

1960-1969: Students, citizenship & the end (nearly) of ‘White Australia’

With the exception of a small number of wartime arrivals from various regions of China, the sponsored arrivals, both official and unofficial, continued to be largely from the same small range of Cantonese speaking counties of southern China from where Chinese people had always come to Australia. A significant change in this pattern began in the 1950s with the institution of the ‘Colombo Plan’ and its associated student scholarships as well as increasing numbers of private overseas students studying in Australia. These students from non-European countries included many, who, although coming from outside China were in fact of Chinese origin. Throughout the decade of the 1960s there were some 12,000 arrivals who could be classified as Chinese.¹ Although arriving as students intending to return home, many were able to remain in Australia, often through local marriages, after the completion of their studies. According to the 1966 census there were over 26,000 Chinese people living in Australia, nearly half of whom were students or who had arrived as students.

This minor breach in the White Australia policy saw the arrival of more people who were not only non-white, but who were educated and middle class. In the same period the occupational spread of Chinese Australian’s became more dispersed, including professional and white-collar jobs. This was in contrast to the relatively narrow range of occupations of the pre-1949 period or even the 1950s when many people’s conditions of residence demanded they take up only certain occupations.² This increased interaction with Chinese people, even if only indirectly with China itself, was paralleled by a significant increased in trade with China well before the normalisation of relations in 1972. By 1967 for example, trade from Australia was 12.5% of China’s imports, mostly in wheat.³

Neither the students in the universities nor those working in more middle class professions in this period had a great deal of contact with the older Chinese Australian communities of Chinatown. This was indicated by Lee Siew Eng, himself a student at the time, when he reported that Sydney’s Chinatown was dead with most of the more successful members of the community living in a variety of Sydney suburbs.⁴ Nevertheless, many of those in the suburbs were also shopkeepers similar to those in Chinatown but catering as in previous generations to the wider community. Stanley Hunt and his father, for example, owned fruit shops in the western Sydney suburbs of Auburn and Merrylands. Here the Hunt’s not only catered for the boarder community but employed only a few workers of Chinese background. Gradual changes in the

¹ ABS Migration, Australia (3412.0), <http://www.border.gov.au/about/reports-publications/research-statistics/statistics/live-in-australia/historical-migration-statistics>

² Christine Inglis, Chinese in Australia, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 266-281.

³ Hou Minyue, China-Australia Trade: How Important and Complementary is it? *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006), pp. 155-179.

⁴ Fitzgerald, *Red Tape, Gold Scissors*, p.147

1960s reduced the scope of these small family-run businesses as shopping centres opened and cars became more common.⁵

The continuing isolation of the older Chinese Australian community in Chinatown also made it the favoured location of many of Sydney's then illegal gambling rooms. A convenience to many, including the NSW Premier:

Askin was a close friend of Chinatown's gambling king of the era, Henry Lee Young, who originally operated a casino from the Hop War dry cleaning and greengrocery premises at [35-37] Dixon Street. Young later [started] the Dixon Restaurant [at 51-55 Dixon St] and re-established his gambling house [at 64 Dixon St]. Askin personally intervened when three senior police were recognised dining with the casino operators at 33 Dixon Street in 1967.⁶

Not only did the NSW police maintain good relations with casino operators, so too did officers of the Immigration Department with the leaders of the Chinese Australian community:

“The presence of Calwell when Leader of the Opposition, along with Immigration Department staff who used to work under him, at Chinese Australian lunches, Chinese opera, functions and dinners is also recalled by Tony Palfreeman, who met Calwell at one or two Chinese ‘tiffins’ at venues such as Tai Yuen:

as I say there was this kind of love-hate relationship between them, between the Chinese and Calwell. Calwell's brief was to stop anyone coming in,^[1] but he seemed to be, he seemed to be, very friendly with Billy Liu and Billy Liu's colleagues, and they would slap each other on the back and say ‘Good^[1] to see you’, and use almost rather obscene comments to each other, which I won't repeat here, as if they were the best of mates. And they'd all sit down and have lunch together, always paid for by Billy Liu, always, Calwell thought his officers were guests of the Chinese community, and therefore paid for by Billy Liu, and they would sit around the table and discuss everything you could think of, until it came to the crunch about immigration. And they'd always bring it up, because that was the purpose of it. Calwell was on the face of it adamant that nothing could change, but he still accepted their food and hospitality. And so I found this a bit strange, because Calwell was acting in quite a schizophrenic way, that he would appear to be so friendly with this community but [when he was Minister for Immigration] once he would get back to Canberra he would sign deportation orders and put these assistant

⁵ Hunt, Stanley, *From Shekki to Sydney: an autobiography* (Broadway, N.S.W.: Wild Peony, 2009), pp.131-132.

