

JIawei SHEN

WELCOME TO BABEL



TOWER OF DREAMS & NIGHTMARES

BABEL FILM PRESENTS PRINCIPAL PRODUCTION FUNDING WITH SCREEN AUSTRALIA AND SCREEN NSW
CO-PRODUCED BY LICHTBLICK FILM IN ASSOCIATION WITH ZDF / ARTE WITH SUPPORT FROM DOCUMENTARY AUSTRALIA
DIRECTED BY JAMES BRADLEY PRODUCED BY GRAEME ISAAC, JAMES BRADLEY EDITED BY CARL-LUDWIG RETTINGER EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ANDREW MYER
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PETER COLEMAN ACS WITH KAREN JOHNSON WITH CAITLIN YEO WITH LIAM EGAN PRODUCED BY BONSAI FILMS
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WELCOME TO BABEL

PRESS KIT

LOG LINE

A renowned and obsessive artist undertakes a massively ambitious project that he believes will give meaning to his whole life but may shatter his reputation in the country of his birth.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

An obsessed artist, a crazy plan and the troubled history of Communism combine in a deep dive into the bloody revolutions of the 20th Century, counterpointed by an intimate portrait of a marriage forged in the chaos of Cultural Revolution in China.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Renowned Chinese-Australian artist Jiawei Shen is completing an extraordinary and monumental artwork that he says gives meaning to his whole life. This former Red Guard, still famous in China for painting one of the most famous images of the Cultural Revolution, "Standing Guard For The Great Motherland", is creating a fantastic parable of the history of Communism in the style that has established him as one of the world's great history painters.

Epic in concept and scale and painted over 7 years, his 'Tower of Babel' masterpiece is an enormous 4 panel work of 130 square meters and 7.5 meters in height. It depicts over 400 famous and infamous characters including politicians, soldiers, scientists, artists, writers and filmmakers who were won over by the utopian vision of the Communist movement, as well as many forgotten people who tragically lost their lives to Revolution. It also includes remixes of over 100 iconic artworks by left wing artists including Picasso, Matisse, Léger, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in an immersive artwork that totally surrounds the viewer in his vast 3-story studio in Bundeena, just outside of Sydney.

As Jiawei's masterpiece progresses, he and his artist wife Lan Wang tell their own stories of lives shared with millions of others in Mao's China through the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution, before the traumatic events of June 1989 in Tiananmen Square saw them settle in Australia.

Welcome To Babel puts an intimate and human face to an extraordinary couple and the story of their generation in China and Australia. And asks whether the present can learn from the past.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

– James Bradley

Ever since Jiawei first told me in April 2012 about his ambitious and slightly crazy plan to paint a monumental Tower of Babel that tells the history of world Communism, I've been fascinated by this project. We started filming with Jiawei and family in December of that year and have since become entwined in their lives.

I had previously visited China numerous times with my wife Cathy Li (RIP), and we had filmed there with artist Zhou Xiaoping for my film *Ochre and Ink* (2011). Later in 2015 we received time critical funding to shoot in Beijing with Jiawei and family at the Beijing Art Biennale and other significant locations.

The story of Jiawei & Lan's lives, from growing up during the Cultural Revolution in Mao's China, their unlikely relationship, and their migration to Australia in the late 1980s, is representative of many Chinese-Australians, but particularly engaging due to their great artistic talents and illustrious reputations. Through their own personal stories and Jiawei's Tower of Babel, we can experience the dramatic and often traumatic world of 20th Century Communism, from the inside. From visions of Socialist Utopia through extraordinary adventures and profound comradeship, to misery in the frozen Gulag, we get a window into the lives of many millions of people.

While the subject matter is serious, Jiawei and Lan tell their stories with a lot of humour, expressing the absurdity of life in Revolutionary China, where so little made sense to the people themselves who had to live through times of constant tumultuous change. There is also a lot of surreal humour in Jiawei's Tower of Babel, as famous personalities, artworks, love stories and battles jostle for space on the walls of his massive studio, hidden in the sleepy NSW coastal town of Bundeena.

Welcome To Babel is a rare opportunity to experience art and history in a film that incorporates drama and entertainment through multifaceted story-telling with great production values, lensed by Peter Coleman, with brilliant editing by Karen Johnson and a magnificent music score by Caitlin Yeo.

