

# NATIONAL

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Now on display in the National Library's Exhibition Gallery

National Library of Australia Seminar Series  
THE LEGACY OF SIR ROBERT MENZIES

Saturday 19 November 1994

# CROSSING BETWEEN

PAUL MACGREGOR DISCUSSES THE AUSTRALIA-CHINA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT WHICH IS A TRIPARTITE ENDEAVOUR BETWEEN

The Australia-China Council, with the assistance of the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne, and the National Library's Oral History Section, is conducting oral history interviews to document the human side of Australia-China relations before 1950.

The project's aim is to record interviews with two types of people, Chinese Australians who were adults in Australia before 1950, and Australians who lived in China before 1950.

Australians from all walks of life—missionaries, diplomats, business people and trade unionists, as well as journalists, writers, military personnel, students and tourists—have visited, studied, worked and lived in China since late last century.

A watershed in Australian-Chinese relations came in 1949 and 1950. The severing of many institutional and unofficial relations between Australia and China after the Communists assumed power in 1949, and the suspension at the same time of the ability of individuals to travel freely between the two countries, led to a point where now there is a lack of understanding of what was in fact a rich and varied contact between Australians and Chinese prior to 1950.

The Chinese Australian community between the 1920s and the 1940s was quite small, due to the impact of restrictive immigration laws after Federation. However, many who had family roots in Australia going back two or three generations still maintained regular contact with China. Little attention has been paid by historians to the experiences of these people, who had achieved significant integration into wider Australian society at the very time when the White Australia policy was at the height of its influence.

Those still alive who were part of the pre-1950 Chinese Australian community, or were part of the Australian experience in China, can

be regarded as rare treasures. Their stories make for valuable reflections on interaction between Western and Chinese cultures in the early 20th century.

## *A watershed in Australian-Chinese relations came in 1949 and 1950*

equipment and technical support, and is archiving the tapes and transcripts as part of its Oral History Collection.

The variety of experiences of the people interviewed so far is absorbing.

### AUSTRALIANS IN CHINA

Frank and Marjorie Stuckey, who have lived in Melbourne since the 1950s, were both born in North China before 1920. Frank's parents



ANZAC Day parade, Shanghai, 1940  
Photograph courtesy of Ivor Bowden

The initiative for the Australia-China Project came from the Museum of Chinese Australian History. The proposal was taken up with enthusiasm by the Australia-China Council, which suggested that the Oral History Section of the National Library should also be brought on board. The idea then developed into a tripartite endeavour. Funding and management supervision is provided by the Australia-China Council, and the Museum's curator, Paul Macgregor, is the Project Coordinator. The Museum also provides people from its network of trained volunteers interested in Chinese/Australian history to conduct the interviews. The National Library's Oral History Section is providing recording

were Australian missionaries with the London Missionary Service; his father, Dr Edward Stuckey, was first Director of the Peking Union Medical College, and later of the MacKenzie Memorial Hospital in Tianjin.

Frank remembers, as a boy of six, being towed in a billy cart with his sister along the tops of the old city walls of Peking one night, thinking how splendid the New Year's fireworks were, only to find out later that it was in fact China's first president, Yuan Shikai, attacking his rivals.

After returning to Melbourne for schooling in the 1920s, Frank returned to Tianjin in the late 1930s, meeting and marrying Marjorie Pennell just before the outbreak of World War 2 in the Pacific.



# BETWEEN CULTURES

BETWEEN THE AUSTRALIA-CHINA COUNCIL, THE MUSEUM OF CHINESE AUSTRALIAN HISTORY AND THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

Marjorie's father, a British émigré, Wilfred Pennell, was the editor of the *Peking and Tientsin Times*. Her mother, Luba Pansoshnik, was part of the substantial Russian population living in North China, especially in Manchuria, between 1900 and 1950.

Both Frank and Marjorie were interned by the Japanese in Shanghai during the latter part of the war.

Alastair Morrison was also in Peking when Japan attacked Pearl

Peking; of temples, markets, street performers; of the lifestyle of the foreigners who had made Peking their home; and of gentle cat-and-mouse games played between the diplomatic corps and Japanese intelligence.

Later in the war, he served with the British Army in Chungking, the wartime capital of Nationalist China; and was briefly in Shanghai at the war's end assisting with the return of British property to its owners. After 20 years as a District Officer in the British Colonial Service in Sarawak, Alastair and Hedda settled in Canberra in 1967.

