



German Cultural Center chief leaves a legacy

ART COLLECTION: Jurgen Gerbig has left the center richer than he found it, artistically speaking, thanks to his policy of having artists donate a work after their exhibitions

BY **BRADLEY WINTERTON**
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Jurgen Gerbig was clearing out his desk at Taipei's German Cultural Center when I finally caught up with him on May 28. Over the previous 10 days he'd been in Warsaw and Beijing, but now he finally had to come to terms with quitting a job he's had since 2002, directing what anywhere else would be called the Goethe Institute, but what in Taiwan had to adjust to Chinese sensibilities.

Nowhere else in Taiwan can free wine have been dispensed so liberally at arts events that were free-of-charge and open to all.

Gerbig was ideally suited to be the host of such largesse — his warmth and openness shone out, and indeed these same qualities came to characterize the events themselves.

"Last week there was a farewell party for me here," he said, "and it ended with all the musicians present jamming together, mixing every possible style. But, as if that wasn't enough, they went on to announce

that our center wasn't only open to everyone — it represented the very principle of open-mindedness itself! I couldn't possibly have had a more welcome farewell compliment."

As he led me around the center's premises, Gerbig pointed out items of the art collection, currently on display in a special exhibition. All had been donated by the artists, he said, and there were around 50 of them. It had been his policy to charge nothing for the exhibition space and to take no commission on sales. Instead, he asked each exhibitor to give one work to the center.

"And there they all are," he said — not, I thought, without a tinge of sadness in his voice. "They are my legacy."

Gerbig's Chinese experience didn't start with his appointment to Beijing, whose Goethe Institute he helped set up, as one of a team of three, in 1988. Prior to that he'd been teaching German in Shanghai's Tongji University to students from all over China, pre-

paring them to go to Germany to study for doctorates. Many later returned to Germany to take up senior positions there as cogs in the field of Sino-German economic cooperation.

Even so, it was initially hard work for Gerbig to get his Taipei posting. He'd already worked in Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong and was due to be rotated to some other part of the globe.

But he insisted he needed to know about "the other China" to have a complete picture of the Mandarin-speaking world. And it's an indication of his standing in his employers' eyes that he was eventually transferred to Taipei.

But when he arrived, he said, he felt he was starting all over again.

"I still remember how, early in my stay, I received an invitation from the then-director of the Cultural Affairs Committee, Madame Tchen Yu-chiou (陳郁秀) to attend a puppet show. I thought 'Oh no, not again!' I'd seen at least a dozen on

the mainland, but out of courtesy I went. And I was so impressed! I'd never seen puppetry of such a high artistic level," he said.

And not only were Taiwan's artists themselves top-notch — they also knew a lot about the German arts scene, and approached the center with specific ideas on who to invite and which projects to consider, he said.

A number of factors had helped along the way.

When he arrived in 2002, Gerbig was told the building the German Cultural Center had occupied for close to 20 years was beyond repair, but this proved a blessing in disguise as he was able to establish a new image, with a transparent reception area and a multi-purpose performance venue, lots of glass, warm colors and open spaces.

He also launched a user-friendly Web site and a new logo.

"We were fortunate to find sponsors who helped — Mercedes when it was still called DaimlerChrysler, which financed our new Web site and leased us a SmartforTwo which I drove for more than a year with our new logo splashed all over it and underneath 'We are Smart!'" he said.

"Later there were Opel and Continental Engineering, who supported us in organizing nationwide green projects," he said.

There were inevitably a few irritants. One of the artists the center exhibited obviously had problems with certain individuals, who called day and night threatening to break in and remove the objects on display as security for outstanding debts, even though most of these were large stone sculptures. The heaviest was a 6 tonne piece at the entrance to the building, which had to be lifted into place by a special crane. The threats died away after staff members explained what the callers' proposed scheme would actually involve.

"Again, early on I had a run-in with the press," Gerbig said, "over a grossly distorted article which claimed I'd said the areas around the train station and the airport looked like Palestine! Not only had I never said that, but I'd also never met the journalist who wrote it. The ensuing war of words was never unambiguously terminated — there was only a half-hearted comment in the newspaper, far short of a correction. Ever since I've been rather wary of the press



Jurgen Gerbig, former director of the German Cultural Institute, Taipei, stands in front of the painting *Hoffen auf ein besseres und Schonerer Morgen* by Chen Tsuo-chi in a photograph taken last month.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GERMAN CULTURAL CENTER, TAIPEI

— with notable exceptions, of course."