James Bradley

FROM THE PRODUCER

– Graeme Isaac

Welcome To Babel is a story that works on a number of different levels. In addition to the 'arts' content - the execution of Jiawei's massive new work filmed over 7 years and the references within it to over 100 famous works by other artists – the painting also deals with a history of totalitarianism made suddenly more relevant by the war in the Ukraine and by the increasing tensions between China and the West.

Jiawei and his artist wife Lan have lived this history, and their own biographical journey through it provides the opportunity to bring the history to life in a personal and accessible way. It is a story familiar to many of the 1.4 million Chinese people who now call Australia home, but one rarely told on film.

Jiawei Shen is not unknown. He is regarded as the elder statesman of Chinese artists in Australia, known for being a pioneer of oil painting in China, a legendary propaganda artist, and as the first truly successful Chinese portraitist in Australia. He has painted the Prime Minister, the Pope, the Governor General, Princess Mary, and has been elected as a finalist in the Archibald 14 times. (The \$100k Archibald Prize is the most prestigious portrait prize in Australia, with an annual attendance more than 130,000). He is a highly promotable figure both to arts audiences and to Chinese-Australians.

We hope that Jiawei and Lan's story can make a valuable contribution to a better understanding of the complexity and cultural richness of the Chinese population in Australia, helping dispel myths and prejudices by highlighting the contribution of Chinese-Australian artists to our cultural life. Jiawei's ambition is to paint a unique and significant masterpiece that he believes only he can paint, and only in Australia, where freedom of thought and self-expression has enabled him to conceive of and undertake what he called his 'mission'.

The film was shot in 4k, and with production values commensurate with theatrical release, and with a beautiful underscore by composer Caitlin Yeo.

Graeme Isaac

Jawei Shen
– Life and work

Jiawei Shen was born in 1948 in a small rural village outside of Shanghai. He joined the Communist Party at a young age and during the Cultural Revolution became a Red Guard and a revolutionary artist, and was posted to the Russian border in the far North. His 1974 painting *Standing Guard For The Great Motherland*, turned into a poster by Madam Mao and sent all over China, became one of the iconic works of that era. It held pride of place in the Guggenheim's 1998 "China 5000 Years" exhibition in New York and Bilbao, and is now held in the prestigious Long Museum in Shanghai.



Jiawei Shen - 'Standing Guard for the Motherland'

Jiawei immigrated to Australia in 1989, resigning as a member of the Chinese Communist Party at the time of Tiananmen but remaining a highly respected figure in the Chinese art world. He is now also one of Australia's leading portrait artists, known for the academic and literary qualities of his works. He has won numerous major art awards in Australia including the Mary MacKillop Art Award, the Doug Moran Portrait Prize and the Sir John Suliman Prize, and has been a finalist in Australia's premiere portrait award the Archibald a record 14 times. He has been commissioned by the Australian National Portrait Gallery and Australian Federal Parliament House to paint portraits of celebrities, including the Danish Crown Princess Mary (2005), the Australian Prime Minister John Howard (2009) and Governor General Sir Peter Cosgrove (2018). His portrait of Pope Francis (2013) is in the Vatican collection.

However, Jiawei's true passion is history, and he is a painter of large-scale history pictures represented in many major public collections including the National Art Gallery of China, the Museum of the Chinese Revolution in Beijing, the National Military Museum in China and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. In collaboration with his wife Lan Wang, he also painted the 14-metre-long masterwork "Merdeka" celebrating 50 years of Malaysian independence and housed in the National Art Gallery Of Malaysia.

His more playful works examine political and cross-cultural issues through appropriation. "Absolute Truth" (2000) shows Mikhail Gorbachev and the Pope conversing in the Sistine Chapel and in "Wise Men from the East" (2002) the Magi in Leonardo da Vinci's unfinished Adoration of the Magi are Chinese sages.



