

## Historical notes on 82-84 Dixon St

The buildings on 82 and 84 Dixon St were erected around 1910 when the land was purchased by Phillip Lee Chun and the Kwong War Chong & Company was set up in 84 Dixon St. The Kwong War Chong was established in 1883 in Campbell St by several partners, including Phillip Lee Chun who had come to Australia in 1874. The store moved to 84 Dixon St in 1910, where it operated as a general store and trading company until 1987.<sup>1</sup> The adjoining site of 82 Dixon St was rented out to a number of individuals and stores throughout the same period.<sup>2</sup>

Phillip Lee Chun was one of Sydney's most successful Chinese merchants, eventually buying out all his partners in the Kwong War Chong and converting it into a family owned business. All the partners, except one, arrived in Sydney before 1902 and all except one had returned to China by the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> The Kwong War Chong was a classic example of an overseas Chinese store; selling imported Chinese goods and foodstuffs to local Chinese market gardeners, acting as a distribution point for similar stores located throughout NSW and Qld, and providing services such as dormitory accommodation and remittance transfers to its customers from the same local district in China. These Sydney-based stores were able to provide services that reached back to the villages because they were part of a network of stores related by ownership and/or common partners in Hong Kong and the home districts.<sup>4</sup> Kwong War Chong & Co. was typical of many such stores, run by people from Zhongshan County, south China, and was used by market gardeners and others from that county.<sup>5</sup>

This link with a particular locality or county was essential to the operation of the store. It was not sufficient that the owner was 'Chinese' and sold largely to other

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Norman Lee, Sydney, 25 September 1997 (1 & 10) and AA (NSW), SP42/1; N59/3386, Kwong War Chong & Co., 'Particulars form', 30 October 1951.

<sup>2</sup> City of Sydney, Assessment Books: Lang Ward, 1902-1918, Roll 88 and Phillip Ward, 1924-1950, Roll 51.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Archives (NSW), SP42/1; N59/3386 Kwong War Chong & Co., "Particulars form", 30 October 1951.

<sup>4</sup> The 'General Merchants' firm of Sun Sam Choy had 25 partners, only five were in Sydney, nine were in Newcastle, one in Glenn Innes, eight in Hong Kong and a further two in Canton. AA (NSW), SP42/1; C29/48, Ping Fun, Certificate of Registration of a firm with the Registrar-General, Sun Sam Choy – General Merchants, no.3, 694, 5 June 1906.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Norman Lee, 25 September 1997 (2). For a map of counties of the Pearl River Delta areas, south China see Michael Williams, *Chinese Settlement in NSW - A thematic history* (Sydney: Heritage Office of NSW, 1999) <http://www.heritage.NSW.gov.au>

‘Chinese’. Phillip Lee Chun was from Long Du, a small district within the County of Zhongshan in the Pearl River Delta region of China. This meant that he could speak the Long Du dialect and had sufficient contacts to guarantee the transfer of remittances back to the villages and families of his customers. In fact by the 1930s Phillip Lee Chun’s connections were so successful that he had established not just connection with similar remittance stores in Hong Kong and Long Du, as was usual among overseas Chinese merchants, but had actually founded branch stores in both Hong Kong and the Zhongshan County capital of Shekki.<sup>6</sup>

The Sydney stores such as the Kwong War Chong used their links and partnerships with those in rural NSW to transfer remittances to the villages and imports from China such as birds’ nests, smoked duck, lychees and medicine herbs.<sup>7</sup> The Kwong War Chong also stocked the type of goods people might want to take back with them to the village, boiled lollies, Arnott’s biscuits (plains not creams), umbrellas, shoes and tools.<sup>8</sup> The Kwong War Chong also hosted a Sunday lunch for Long Du market gardeners who would come in every Saturday to sell their vegetables at the markets and stay overnight at in the upstairs dormitories. This Sunday lunch was the sole recreation and opportunity for socialisation for the gardeners who lived the rest of the week on their gardens.<sup>9</sup>

The stores also provided services for those members of the Chinese community who were from the same locality in China. While people could use stores run by those from other localities, for sending remittances and other services relative to their villages they would not have been useful.<sup>10</sup> The stores with connections to the County

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<sup>6</sup> In Sydney, the Kwong War Chong (廣和豐), in Hong Kong, the Kwong War Fong (廣和丰) and the Kwong War Cheong & Co (廣和祥) was the branch in Shekki.

