

Chinese invade

By **Martin Delgado**

FIRST they bought MG Rover, now the Chinese appear to be moving in on an even older piece of Britain's heritage – Constable Country.

The Chinese government and a reclusive Hong Kong tycoon are secretly involved in plans to build a £20million John Constable theme park which protesters say will ruin the landscape that inspired his masterpiece The Hay Wain.

A close associate of multi-millionaire Victor Hwang is advising the Essex businessman behind the development.

And Mr Hwang's company has written to planning officials offering 'wholehearted support' for the 'imaginative initiative' which locals fear will tear the heart out of some of the most beautiful villages in England.

Essex County Council, which is responsible for the

Peking backs plan for £20m theme park that locals fear will ruin Hay Wain landscape for ever

site in the Stour Valley where Constable painted his best-known works, has a twinning deal with a Chinese province to boost trade and cultural links.

And a Mail on Sunday investigation has discovered that as part of the agreement, a Chinese construction firm is to finance and build a £1 million Chinese garden inside the Constable centre, which is intended to attract more than 750,000 visitors a year.

The development, on a 117-acre site between the villages of Great and Little Horkesley, promises 'an interactive interpretation experience' of the life and times of Constable, an art gallery in a Regency villa and exhibitions about historic farming methods. But critics say the scheme is in reality a theme park and retail project disguised as 'heritage centre' for public-relations purposes.

The Chinese connection has come as a surprise to locals. Suspicions were first raised when limousines carrying smartly dressed Chinese men on tours of the area around the site were spotted. And last night the saga took another twist when Stephen Bunting, the businessman who



SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

SUPPORT: Millionaire Victor Hwang

until now was assumed to be the scheme's sole backer, admitted meeting Mr Hwang, who is worth £200million.

The Mail on Sunday has obtained a letter sent by Michael Roberts, chief executive of Mr Hwang's firm, Parkview International – which owns Battersea Power Station – offering total backing for the project to Colchester district council, which will rule on it next month.

The letter says: 'We hope the local authority recognises the merit in this well developed proposal and will strongly support this imaginative initiative.'

Urging the council to 'resist inevitable

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Constable Country



BEAUTIFUL: View over the valley to the centre's site at the top of the hill

opposition', it adds: 'We offer the project our wholehearted support and wish it every success.'

Mr Hwang, 52 - who hates being photographed - has had a controversial career. After buying Battersea Power Station in 1993, he said he would not demolish its iconic four chimneys because they were a 'landmark'. However, he recently won permission to replace them with replicas as part of a £1.5 billion leisure, retail and entertainment site, infuriating local campaigners.

At a recent meeting with protesters against the Constable centre plans, Mr Roberts admitted he was advising Mr Bunting and is said to have drawn a comparison between the Bunting 'dynasty' in Essex and the Hwang 'dynasty' in Hong Kong.

Mr Roberts said he had told Mr Bunting he would need to show as much determination as Mr Hwang had displayed over the Battersea project, and may need to appeal to Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott to get the go-ahead.

Mr Roberts told The Mail on Sunday he had no financial interest in the heritage centre itself. But he admitted that, along with members of the Bunting family, he is a director of East Anglia Wine Producers, whose headquarters are on the proposed site.

The idea for the Chinese garden - to be built and paid for by a company called China Construction - appears to stem from a 'memorandum of agreement' signed in 2004 by Essex County Council's Tory leader Lord



ALBANPIX

MASTERPIECE: John Constable and his most famous painting The Hay Wain



Hanningfield and officials in the Chinese province of Jiangsu.

In a letter to protest leader William Pavry last month, Lord Hanningfield said that the council strongly supported the plan for the garden. Its

'delivery', he said, was a private matter between the Chinese and Mr Bunting.

Mr Pavry said last night: 'I can see no conceivable reason why a heritage centre meant to celebrate

the life and works of John Constable should include a Chinese garden built and paid for by the Chinese, supposedly to strengthen our links with a province of China most Essex people have never heard of.'