

Pioneer Spirit – Unveil the Twisted Story

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Good morning to you all! 你们好！

It is a great honour as the first Australian Chinese woman in Victorian history to be here and speak to you at the 50th Australia Day Women’s Ceremony.

Thank you very much, Madame President, for inviting me to be today’s guest speaker at such an important occasion. As a China-born Australian woman, I would like to take this unusual opportunity to tell you a bit of the history of the Victorian Chinese and of Chinese culture, especially the role of Chinese women, to help your understanding why the Chinese look different, behave differently and are difficult to fit into mainstream society. The purpose is to bridge the cultural gap between the Australian Chinese and rest of the community. I will also finish with a bit of what I have been trying to achieve.

1. Victorian Chinese in the early years

The Victorian Chinese have been living in the state since the Gold Rush in 1850s, longer than the most of the European settlers in Australia. Currently there are 56,000 Chinese living in Victoria.¹ It is great pity that, despite such a large population and a long history in the country, not many people know, understand and accept the Australian Chinese and their culture. For more than one and half centuries, the Australian Chinese have lived here like a silent community coloured by a twisted stereotype perception as unhealthy, menial and self-interested in the stories written by a handful white writers.

¹ NCWV Newsletter, Dec 2010, p.4

According to the historian (Qiusheng Zhang 2002), the earliest group of Chinese labours arrived in Australia in 1848. They were 120 Chinese men from Canton in South China and then they were transferred from Sydney to Victoria after they landed in Sydney Harbour.²

Although a few Chinese people came to Australia before, the first wave of Chinese influx under the immigration labours' contracts was from 1850 till 1890. Together more than 100,000 Chinese worked in the goldfields during the period. The Chinese gold diggers made great contributions to Victoria. Their hard work enriched the colonial state and created prosperity for the cities and towns, especially Bendigo, Ballarat and Ararat. Then Victoria was called "New Gold Mountain" compared with "Old Gold Mountain" of San Francisco in USA. The Chinese gold diggers paid the highest tax of 10 Pounds per person to the colonial government under the discriminatory Chinese Poll Tax. Under the "White Australian" policy, the Chinese population declined sharply after Federation in 1901. There were only 8,500 Chinese left in 1923.³ It was less than one tenth of the population in the peak time.

During those years, the Chinese was treated as sub-human and the Chinese women were more like "invisible people" because the Chinese wives and their children were not allowed to enter Australia under the "*Immigration Restriction Act*" in 1901. The famous Australian Chinese sniper, Billy Sing, whose story was shown as a TV series during ANZAC Day in 2010, who had a very sad life after returning from WWI because he was not allowed to bring his wife to Australia.

2. Explore the reason why the Chinese were treated badly

Now, let's think about a few questions at the moment:

- i) Why didn't the Chinese people stay here although they came much earlier than many Europeans and came in quite large numbers?
- ii) Why were the Chinese treated badly, suffering anti-Chinese violence and discrimination in the early years?
- iii) Even now, why do the Chinese often become the targets of racial discrimination whenever the economy suffers a downturn, such as, Pauline Hanson's anti-Asian and anti-immigration view?

² Zhang, Qiusheng (2002), "A History of the Chinese Emigrants to Australia", Cited *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 Oct, 1848, Beijing University of Foreign Languages Press, p.57

³ Hu, May et. al.(1996), *Australia Down-under*, Golden Land Publishing House, Melbourne, pp. 25-26

The reason comes from the both sides of the coin.

Firstly, why did the massive Chinese migrants go back to China and not stay in Australia in the early years?

The “White Australia” policy was in effect for more than half a century.

The Immigration Act required anyone applying for entry visas to sit a “Dictation Test”, 50 words of designated European languages. It played as a colour bar to ban any Asians and Africans from entering to Australia and accept only Europeans.

Professor John Fitzgerald called for recognition of the place of the Australian Chinese in our history. He said that what it meant to be Australian in White Australia still excludes the Chinese Australians from their rightful place in Australian history as Australians.⁴

Secondly, why were the majority of the Chinese gold diggers were men, not women?