Quite a different perspective on wartime China is provided by Bill Noonan and Pat Hamilton, of Sydney. Both men were Australian soldiers who served during 1941 and 1942 in the Australian contingent of Mission 204, an Allied commando taskforce sent into Southeast China over the Burma Road, to train Chinese Nationalist troops in guerilla warfare. The Mission was essentially ill-conceived, and a failure in its own terms; the Nationalist government didn't want the commandos, but didn't want to be seen to be rejecting Allied assistance. While much time was spent in training the Chinese Surprising Battalions, elaborate efforts were taken by the Nationalist Army to keep the taskforce away from fighting the Japanese.

Both Bill and Pat talk about the fascination and novelty of their experience of Chinese people and society, and of the pleasures and the frustrations they had in dealing with Chinese people at many levels within military and civilian circles. They also talk of the climatic hardships, the disease and lack of medical supplies, and of the transformation of their attitudes, from initial enthusiasm through to disillusion and disaffection, before the final order to evacuate.

Bill Hamilton was recruited in 1947 as Financial Officer to the

Australian Embassy in Nanking. At the time, the rampant inflation of the Chinese currency required a trained accountant to keep diplomatic finances in line. In late 1948

the government said that ... the new currency [the gold yuan] ... was backed by the might of China ... and that anyone who dealt ... on the black market with this currency would be executed. And there were a few [executed] in Shanghai. But in the second week after the introduction of the new currency ... all foreign embassies ... had a circular letter from the then [Nationalist government] Vice Minister for Finance, offering his house in Nanking for rental by one of the embassies at a very substantial rent, payable in United States dollars to a bank account in New York.

Bill stayed in Nanking until October 1949, witnessing the disintegration of the Nationalist government and the takeover by the Communists. Though not privy to most of the political work of the legation staff, he took an active part in the social life within the foreign diplomatic community in Nanking, recounting tales of balls and garden dinner parties, of evening cruises on the lake, of picnics and amateur theatrical endeavours.

The foreign community in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s is evoked by Ivor Bowden, who was born and grew up in Shanghai, the son of V.G. Bowden, later (in 1936) Australia's first Trade Commissioner to China.

## CHINESE AUSTRALIANS

Toylan Ah Ket, now living in Sydney, is the daughter of William Ah Ket, a second generation Chinese Australian who was the first Chinese barrister in Victoria, as well as being one of the most important members of the legal fraternity in Melbourne in the 1920s. Twice he was Acting Consul-General for China in



Lulu Meek Chinn with a friend and her two daughters

Photograph courtesy of Paul Macgregor

Harbour. He, too, had returned to the land of his birth, being one of the three sons of George Ernest Morrison, the renowned Australian who was *The Times* correspondent in Peking during the last years of the Manchu emperors. Alastair lived in Peking for two years between 1940 and 1941, and for part of that time he was a cipher clerk at the British Legation in Peking, but he also spent most of his spare time exploring the ancient city with Hedda Hammer, a German photographer who had lived and worked there since 1929, and whom he later married.

Hedda Morrison's celebrated photographs of China and Sarawak were recently exhibited at the National Library.

In his interview, Alastair paints vivid pictures of the old life of



Australia, and was one of two representatives of Chinese people in Australia during the first Chinese Republic Parliament in 1913.

Toylan's mother, Gertrude Bullock, was of English background. In her interview, Toylan gives a moving account of the courtship of her parents, which at first had to be conducted clandestinely because of opposition from Gertrude's father. Gertrude's employer discovered her secret, but instead of chastising her, took up her cause, and persuaded Gertrude's father to accept William as a son-in-law.

Toylan speaks much about her early family memories; growing up in the cultivated professional circles of upper middle-class Malvern, of garden parties, dinners, famous legal cases of the day and of the way her family moved easily within both Chinese and non-Chinese circles. She depicts the character and interests of her father vividly. Personally, and in his political and community involvements, he endeavoured to bring together the best of both West and East.