But Gerbig has nothing but praise for Taiwan's artists, as well as the official bodies who've proved so helpful over the years.

And it's a singular tribute to Taiwan that, along with his Shanghaiese wife, he'll continue to live here, in Tiamu (天母), after his retirement and will no doubt remain a familiar face at local arts events.

PIGEON POST

Canada D'eh set for June 27

SOCIETY The 2009 annual Canada D'eh Beach Party will be held on Saturday, June 27, at Shahun (沙滄) Beach near Tamsui (淡水) from noon to midnight, rain or shine. This year, along with fireworks, games, drinks and food, Grammy nominee Colby O'Donis will be among the musicians providing live entertainment. Tickets range from NT\$450 for a single adult to NT\$950 for family pack of two adults and two children and are on sale now. More information is available at www.canadian-society.org.tw. Meanwhile, the Canadian Trade Office in Taipei and the Taichung City Government are inviting everyone to take part in a series of events from June 30 to July 5 in Taichung in celebration of Canada Day. The week-long series will feature an environmental film festival at the National Museum of Art, a street festival and a Canada Food Promotion. Details are available on the trade office's Web site (www.canada.org.tw) or by calling (02) 2544-3000.

Buddy Bear arrives from Germany

SOCIETY Taiwan received its own Buddy Bear from Germany last Saturday via the German Institute. With help from students at Fengshan and Fengshin high schools in Kaohsiung and the German School in Taipei, the bear was painted and given its own unique look on Saturday. The life-sized fiberglass sculpture will make an appearance on June 27 at the Taipei Film Festival, as the festival's theme this year is Berlin, the institute said. The bear will go on tour next month and in September to coincide with the World Games in Kaohsiung and the Deaflympics in Taipei, it said. The institute is holding a competition to name the bear. Suggestions can be sent to the institute before Oct. 3. Nearly 1,300 Buddy Bears have been sent from Germany all over the world. More information on the bear-naming contest is available on the institute's Web site at www.taipei.diplo.de.

STAFF WRITER

Canadian opens Kaohsiung center

BY **JENNY W. HSU**
STAFF REPORTER

The wise men who came up with the adage "when life gives you a lemon, make lemonade" probably did not have Melissa Wriston in mind, but the blue-eyed Canadian from Saskatchewan lives up to it.

Wriston, an English teacher in Kaohsiung City for the past six years, was the tour de force behind the idea of a community center for foreigners in Kaohsiung.

Together with a few friends in the city government and from the English-speaking community, Wriston persuaded the city government to provide a small building where foreigners and locals could mingle, relax, chat over coffee or take some classes.

However, weeks turned to months and months to a year, and the center has yet to become a reality although the building has been renovated and equipped with computers and furniture since last year. Without giving an explanation, the Kaohsiung City Government has been dragging its feet about opening the center.

The center even earned a listing in the *Lonely Planet* travel book on Taiwan, Wriston said.

But instead of wringing her hands and gnashing her teeth at bureaucratic red tape over the long wait, Wriston took the initiative to relocate the spirit of the center to her residence, which she has turned into an international hostel for travelers and those in transition.

"It was just in the last six months where I thought to myself, hmm, I have the space to put the information, I have the space to do a common area, I am getting what I originally wanted. It clicked in my head that the original vision for the center ... we can actually make it happen," she said in an interview with the *Taipei Times* earlier this month.

After talking to several expatriates in the city who shared her goal of having a place to hold classes and activities, Wriston opened the first floor of her five-story home/hostel as a gathering place where people can take cooking classes, have movie nights, hold meetings,



Melissa Wriston points out some of the places the guests at her Kaohsiung hostel have come from on June 2.

PHOTO: JENNY W. HSU, TAIPEI TIMES

or just simply hang out, she said.

She said a member of the expatriate community recently held a cooking demonstration there on how to make eggplant soup and another class on homemade granola and yogurt.

"When I finally realized and accepted the fact the center might not ever open, I took most of the informational brochures, fliers, books and posters about life in Kaohsiung City and brought them to my house," she said.

Wriston also turned her garage into a quasi-resource service center. One of the walls is lined with an array of brochures on just about anything on Kaohsiung — from restaurants to World Games events to recommended tourist sites and where to go to paraglide.

