

Artists Lyndal Jones and Lindy Lee help build the garden of fire and water in Avoca

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Cherry blossoms are not the kind of flora you'd expect to find growing in the inhospitable soil of Avoca's flood plain.

Then again, this rural outpost between Ballarat and Bendigo is not where you'd expect to find prominent visual artists Lyndal Jones and Lindy Lee working either. They've been collaborating with locals for over a year now to build *The Garden of Fire and Water*, a Chinese garden that recognises the diasporic heritage of this former gold town. Now, the buds are just starting to bloom as the team prepare for the opening celebrations.

Avoca is one of five Victorian towns with populations under 1500 that were selected by Regional Arts Victoria (RAV) to take part in Small Town Transformations, which will launch across the state this October. The projects focus on artistic legacy, creating artworks and arts spaces that will have a lasting impact on place.



Lyndal Jones at Avoca Chinese Garden Small Town Transformations. *Photo: Lachlan Bence*

"Art has an astounding and often a startling way of making us ask new questions. It provokes us and it stimulates us to think differently," says RAV Director Esther Anatolitis. "But in this context, thinking about works and projects and workshops that are going to occupy the whole town, it's about changing people's perceptions of what art could mean for a community."

Avoca was founded during the gold rush, flourishing as an administrative centre for the region, but like most towns in the Pyrenees Shire it has slowly dwindled since. The railway station was shut down in 1979. Limited mobile phone reception and poor internet coverage now rule it out for most tree changers. These days, 42 per cent of the population is over 55.

"These small communities really do get... left behind at times," says Jennifer Ganske, a member of the volunteer-run Chinese Garden Committee and the shire's Business Development Officer. "You feel far behind if you have no access to technology... so to have something so left of field come out was really inspiring."

Before the project began, the town's Chinese heritage had largely been forgotten. In the 19th century over 16,500 Chinese disembarked at Robe on the South Australian coast before walking some 400 kilometres to the goldfields; Avoca was one of the stops along the epic journey. Some took up roots. "It's really something that's been silenced within the community, so it was really a way to pay homage while also opening up the conversation again," says Ganske. They've been working with the Avoca Historical Society, as well as the Golden Dragon Museum of Chinese History in Bendigo, to unearth it. Children at the local school have begun studying Chinese over Skype, and participated in Chinese new year celebrations.

The garden takes inspiration from the final symbol in the I Ching, the ancient Chinese divination book that was adopted by artists like John Cage as a tool for composition. "[The symbol] is called 'Before Completion' because it's all about cycles," explains artistic director Lyndal Jones, who is Professor of Contemporary Art in the School of Media and Communications at RMIT. "So you think you've finished but in fact you're just starting."

Located just off the main street beside the banks of the Avoca River – a former saleyard donated by locals Harvey and Carol Wilkins, near where the town's original Chinese burial site was – it's particularly trying conditions for any garden. "We've had to find the very toughest of things," says Jones, who worked closely with local landscape artist Mel Ogden and soil expert Martin Wynne.

Traditional Chinese plants have been integrated with Australian flora, with an emphasis on sustainability. Bamboo and lotus flowers grow alongside river red gums and zanthorreas. The pond is filled by storm water from the main street, which is caught and cleaned in a large underground tank. Stones have been donated by farmers in the area, and slate from a nearby quarry.

A pagoda by Chinese-Australian artist Lindy Lee combines traditional design with elements of the Australian shed, including burnt wooden columns and a lick

of silver flames running across the roof. Lee has also made a scholar rock, traditionally collected and displayed in Chinese Gardens as part of a scholar's study, that will be unveiled by Museum of Contemporary Art Director Lianne McGregor at the opening.

"In the past anything Chinese happened at the edges of town, so it's so lovely that this is right in the centre," says Jones.

The garden was initially met with some trepidation from residents who asked why the funding wasn't going to areas like health, education or technology – resources that are lacking in the isolated community. But as the project has gone on it's been embraced with some pride as a potential attraction. Jones describes a conversation she had that morning with a man who claimed it wasn't a proper Chinese garden. When she asked why, he replied, "I was looking at a video about Chinese gardens' – this bloke who would never have looked at a Chinese garden before – 'to check its authenticity.'" They went on to discuss the team's artistic process, and how they'd merged Australian and Chinese aesthetics.

"Those conversations, the stories that people tell, that's the transformation right there," says Anatolitis.