A distant twang

John Huie has put Chinese music on the Western map, writes **RACHEL OLDING.**

After living and working in China for 18 years, John Huie was described by the media in his adopted home country as an egg. Yes, an egg. "I thought it was insult," says Huie of the article in *Australian Chinese Daily*. "I had to ask my [Chinese] wife, Grace."

The analogy was actually a compliment of the highest order for the Australian composer. It meant that, like an egg, he was white and Western on the outside but yellow and Chinese on the inside.

It was a sign that Huie and his revered East-meets-West music had been truly accepted not only by the Chinese music community but also by the country's media and Government.

While living in Hong Kong, he had scored short films for the Hong Kong Tourist Association and a string of documentaries for various Asian film companies. He lectured on music for film at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Hong Kong Arts Centre, and was commissioned by the Hong Kong government in 1997 to compose and produce *The Honorable Retreat*, a musical tribute to the handover of Hong Kong to China, which, Huie says, was not so much bizarre or contentious as "great fun" and "really good".

In Shanghai in the early noughties, he wrote for small ensembles using a combination of traditional European and Chinese instruments, including the guqin, erhu and pipa. He was asked to score films such as *The White Countess* by the famed production company Merchant Ivory starring Ralph Fiennes, and for "two beautiful years", he researched and re-created songs from Shanghai in the 1930s, leading to two *Shanghai Jazz* albums.

Many Chinese musicians consider him responsible for single-handedly reviving the Shanghai jazz genre that emerged after US musicians made their way to China in the '30s but was forced underground during the Mao era and later fizzled out.

When Huie left China to return home to Australia in 2007, after 18 years in the People's Republic, the Chinese threw a concert in his honour. And called him an egg.

So how is it that a white man with little interest in Chinese music to begin with, who left for Hong Kong because he was bored, became one of the China's most treasured composers?

In Australia he slips under the radar but in China he is a minor celebrity. When I tell my Chinese taxi driver that I'm on my way to the Chinese Gardens to interview a man who created the Chinese Gardens Chamber Music Festival, my driver says casually, "Oh yes, John?"

But sitting in the gardens, with his wiry grey hair and long limbs floundering around, not even Huie is sure how Chinese taxi drivers have come to know his name.



"I suppose I got to that point of being accepted through the 'bad way', the corporate way, and not through public performance or anything like that. I did the Macau Tourist Association and the Hong Kong Tourist Association music for their campaigns, so I'd get to know the right people. I don't really know how all that happened back then but, God, what a ride it was."

Sick of playing "old ladies' music" in a quartet after graduating from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music High School, Huie decided to pack up and move somewhere different.

No matter what country he landed in, he knew he would become immersed in its musical and social life.

"That's my thing, it's just who I am," he says.

It just so happened that the city was Hong Kong and he was exposed to all sorts of ancient Chinese instruments and musical styles.

The food, the music scene, the history, his family, and the never-ending number of instruments to discover kept Huie there for the next 18 years.

His fondest memory is sitting on the roof of his house and having a barbecue with his Chinese family. Scoring Steven Chow's super-kitsch, kung-fu comedy film *Shaolin Soccer* – which went gangbusters in Hong Kong and ended up on Broadway – was another.

Seeing his troupe of Shanghai musicians freshly shaven and suited up on the huge Hollywood set of *The White Countess* was about as good as it got.

Outside China, however, people haven't quite been able to grasp his life's trajectory, Huie says.

"When I come back from Shanghai everyone says: "Wow … how could you live there?" But all that people know is what they read in *The New York Times* and it's all the same. The Chinese are bad, the Government is bad, the people are bad – that's what people think.

"Shanghai is truly fantastic. It has quiet areas and green areas, and everyone is friendly. You don't see guards walking down the street. It's very funny the way that people are very questionable. They treat China with a big question mark."

As it is, however, Huie and his wife had always said they would return to Australia and did so in 2007 with their two sons, now aged 7 and 11.

He returned with the aim of bringing Chinese music to an Australian audience and set about staging the first Chinese Gardens Chamber Music Festival last year. He will present the second next week.

"The festival is a way of showing Chinese culture and music because Australians never get it and they'll never hear it in their whole lives otherwise," he says. "It's so important to hear a variety of stuff from at least one other country. All we hear is dead white people's music, which I love, too, but, boy oh boy, there's so much more out there."

When Westerners think of Chinese music, they tend to think of the rather squeaky-sounding Cantonese opera, which can be quite unpleasant on the ear, he says, but there is so much more than that.

His *Shanghai Jazz* and *New Shanghai* albums are proof. Chinese traditional instrumentalists have been adapted to modern harmonic structures and slathered with a hot rhythm section. The result is a pulsating soundtrack that would befit a high-speed voyage through the futuristic skyscrapers and oriental tea houses of a Chinese metropolis.

The festival likewise showcases songs that combine characteristic Chinese melodic ornamentation with French impressionist sensibilities and presents a melange of ancient and modern instruments. A highlight will be the erhu master Xing Lu, cellist Patrick Murphy and Huie on guitar, performing Huie's new work *Planet Earth*. The total repertoire is an eclectic program that combines and contrasts Chinese, Australian and European works.

"The aim of the festival is to bring Australian and Chinese audiences and artists closer together through a great understanding and appreciation of beauty, complexity and variation of culture across the region of China," Huie says. "If there's one thing I learnt from living in China, it's that people are really all the same wherever you go and they do just want the same things.

"We've grown up differently, with different ideas and different systems but what we all want is dinner and a place to sleep and a partner and beautiful music. We're all the same."

The Chinese Gardens Chamber Music Festival runs February 4-6. There are six concerts over three days – three yum cha concerts at 11.30am and three evening concerts at 7pm. For more information see www.johnhuiemusic.com. Book through Musica Viva on 1800 688 482.