Jiawei Shen – 'Nixon Visits China'

LAN WANG

Lan Wang was born in Beijing in 1953. Her family suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution because her academic father, like all academics, was labelled as a class enemy. At the age of 16 Lan was sent to work as a farm labourer in China's Great Northern Wilderness for nine years. Despite the handicap of her family background and though her own artistic talents she managed to eventually gain entry to the Lu-Xun Academy of Fine Art in Shenyang where she studied print making and where she met Jiawei. Lan went on to be part of the famous Shenyang print making collective and to teach at the Academy, and for a period was better known in China than Jiawei himself.

A painter, printmaker and woodcarver, Lan's work has been included in solo and group exhibitions and is held in private and public collections, including the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. Lan Wang is a founding member of the Art Trail of Bundeena, south of Sydney, and along with Jiawei regularly opens her studio for visitors



Lan Wang 'Harmony No.20'

CV'S OF PRINCIPALS

WRITER/ DIRECTOR / PRODUCER: JAMES BRADLEY

James Bradley has worked in film and TV for 40 years, variously as a writer, producer, director and editor of numerous documentary films and series. He has a reputation for telling powerful stories and a passion for cross-cultural collaboration. He co-directed 50 Years of Silence which won the AFI Best Documentary Award and produced and directed the multi award-winning Ochre and Ink, the story of Chinese-Australian artist Zhou Xiaoping and his 23-year collaboration with Aboriginal artists.

His many editing credits include a slate of award-winning Australian Indigenous projects including the dramatic feature Radiance and documentaries Dhakiyarr vs The King, Mr Patterns, 5 Seasons, In My Father's Country, art + soul and Occupation: Native. James also produced the documentaries Destiny In Alice, Blown Away, and Under a Pagan Sky for ABC TV, and has taught film production and editing at Metro Screen, the University of Western Sydney, AFTRS, and Macquarie University.

James shared the 1994 AFI Best Documentary Award for 50 Years of Silence and won the 2005 AFI Non-Feature Editing Award for Mr. Patterns. And in 2019 he was presented with the prestigious Stanley Hawes Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Documentary Sector in Australia.

His first feature documentary as director, Welcome To Babel, won the 2024 Sydney Film Festival Documentary Australia Award.

PRODUCER: GRAEME ISAAC

Graeme Isaac has worked as a producer for over 40 years making dramas and documentaries dealing with cross cultural issues. His drama credits include the Indigenous musical Bran Nue Dae (in competition at Toronto and Berlin), and the iconic Aboriginal R&R road movie Wrong Side Of the Road (Jury Prize, AFI Awards and premiered in Mannheim). His documentary credits include the feature documentaries In My Father's Country (Best Documentary ADG Awards and screened in competition at IDFA), Dhakiyarr vs The King (Reuben Mamoulian Prize, Sydney Film Festival and in competition at Sundance), and Welcome To Babel which won the 2024 Sydney Film Fest Documentary Australia Best Documentary Award.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: ANDREW MYER

In addition to his wide range of other interests Andrew Myer has acted as EP on over 10 Australian feature films, both drama and documentary, including Radiance, Look Both Ways, Romulus My Father, My Year Without Sex, Balibo, The Dry, Monsieur Mayonnaise, Chef Antonio's Recipes For Revolution, and the breakout children's film Paper Planes.

GERMAN CO-PRODUCER: CARL-LUDWIG RETTINGER

Carl-Ludwig established his production company Lichtblick Film in the mid 80's and since that time has worked in both drama and documentary with film makers and partners in over 40 countries. He has a long working history with ZDF-Arte, and his documentary films have won many major awards at A list festivals including the Berlinale, IDFA, Visions Du Reel, and Locarno. (He also co-produced Sydney film maker Trevor Graham's Monsieur Mayonnaise.)

ADDITIONAL KEY PRODUCTION CREDITS

Cinematographer: Peter Coleman ACS
Editor: Karen Johnson
Composer: Caitlin Yeo
Sound Designer: Liam Egan

TECH SPECS

Country of Production: Australia & China
Language: Mandarin & English
Runtime: 99 minutes
Format: DCP (24fps), colour
Aspect Ratio: 1.78:1
Sound: 5.1 surround sound

CONTACT DETAILS

Australian Distributor: Bonsai Films
Jonathan Page jpage@bonsaifilms.com.au
Babel Film Producer Graeme Isaac graeme@mayfan.com.au
Director/Producer James Bradley nirvana9@bigpond.com

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