Thelma Cremin (nee Wong) talks of growing up in Tasmania and Melbourne as part of the extended Chinn family. Her grandfather, Ma Mon Chinn, had been one of the most important figures in the tin-mining Chinese community of Northeast Tasmania from the 1870s onwards, but as the tin became harder to win, the next generation moved to Melbourne and Sydney. In Melbourne the Chinn brothers were fruit and vegetable wholesalers, and Thelma's uncle Frank was a community leader and co-founder of the Young Chinese League of Melbourne. At Chinese New Year time, in Weldborough, Tasmania, between 1910 and 1920

people used to come from far and wide to ... celebrate because the one thing that I can remember was two poles with a cross beam and strung up were boxes and crackers underneath and they would light the crackers and as the crackers would burn ... they would burst open and toys and dolls would fly out ...

Stories of market-gardening, and Chinese involvement in the fruit and vegetable industry (70% of the trade at the turn of the century), have been recorded in interviews with George Lee Kim and Russell Moy.

George Lee Kim grew up with his grandparents in Bendigo in the 1920s. His grandfather had migrated from China as a gold seeker around 1870, later setting himself up as a market gardener on the outskirts of Bendigo. He, too, like William Ah Ket, married an English Australian, Ellen Plowright, herself from a goldmining family.

As a young boy, George would help his grandfather in the fields. George gives graphic and detailed descriptions of Chinese vegetable farming techniques, the natural fertilisation methods, the types of produce grown, and the social structure of the industry. He is perhaps the only person in Australia still alive who worked with Chinese market gardeners using traditional techniques, which makes his

Russell depicts the way in which clan allegiances were crucial not only to social structure within the Chinese community, but also to economic activity. In the 1920s, the Leong clan, among others, had a network of growers, wholesalers and suburban hawkers, who generally only traded within the clan, except at the point of sale to the non-Chinese consumer.

Russell's memory of who lived where, who ran what stores and which businesses in Little Bourke Street in the 1920s is superb. As most of his generation of Chinese Australians moved out of Chinatown after 1940, it is memories like his that bring the human story to what would otherwise be the dry records in council rate books. He tells of the reputations, the

*Australia is now  
recommencing the  
journey of  
integration with Asia*



*Wedding of Tutoy Chinn and Frank Wong, 1904*  
Photograph courtesy of Paul Macgregor

interview of particular historical significance.

Russell Moy also grew up in the 1920s, in Melbourne's Chinese quarter, around Little Bourke Street. His knowledge of fruit and vegetables is from the wholesaler's end, as his father managed the Leong clan's business, Hoong Cheong.

business and family links that official documents do not record.

Jean Tai-Linn Gooley also grew up in Little Bourke Street, marrying into the Gooley family which was the main supplier of fresh pork to the local community. As well as presenting another family's perspective on the interwar Little



Bourke Street, she also gives accounts of her involvement in the Chinese Christian congregations in Melbourne, and adds to our knowledge of the shifting allegiances between traditional Chinese religion and Christianity.

Until recently, Australian historiography of Chinese in Australia was built on European-Australian sources, and dealt much with the prejudice and discrimination shown towards Chinese in Australia. Through interviews such as these, the perspectives of Chinese Australians, their own sense of their histories in this country, the accommodations

there were many ways in which they did intermingle with Chinese, and all of those interviewed so far display an enthusiasm and respect for Chinese people and culture.

The people interviewed to date are only a small selection of those around Australia with stories to tell. There are at least 100 Australians still living who were in China before 1950, and at least several hundred Chinese Australians from the same period.

These early interviews were recorded as a pilot phase of the project. It is hoped that, given the initial success and the availability of



*Young Chinese Debutante League, 1947*  
Photograph courtesy of Paul Macgregor

## *the experiences of Australians in China add to our society's understanding*

they have chosen to make to the Anglo-Celtic mainstream, and the aspects of their Chinese backgrounds which they kept, are made known to a wider audience of Australians.

By comparison, the experiences of Australians in China add to our society's understanding of our ability to make cultural accommodations. Australians in China before 1949, like other Westerners there, kept mainly within the Western social circles. But

further funding, the project will continue into 1995.

Australia is now recommencing the journey of integration with Asia which as a nation it consciously repudiated in the 19th century. The Australia-China Oral History Project is invaluable because it shows that Australia's formal distancing of Asia was not the whole story, and that many Australians of the early 20th century, whether they were of European or Chinese background, were showing in their own lives and endeavours a willingness to explore cultural differences, not fear them.

PAUL MACGREGOR is Curator at the Museum of Chinese Australian History

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