⁶ *The Canberra Times*, 24 March 1985, p.36. Corrections, King Fong, December 2015.

cooks in gaol for staying a week over and all this stuff. So it was rough, and it was matey, and it was hard to grasp that connection.”⁷

The power these immigration officers had over the Chinese Australian community was little known to outsiders. Just as the efforts required by the students and their families to send them to study in Australia was also not well-known by their fellow Australian-born students. This ignorance was part of the assimilationist atmosphere of the times that encouraged a polite unseeing of foreign culture. When Christine Ramsay, for example, arrived as a student to attend an Adelaide High School she was one of only three Chinese students and found a complete lack of interest in her background in Singapore.⁸

Francis Lee arrived as a student from Hong Kong in the early 1960s after his parents had arranged the necessary paperwork, including ‘tea money’ for the immigration application.⁹ For this, like many with Hong Kong and Cantonese connections, they relied on agents considered ‘a distant cousin’.¹⁰ Francis went by ship, as it was cheaper than a plane, although in a change from pre-war conditions it was second-class for most Chinese passengers, with Russians from China in third class.¹¹ Once a student at university Francis spent his holidays working for a Chinese restaurant run by a fellow villager of his mothers.¹² He also witnessed his ‘Uncle Tat’s’ sudden arrest and deportation for overstaying his one year ‘work experience’ visa.¹³ Unlike Colombo Plan students, who were required to return to their country of origin for a time even when they wished to remain, Francis as a private student of engineering was recruited straight from university into the then Department of Public Works.¹⁴ Thanks to recent changes in citizenship laws for those officially described as ‘non-Europeans’ he was also able to apply for citizenship in 1968.¹⁵ This newly created

⁷ Interview with Tony Palfreeman, 16 September 2004, in Charlotte Jordon Greene, ‘Fantastic Dreams’: William Liu and the origins and influence of protest against the White Australia Policy in the 20th century (PhD, University of Sydney, 2005), p.220.

⁸ Christine Ramsay, “Mostly Celebration – A student who stayed”, 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.30.

⁹ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.17.

¹⁰ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.20.

¹¹ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.23.

¹² Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.49.

¹³ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.59.

¹⁴ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.71.

¹⁵ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.74.

equality of treatment in citizenship did not prevent his supervisor informing him, albeit sympathetically, that promotions would be difficult ‘because you are Chinese’.¹⁶

When in 1966 citizenship after five years residence became equal for both Europeans and non-Europeans this was yet another gradual step in the dismantling of the White Australia policy. A push to dismantling that the Chinese Australian community as a whole did not participate in at this stage, although one member, William Liu, certainly played a prominent role. Liu was, for example, “closely involved in organised opposition to the White Australia Policy, assisting with the production of the Immigration Reform Group’s ‘Control or Colour Bar’ pamphlet which was published in 1960.”¹⁷

Despite William Liu’s efforts the Chinese-Australian community’s direct contribution to changing the White Australia policy was minimal unless you see their very political quietude at this time as assisting in bringing about changes that many in the broader community would have regarded as shocking. William Liu described the basis of the low-profile many Chinese-Australians preferred to keep at that time:

It’s been a lone battle for me. The Chinese feel strongly about this, but they will never come out with it; they don’t dare to get involved, because the worst name you can be called is a ‘Commo’. You have to be a bit of a scallywag like me, then you get immune.¹⁸

As late as 1968 William Liu’s efforts to even attend the annual Citizenship Convention was still being rejected.¹⁹ Yet by 1965 the Australian Labor Party had formally removed any reference to the ‘White Australia Policy’ from its platform, while in the following year Harry Chan was elected mayor of Darwin. Nevertheless, even the gradual changes the Holt government was bringing about generated many protest letters.²⁰ In 1966 Prime Minister Holt described the most substantial of these changes:

First, it has been decided that non-European people who are already here under temporary permits but are likely to be here indefinitely, should not have to wait 15 years before applying for resident status and for Australian citizenship, but should be able to apply after five years’ residence, so ending a situation often criticised for its effect on individuals and families.