<sup>7</sup> Hong Sing of Reservoir St, Surry Hills sold to stores in Tenterfield, Emmaville and Tingha, AA(NSW), SP1122/1; N57/2220, Chang Wai Sheu Sing. Janis Wilton, *Chinese Voices, Australian Lives* (University of New England, Ph.D., 1996), p.133, for details of northern NSW connections with Sydney. For imports, AA (NSW), A1026, Correspondence in connection with Immigration Restriction Act 1904-12, vol. 3, report, ‘Check on importation of Chinese Goods’, Collector of Customs to Comptroller-General, 5/6/08.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Norman Lee, Sydney, 25 September 1997 (1 & 10) and Australian Archives (NSW), SP42/1; N59/3386, Kwong War Chong & Co., “Particulars form”, 30 October 1951.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with William Lee, 20/3/99.

<sup>10</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling & Immorality and charges of bribery against members of the police force* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1892), p.115, as San Tin reported of his Lodging House, ‘only friends and countrymen [of his district or county] stop there’. C. F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: the Chinese in Australia, 1901-1921* (Richmond: Raphael Arts,

of Zhongshan such as Wing On, Onyik Lee and the Kwong War Chong, paid fares, purchased tickets, arranged Immigration Restriction Act paperwork, provided accommodation and even lent money for the first remittance home, including a letter written by the firm's scribe if necessary.<sup>11</sup>

Remittances to the family in the village were a significant part of the lives of Chinese people in Australia before 1949.<sup>12</sup> Nineteenth century remittances may have been in gold but by the 1930s, bank drafts were more common. In this case, a store collected the individual remittances from its customers and a standard letter was written to the family, usually by the store's clerk, to accompany the payment.<sup>13</sup> The Kwong War Chong, for example, charged a small commission on each remittance and consolidated them into a single draft drawn on the English, Scottish and Australian Bank in pounds sterling. The draft was then sent to the Hong Kong branch of the Kwong War Chong, where it was converted to Hong Kong dollars and then into Chinese dollars for the money to be sent to the Zhongshan County capital Shekki. The store's branch in Shekki then distributed the money to the families, either by their collecting it or by it being delivered to the villages by the firm's clerks. A receipt, which included a letter back to Sydney, would be signed and returned to the shop in Dixon St, where it was set up on a rack in the front window for people to collect.<sup>14</sup>

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1977), p.46, discusses this feature of the stores. Interview with Arthur Gar Lock Chang, Sydney, 7 March 1998 (Tape 2, B, 0.00).

<sup>11</sup> *Royal Commission*, p.115, lines, 4567-71, Sam Tin reported that as many as 50 stayed in his lodging house 'when they have been going away to China, or going into the country'. Victor Gow remembers he and his father in the 1920s staying above the Kwong War Chong store, Dixon Street Sydney, on buying trips from Wollongong. Interview with Arthur Gar Lock Chang, Sydney, 7 March 1998 (Tape 2, B, 0.75) & Victor Gow, 30 October 1997 (9).

<sup>12</sup> Breakdowns of figures are not available but in 1927 the Manager of one Sydney Bank stated, 'In this Branch alone, the Hong Kong exchange sold by us yearly averages £600,000.' William Liu papers, Box 1, ML MSS 6294, Letter, 16/8/27, Manger, C.A. Morgan, The English Scottish and Australian Bank Ltd to Mr W. J. L. Liu.

