubs that was the real impetus for raising the standard of bonsai formation in Australia. The importance of personal contact, compared with reading books was enormous. The same is true today. So much is available on the web, but it is personal contact via clubs and the significant visitors who are invited to their meetings or conferences such as this, that make all the difference to ones understanding of bonsai.

Both Naka and Yoshimura visited Australia, and many bonsaiists today mark their visits as the turning point in the major upgrading of styling and presentation of bonsai in Australia.

Yoshimura, via his book with Halford, is also credited with introducing the terminology still used today for describing tree forms based on the position and form of the trunk in space. Unfortunately, in my opinion, these terms have been used to limit the styling options for many bonsai growers.

In concluding this all too rapid overview of the deep history of the Australian Journey, I'd like to draw attention to just two sets of statements from significant figures in bonsai:

John Naka: make your bonsai into a tree, not your tree into a bonsai?

And,

Yuji Yoshimura: admonition to use native species, and not to force the tree into unnatural shapes.

What do these mean in your own practice? I wonder what we will see during this weekend and beyond?

I know I have missed much and probably oversimplified in many places. But I hope that this has given you a little perspective on where we have come from.

## FURTHER READING

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Bonsai appreciation  
Kofu-tsukuri-matsu  
'art' in bonsai from Meiji era late 19<sup>th</sup> century

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