

1980-1989: From Cantonese to Mandarin

With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of significant economic reforms in China, more students and other skilled entrants began to come to Australia directly from China. In this period Australia's policies towards overseas students changed radically with the imposition of higher fees on foreign students and the beginnings of an 'education industry' which saw a great increase in both student numbers and the consequent permanent residence of former students. In fact education of foreign students who subsequently become citizens became a backdoor way of charging full fees with no deferred payments or students loans. General migration policy, especially under the Business Migration Program, increasingly favoured skilled and increasingly educated people, and this favoured those who could speak English or had received their skills in Australian institutions.

Increasing trade also paralleled increasing numbers of people. When China and Australia normalised relations in 1972, trade had actually been decreasing, but by 1978 and the beginnings of China's economic reforms, trade was increasing and continued to grow steadily during the 1980s.¹ As a material symbol of this increasing China-Australian trade the province of Guangzhou, from which historically most Chinese-Australian's originated, gifted to the people of NSW the Chinese Gardens in Sydney, and in 1985 the Chinese Museum, Melbourne opened. While in 1982 William Liu, who had spent so much of his life promoting trade links with China, received an OBE. The following year William Liu died and the Australia China Chamber of Commerce and Industry of New South Wales, ACCCI, created the 'W J Liu Esq OBE Memorial Prize for Chinese Studies' at the University of NSW. A series of scrolls on William Liu's life were also commissioned and a book published on his life entitled *Pathfinder*.

In the 1980s Chinese government's policies on private overseas travel greatly relaxed increasing the numbers of both migrants and tourists from China traveling to many countries including Australia. Those that permanently migrate from China have been categorised by Chinese scholars as 'new migrants' to distinguish them from migrations of previous periods that are considered to have been 'sojourning' in nature. Characteristics of these 'new migrants' are not only the permanent nature of their migration but the tendency to migrate with the whole family, including very often grandparents. Over the 1980s some 130,000 Chinese people arrived in Australia.²

Thus many students coming to Australia were already married and often had a child that would frequently be left in the care of grandparents while the parents studied and prepared for a new life in Australia. Mimi Zou, for example, was born in 1984, and lived with her grandmother in China while her educated parents worked in various

¹ Minyue, China-Australia Trade: How Important and Complementary is it?, pp.155-179.

² ABS Migration, Australia (3412.0), <http://www.border.gov.au/about/reports-publications/research-statistics/statistics/live-in-australia/historical-migration-statistics>

unskilled jobs and saved to buy a home in Sydney, joining her parents in 1992 when aged seven.³ An alternative to this pattern is for parents with children born in Australia to sponsor grandparents to also migrate to Australia so they can help care for children while both parents work.

Another feature of the many arrivals direct from China is that while a significant proportion continued to be from the historic migration areas of Guangzhou. Many were from new regions, particularly Beijing and Shanghai, both major sources of students.⁴ One consequence of this was that for the first time in the history of Chinese-Australia Mandarin equalled and then passed Cantonese as the prime Chinese dialect spoken in Australia.

Another aspect of this is a preference for using simplified characters over the traditional forms favoured by Chinese readers outside China itself. Thus in 1988 the *Australian Chinese Daily* stopped using traditional characters and began publishing in simplified characters only.⁵ Education departments around Australia also adopted simplified characters in teaching Chinese language in schools. While then Australian Chinese Community Association (ACCA) President Stan Hunt reports he had to learn standard Cantonese then Mandarin before finally convincing the ACCA to use English in the early 1980s for their meetings.⁶

Within the Cantonese speaking groups change was also necessary as new members joined the old district associations from the historic districts of south China. Most of these district associations had had a continuous existence from the 19th century and so underwent a revival. In the case of the Chungshan Society, which had died out, it was a case of being re-established in 1980 as new arrivals from Zhongshan joined with Australian-born Zhongshan district descendants to purchase with donations a property for this purpose at 50 Albion Street Sydney. Along with the revival of the district associations was the revival of such annual celebrations as the Qingming gatherings at Rookwood Cemetery, which had not taken place for some years.⁷

While those from China were increasing as a proportion of new arrivals the concept of 'Chinese' continued to be a broad one and one difficult of accurate definition. As sociologist Poo Kong Kee expressed it:

The problems of enumerating an ethnic group like the Chinese who came to Australia from many places can be illustrated by the pilot tests conducted by

³ Cheong, Doreen, Zou, Mimi, Loong, Nikki (ed), *From great grandmothers to great granddaughters: the stories of six Chinese Australian women* (Katoomba, N.S.W.: Echo Point Press, 2006, pp.72-76.

⁴ Liu Hong and 劉宏, Explaining the Dynamics and Patterns of Chinese Emigration since 1980: A Historical and Demographic Perspective / 1980 年以來中國國際移民潮的動力與模式：歷史的和人口的考察, *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1, Special Issue on Chinese Business History (June 2005), pp.92-110.

⁵ Jia Gao, *Chinese migrant entrepreneurship in Australia from the 1990s*, p.33.

⁶ Hunt, Stanley, *From Shekki to Sydney: an autobiography* (Broadway, N.S.W.: Wild Peony, 2009), p.170.