<sup>13</sup> *Royal Commission*, p.55, line, 2126; Shirley Fitzgerald, *Red Tape, Gold Scissors* (Sydney: State Library of NSW Press, 1997), p. 47, refers to an early mishap which may have encouraged the use of a safer system. Interview with Norman Lee, Sydney, 25 September 1997 (2). When the Bank of China began to take over all remittances after 1949 it issued a standard letter form to accompany remittances that may have been modeled on that created by the stores' scribes. Such a letter had 5 points: best wishes, write more often, let me know when received, have received your letter & tell how to spend the money in another letter. Mar Letters, no.264, Bank of China notice, 5 June 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Norman Lee, Sydney, 25 September 1997 (2,3 &4). Miao Wenye 繆文雨 & Gao Huanzhang 高煥章, "Shiqi yinye de huiyi" 石岐銀業的回憶 (Recollections of the Shiqi silver industry), *Zhongshan wenshi* 中山文史 (Zhongshan Cultural History), Vol.1-3, [1962-1965], 1989, pp.88-90, discusses commissions earned between Shiqi and Hong Kong. The Tiy Loy & Co. of the Gao Yao people in Sussex St. Sydney still have such a letter rack, now used only for correspondence.

This was the system used by most *huaqiao* with small amounts to remit. It was a system that relied on family-like connections among people from the same village or locality. Something banks could not offer. Despite this, elements of mistrust could be present. A remittance customer once complained that his family had not received their money and accused Phillip Lee Chun of stealing the remittance. Phillip Lee Chun was sitting outside his shop in Dixon St one evening, “taking the air” when, according to his son Norman Lee, he was suddenly struck on the head by a piece of “two by four”. The man later apologised when his family sent word that they had received the money.<sup>15</sup>

Merchants such as Phillip Lee Chun performed a number of functions within both the Chinese and wider community through their ability to in some measure ‘cross the racial barriers’ that were such a prominent feature of the times. They did this by being leading members of organisations within their communities. Phillip Lee Chun for example was a member of the Xiangyi Long Du Tong Sen Tong (香邑隆都同善堂), a *tongxianghui* (同鄉會) or ‘same place society’ for people of Zhongshan origin which met upstairs in 82 Dixon St and which assisted its members in such social functions as the return of the poor and deceased to their villages in China.

Phillip Lee Chun was also a member of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce which among other functions negotiated cheaper fares for impoverished members of the Chinese communities who the *tongxianghui* were assisted to return home. More generally, the purchase of tickets for ships was another matter handled by the stores in both Sydney and Hong Kong.<sup>16</sup> In this, the average Chinese person had little choice as shipping agents preferred not to have to deal with Chinese people directly.<sup>17</sup> The stores knowledge of European ways, English and the capacity of the store managers

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<sup>15</sup> Interview Norman Lee, Sydney, 25 September 1997 (5).

<sup>16</sup> Such arrangements go back to at least the 1880s, when tickets purchased in bulk in Hong Kong would be sold in the villages regardless of names on tickets, SP42/1, C33/7368, Harry Chun Fook, memo Collector of Customs to Deputy Crown Solicitor, 18/9/33, & Fitzgerald, *Red Tape, Golden Scissors*, p.26.

<sup>17</sup> ‘... if an ordinary Chinamen came to book a passage they would refuse to take his money; he would have to book through a Chinese merchant.’ *Royal Commission*, p.99, lines, 3982-83. Yong, *New Gold Mountain*, p.80.

and merchant's class position to override, to some extent at least, racial bias was a significant factor here.

For similar reasons Phillip Lee Chun and the Kwong War Chong were also important in assisting those applying for a 'Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test' (CEDT) whenever they wished to visit their families in China and to return to Australia. The filling in of the application forms and filing them at Customs House were carried out by those in the stores such as the Kwong War Chong whose clerks had sufficient skills in English.

As a result of his role in assisting both his fellow Chinese and the Immigration Restriction Act administrators Phillip Lee Chun became very well known to the Customs officials, being described in their documents as a 'well known Chinese'.<sup>18</sup>

While nearly all of Phillip Lee Chun's original partners returned to China, he remained permanently in Australia with his wife, raising a large family. One son, William Jingsen Lee was sent to be educated in Hong Kong at age 12, but returned to enter Sydney University and became Sydney's first barrister of Chinese origin. Another son, Arthur Lee was also university educated and became a Professor of English at Amoy University. Other sons, Harry and then Norman Lee took over the Kwong War Chong in Dixon St after Phillip Lee Chun's death in the 1930s. His only daughter, Lily Lee accompanied the body back to the village and then settled down in Hong Kong.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> AA (NSW), SP726/1; Register of Certificates Exempting from the Dictation Test, 1902-1959.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Lily Lee, Hong Kong, 24 November 2000