¹⁶ Lee, Francis, *Out of bounds: journey of a migrant* (Petersham North, N.S.W.: Universe Books, 2010), p.77.

¹⁷ Charlotte Jordon Greene, ‘Fantastic Dreams’: William Liu and the origins and influence of protest against the White Australia Policy in the 20th century (PhD, University of Sydney, 2005), p.208.

¹⁸ Helen Frizell, "THE BATTLERS: Sellen & Liu", Sydney Morning Herald, 15 January 1968, p. 6, MLMSS 6294/11, cited in Charlotte Jordon Greene, ‘Fantastic Dreams’: William Liu and the origins and influence of protest against the White Australia Policy in the 20th century (PhD, University of Sydney, 2005), p.241.

¹⁹ *The Canberra Times*, 12 January 1968, p.3.

²⁰ Jordens, Ann-Mari, *Alien to citizen: settling migrants in Australia, 1945-75* (St. Leonards N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian Archives, 1997), p.218.

The second decision is that applications for entry by well qualified people wishing to settle in Australia will be considered on the basis of their suitability as settlers, their ability to integrate readily, and their possession of qualifications which are in fact positively useful to Australia. They will be able after five years' stay on temporary permits to apply for resident status and citizenship. They will be able to bring their immediate families with them on first arrival.²¹

These changes to the White Australia policy, which included the removal of nationality requirements for aged, invalid and widows pensions, should be seen in the context of the recognition of Aborigines and the general move within the Australian community to enhance equality on various levels. While Chinese Australian's benefited they were not the only or even the major consideration. One of the highest profile cases that helped push change was the case in 1965 of Nancy Prasad, who was of Fijian Indian origin. However, after 1966 the momentum for change in immigration became diluted as the anti-Vietnam War and the moment for Women's Right's absorbed more and more protest energies. Nevertheless, the subject remained under consideration and a 1968 working paper addressed the issue of Asian migration by calling for a quota and declaring that "attitudes to inter-racial marriages are changing rapidly" as an indication that community hostility to increased Asian migration was falling.²²

Even more important than political factors was perhaps the post-war immigration program itself. As James Jupp has explained it:

An important factor eroding support for White Australia was the painless integration of large numbers of non-English-speaking Europeans under the mass migration programs launched in 1947. Originally these were intended to sustain White Australia by supplementing British immigration from Europe. However, Europeans were not the same as the British in many cultural respects. Governments moved away from assimilationist towards multicultural approaches, though this was not effective at the national level until 1973. These approaches no longer expected immigrants to become invisibly indistinct from Anglo-Australians. With the sources of immigrants extending towards the Middle East and the completion of an agreement with Turkey in 1967, the cultural arguments for White Australia became untenable, leaving exposed the crude racism which underlay the policy but which was officially denied.²³

²¹ Immigration Minister Opperman, MHR, Liberal, in Parliamentary Debates [Hansard], Vol. 50, 9 March 1966, pp. 68-9, cited in Charlotte Jordon Greene, 'Fantastic Dreams': William Liu and the origins and influence of protest against the White Australia Policy in the 20th century (PhD, University of Sydney, 2005), p.234.

²² Gustav Nossal, *Goals Ahead: 20 years past – the years ahead* (Canberra: Dept. of Immigration, 1968), pp.15-18.

²³ James Jupp, From 'White Australia' to 'Part of Asia': Recent Shifts in Australian Immigration Policy towards the Region, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Special Issue: Diversity and Comparability: International Migrants in Host Countries on Four Continents (Spring, 1995), p.209.

By 1970, a paper written for the Australian Citizenship Convention, which had always focused on efforts to assimilate European migrants, commented that: “The only politically emotive issue is that of Asian migration which, being a subject of its own, I have not discussed.”²⁴ Much discussion would take place on this issue in the following decades.

Questions to ask/answer

- What were student numbers – arrivals/stayers?
- Details on gambling in Chinatown?
- Bribery and corruption – police/immigration?
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²⁴ Fabinyi, Andrew, *Social and cultural issues of migration* (Canberra: Australian Citizenship Convention, 1970), p.21.