The hostel, the International Friendship House, is located in a

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— Melissa Wriston, a Canadian resident of Kaohsiung

quiet neighborhood close to the high speed rail station, the World Game stadium and the Kaohsiung rapid transit system. It has welcomed people from Asia, Europe, North America and Africa since it opened in September 2006, she said.

Wriston said she hopes the

hostel will not just be a place for travelers to stay, but also a home for people who are in the midst of transition, such as newcomers to the city.

Information about the resource center and the hostel can be found at accesskaohsiung.blogspot.com.

BTCO celebrates Queen Elizabeth's official birthday

BY **JENNY W. HSU**
STAFF REPORTER

More than 300 guests raised their champagne glasses to wish Queen Elizabeth II a happy 86th birthday during a reception held by the British Trade and Cultural Office (BTCO) in Taipei on June 9.

Office Director David Campbell said the queen's actual birthday is on April 21, but the monarch's official birthday, which is a public holiday in the UK as well as many commonwealth countries, is usually celebrated in June.

Last year had been a "very positive year" for bilateral relations between Taiwan and the UK, Campbell said, and the friendship was strengthened when both countries agreed to grant six-month visa-waiver privileges to each other's citizens.

The visa-waiver program began in March.

VISITORS

Touting the trade and cultural relations between the two sides, Campbell said a large contingent of British athletes will participate in the World Games in Kaohsiung next month and the Deaflympics in Taipei in September.

BTCO said approximately 3,000 British nationals are living in Taiwan. The number is expected to increase due to the visa-waiver program, the office said.

At the center of the birthday reception last week was an ice sculpture of Big Ben to mark the 150th anniversary of the British landmark.

BRITISH FARE

Guests at the queen's birthday reception, including senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the heads of embassies and representative offices, and representatives from the business and academic sectors, partook of typical British fare such as roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, sausage rolls, minced meat pies and English trifle.



GRADUATION HONOR

Salah Khudaid, an Iraqi student in National Taiwan University's civil engineering department, left, and Hsu Ho-chien from the history department pose after graduating on June 7. They represented the 2009 class and gave speeches at the graduation ceremony. Khudaid said he originally couldn't tell the difference between Taiwan, China and Japan, but that now he has fallen in love with Taiwan and plans to continue his graduate studies here.

PHOTO: HU CHING-HUI, TAIPEI TIMES

Russian-Taiwanese ties celebrated at Russian National Day party

KREMLIN ICE SCULPTURE: The head of the Russian trade office in Taipei praised growth in trade and cultural exchanges and the increase in joint research projects

BY **JENNY W. HSU**
STAFF REPORTER

With a huge ice sculpture of the Kremlin as a party centerpiece, hundreds of well-wishers gathered in Taipei to wish Russia a happy birthday and toast Russia-Taiwan ties last Thursday on the eve of Russian National Day.

Although Taiwan and Russia do not have formal diplomatic relations, they have forged strong cultural and commercial ties,

with trade volume reaching a record US\$4 billion last year, said Sergey Gubarev, the head of the Representative Office for the Moscow-Taipei Coordination Commission on Economic and Cultural Cooperation.

The commission was established in 1992, one year after the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

Gubarev, who has been posted to Taipei for three-and-a-half years, said he has never encountered a

"cold attitude" in all his interactions with Taiwanese officials and that mutual efforts will strengthen bilateral cooperation.

In addition to fruitful business relations, Taiwan and Russia have developed active and frequent cultural and academic exchanges, Gubarev said.

Taiwanese and Russian scientists are engaged in more than 50 joint projects and each year, he said.

Russia welcomes more than 300 Taiwanese students while about 200 Russians study in Taiwan. There are about 1,000 Russians in Taiwan at present.

One Russian student, Alexander Avgust, came to Taiwan on a scholarship almost four years ago. After getting his degree in politics from the Chinese Cultural University, Avgust has decided to stay to work in Taiwan.

"I like Taiwan a lot, especially the weather and the friendliness of the people," he said.

Gubarev said more than 10,000 Taiwanese visit Russia annually but

less than 2,000 Russians come to Taiwan. The main reason for this discrepancy, he said, is the lack of a beach culture in Taiwan.

For many Russians, a vacation means a break from the icy cold weather of their hometowns and so they are more interested in countries with beachfront resorts, he said.

Guests at the reception enjoyed typical Russian cuisine such as borscht and cabbage rolls, along with Russian wine.

Four Russian members of the Kaohsiung Philharmonic Orchestra performed during the reception.