⁷ Hunt, Stanley, *From Shekki to Sydney: an autobiography* (Broadway, N.S.W.: Wild Peony, 2009), pp.179-180.

the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the 1986 Population Census Ethnicity Committee to develop a measure of ethnic origin for the last census. In a survey conducted in Sydney in May 1983, 130 persons were found to identify themselves as 'Chinese' in reply to the test question 'With what Australian ethnic group(s) does each person identify?' Of the 130 'Chinese' so identified, only 17% were born in China, 9% were born in Australia, and the large majority, i.e. 74% were born in a variety of other countries.⁸

This problem defining ethnicity was strongest with people from Malaysia and Vietnam with estimates of 60% of those from Malaysia and from Vietnam 30% being Chinese.⁹

In the 1960s the conservative government and the Immigration Department had anxiously feared popular discontent from its gradual dismantling of the White Australia policy. Apart from a series of angry letters this had not eventuated. The Whitlam governments more far reaching changes, the introduction of multiculturalism, and the Fraser governments welcoming of thousands of refugees from Indo-China had all occurred quickly and with little or no obvious social discontent. In March 1984 this changed suddenly when historian Geoffrey Blainey gave a public lecture criticising levels of 'Asian immigration' that sparked off a public debate on this issue.

For the Chinese-Australian community this debating of immigration issues and the role of non-Europeans within society marked the first time in generations that Chinese-Australians participated publically in such a discussion. Though this was not the case at first and Francis Lee felt that there was little response and a reluctance from Chinese community organisations to be political.¹⁰ However, in March 1984 the Australian Chinese Forum was founded as Chinese-Australians began to participate in open politics once more.¹¹ While in October 1984 ACCA representatives Stanley Hunt and Gary Leung did participate in a debate on TV's Channel 7.¹²

This need to consciously raise the profile of Chinese Australians was the result of past White Australia policy and racist attitudes in general that had created in the Chinese Australian community a sense that keeping a low profile and not complaining was key to their survival. In 1988 occurred a symbolic and practical example of major change

⁸ Kee, Poo Kong, *Chinese immigrants in Australia: construction of a socio-economic profile* (Parkville, Vic.: Institute of Applied Economics and Social Research, 1988), p.7.

⁹ Kee, Poo Kong, *Chinese immigrants in Australia: construction of a socio-economic profile* (Parkville, Vic.: Institute of Applied Economics and Social Research, 1988), p.8.

¹⁰ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), pp.135-136.

¹¹ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.140.

¹² Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.137.

in this thinking when ACCA took then prominent radio commentator Ron Casey to court for discrimination.¹³

Irene Moss, who grew up in Sydney's Chinatown, reports that in the early days of the Anti-discrimination Board for which she then worked, there were few Chinese complaints, a situation that had changed by the early 1980s.¹⁴ This was a change greatly facilitated by the many reforms in Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) and the ability to make appeals introduced in the 1970s and 1980s that began to overcome a reluctant to protest of those of non-English speaking backgrounds.¹⁵

Political activism and making complaints was not of course the only way Chinese-Australians raised their profile in this period. Community functions hosted by the Chinese community such as the Dragon Balls of the past were tried and true methods and the Annual Lady Mayoress' Dinner organised by the Chinese community to which the then still illegal gambling houses donated is one example of this.¹⁶

The Chinese-Australian community, like the broader community, was changing internally as well, especially in regard to its attitudes to women. Thus when Chinese President Hu Yaobang visited Australia in 1985 it was considered a matter of some note when women were allowed to sit with men at the VIP table.¹⁷ However Chinese-Australian women were doing much more than sitting at VIP tables and the ability of Chinese-Australian's to take a place of equality within mainstream society is better illustrated by the rise to positions of authority of a number of Chinese-Australian women including the first Chinese background person elected to an Australian Parliament in Helen Sham-Ho, as well as the successful careers of Angela Chan, Irene Moss, and Kaylin Simpson Lee, as well as Annette Shun Wah, Helene Chung Martin, Kylie Kwong, and Norma King Koi among others.

In March 1988 Helen Sham-Ho was elected to the NSW Parliament as a Liberal Party member. In that same year then Liberal Party leader John Howard attempted to make immigration an election issue. In this he failed and the following year as a result of Chinese actions in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, Prime Minister Bob Hawke made an announcement regarding Chinese students in Australia that had major consequences in the following decade.

¹³ Fitzgerald, *Red Tape, Gold Scissors*, p.151.

¹⁴ Irene Moss, "Chinese or Australian? Growing up in a bicultural twilight zone from the 1950s on", in Morag Loh and Christine Ramsay, *Survival and celebration: an insight into the lives of Chinese immigrant women, European women married to Chinese and their female children in Australia from 1856 to 1986* (Melbourne: M. Loh and C. Ramsay, 1986), p.19.

¹⁵ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), pp.120-123.

¹⁶ Hunt, Stanley., *From Shekki to Sydney: an autobiography* (Broadway, N.S.W.: Wild Peony, 2009), p.173.

¹⁷ Hunt, Stanley., *From Shekki to Sydney: an autobiography* (Broadway, N.S.W.: Wild Peony, 2009), p.178.