Some time ago you gave a number of talks around your experience of going to China and impressed on me your complex feelings about who you are.

I've been going to China on and off for more than three decades. Initially it was extremely confronting and to a lesser degree it is still uncomfortable. No matter what, I am Chinese and I'm not Chinese. I swim almost every day of my life and I travel to China sometimes four times a year to work on public projects, so I need to find a local pool. In the women's changing room I feel a shocking, profound and familiar discomfort: I am confronted by my own ‘phantom’ body. The naked bodies of the Chinese women sharing the shower facilities are the same as mine: black hair, short legs, rounded bellies and no buttocks to speak of. I look like ‘them’ but am completely ‘other’ to them. The only visible difference is the tan lines on my skin because unlike typical Chinese I love the sun and I am not subject to the same scrutiny that dark skin implies in Chinese society. Simultaneously my body proclaims its ancestry and race, and yet this body has been steeped for a lifetime in Western cultural values. I think the fundamental and persistent question in my work is not ‘who’ I am but ‘what’ I am – what is real?
How do you describe your identity and how does that inform your art practice?

The defining experience of my life is one of being fractured, which is a direct result of being Chinese-Australian. Establishing identity has been a primary motivation for my art-making but ultimately my questions have gone beyond that. Working through identity issues was essential but you need to be careful not to end up with just a set of descriptions. We are always elusively and mysteriously greater than the sum of those parts.

My early work with photocopies of European masters was part of the quest to find my spirit of place, trying to see how ‘western’ I was but then I broadened/deepened that search by examining the multiple generations of transition my own family took to make Australia their home. Curiously, it took my embrace of Chinese traditional spiritual practice (Ch’an or Zen Buddhism) to liberate me beyond questions of identity. The nature of ‘self’ is existential and involves a deep enquiry which requires an intimacy with the fluidity of being – the ongoing construction and deconstruction of it and that enquiry is Zen Buddhist practice. All of my work flows from that interrogation. Currently, my work is concerned with cosmos which is still about ‘self’ in that cosmos is fabric to our being – we can never step outside of it.

Can you describe the notion and position of minority nations within the Chinese nation. Are you touched in some way by these societies?

People often mistakenly think that China is homogenous, but there are at least 56 different minority groups. The notion of homogeneity is as mistaken as saying that all Australian Aborigines are the same. Chinese dialects are as different to each other as French is to Italian. I’ve travelled a lot through China. Inner Mongolian desert trekking is very different to a life of Shanghai chic. Muslim Chinese are subject to the same dietary laws as all Muslims are. I can’t comment with any real authority but I think there are genuine displacement issues where ethnic or tribal interests are overridden in favour of the Han majority. Having said that, some of the major universities are ethnic minority universities like Minzu in Beijing and Chinese New Year is a major testament to the value of ‘origins’. Every year during Chinese New Year there is the greatest human migration on the planet – millions and millions of people moving. People think nothing of standing on a train or bus for 36 hours to return to their hometown.

Have you had a serious relationship with Australian Indigenous people and arts? Has this informed your practice in any way?

I’ve had some very moving encounters with Indigenous art and people, which have whetted my appetite for more. I judged the Cossack Art Prize at Karratha in 2013. Being in the Pilbara was the first time that ‘welcome to country’ made emotional sense to me. The depth and breadth of Indigenous art – the personal, expansive relationship it has to ‘country’ – can only be experienced. It is in no way an intellectual thing, it is visceral and cellular. I went on a group tour through an area with very ancient rock paintings. The guide who was an anthropologist said to the group that ‘to the Indigenous people this was a place of deep spirit but for those of us who aren’t Indigenous there was plenty of art to see.’ Later on in my speech at the opening I corrected him – I said that the reason that Aboriginal art exists at all is because it is moved by deep spirit, the two are inseparable. Indigenous culture is completely lived; it is not an intellectual conceit.

I was very fortunate that I was curated into Marking...
Time, which was the inaugural exhibition for the newly renovated MCA in Sydney in 2012. I shared the gallery space with Gulumbu Yunupingu. It was a profound experience for both of us. We wept in front of each other’s work. She explained that her work was the ‘outer story’ and that my work revealed the ‘inner story’ of her father’s dreaming. She said her people were born of fire so the sparks, burn marks and perforations in my work were images of her people being born. I told Gulumbu that her work embodied the Buddhist story of Cosmos: the Net of Indra, where the universe is likened to an infinite net. At the ties of each net there is a beautiful and singular jewel but that jewel’s beauty contains the reflected light of every other jewel in the universe. The jewels are all phenomena – each individual thing is simultaneously utterly unique, never to be repeated. But that uniqueness is absolutely reliant on its profound interconnection to all other phenomena. Our work in Marking Time was extremely resonant. In my heart I believe that there are very deep connections between Aboriginal spirituality and the spirituality of my Chinese ancestors, especially in Buddhism and Taoism.

For completion in late 2015, Lindy Lee is working on a number of public art projects: New Century Garden for Chinatown, Sydney, One Avenue in Shenzhen, China, and Springs in Shanghai.