The reason was mainly because their wives were prohibited from settling in Australia under the Act after the Federation. As Professor Fitzgerald stated in his book *Big White Lie* (2007), the restrictions made Chinese Australian men more than usually mobile to commute in ever greater numbers and frequency between Australian and China to marry, raise children and visit their families and the individual sojourning pattern was reinforced as a family strategy coping with the discrimination.⁵

According to the Chinese culture, men are bread earners. They should go out and work to feed their families. Women are home bound for cooking, raising children and looking after their elder parents. One can tell this tradition by looking at the Chinese characters.



Portrait of Nell Nomchong, an early Braidwood settler, wearing her mother's wedding frock, 1877, courtesy of National Library of Australia.



Dorothy 'Biddy' (Tue Foang) Chinn with children of her friend, courtesy of Museum of Chinese Australian History in Chinatown Melbourne.



Dorothy Chinn and Mrs Amy Moo Tong Young playing Chinese instruments, courtesy of Museum of Chinese Australian History in Chinatown Melbourne.

⁴ Fitzgerald, John, Professor of La Trobe University (2007), *Big White Lie – Chinese Australians in White Australia*, UNSW Press, Preface, p.viii

⁵ Fitzgerald, J.(2007), *As Above*, pp.50-51

The Chinese character for man is 男, it means that man is the power of paddies field. The character for woman is 女, it means that woman stays at home, get pregnant and feed babies. That is why women had bound feet in the feudal society a thousand years ago. They were not allowed to go out to seek work.

We all know that without women, there would be no children. Without women, there wouldn't be any families. So, without families, the Chinese migrants could not able to settle down in Australia unless they married local women, including the whites and Aboriginals. Fitzgerald said the *Immigration Restriction Act* which stopped Chinese women entering Australia, and played a part in skewing the unbalanced gender ratio.⁶ This was one reason why the majority of the Chinese left Australia after the Federation.

Thirdly, why the Australian Chinese were treated badly in the early years? Has the racial discrimination disappeared now?

There were a number of anti-Chinese violence which happened in the gold fields of late 19th century. The Chinese were discriminated against in various fields in White Australia. They did not have the rights to vote. They were banned from joining the unions because the "Working men's Paradise" only opened the door to the whites in those years. Nowadays, the Australian Chinese still have difficulties of getting into the positions of governmental and management levels. There are only a few Australian Chinese politicians compared to their population.

Apart from the elements of obvious white superiority, the difference of the culture and values between Western and Eastern also played a part. Chinese everywhere, anytime have always been proud of their culture. China has 5,000 years of civilization and 2,000 years history under Feudal System ruled by Emperors and Empresses. "China" in Chinese characters "中国" means that it is the centre of the world.

Wherever they go, there is a Chinatown. Wherever they live, there is a Chinese restaurant. The influence of Chinese culture is so strong that it influences the surrounding countries, such as Indo-China, Mongolia, Koreas and Japan. The Chinese migrants often refuse to mix with local culture and tradition. They are reluctant to fit in local society. When their children were born in Australia, the parents send them back to their hometown in China to learn Chinese language and culture.

We learnt these stories from the recently aired documentary "Immigration Nation – The Secret History of Us" on SBS Television. Australian Chinese men who entered Australia before the Federation were aging and dieing. Very often they were cremated and their bodies were

⁶ Fitzgerald, John, Professor of La Trobe University (2007), *Big White Lie – Chinese Australians in White Australia*, UNSW Press, p.50

shipped back to their hometown in China. In Chinese tradition, it is called “falling leaves are always returning to their roots”.

Unlike the Western colonials, the Chinese emigrants didn't intent to settle in foreign countries. When the Chinese Captain, Zheng He, travelled for the Empire across Pacific Ocean to Australia 600 years ago, China had no intension to colonize this continent. Even now, when China has emerged as one of the superpowers in the world, the Chinese leaders have no intension whatsoever to invade any countries no matter what excuses made, whether anti-terrorists or mass destruction weapons. This is based on the Chinese philosophy – Taoism. Confucius says, “己所不欲，勿施于人”, it means, “if you don't want to be offended, don't offend others.”

3. The Chinese migrants after the Federation

While massive European migrants came to Australia during and after WW1 and WW2, Asians and Africans were banned from entering under “White Australia” policy. After 1951, a number of young Asian students came to Australia to study under the United Nation's “Colombo Scholarship plan”. These students from South-East Asia were young and intelligent of good characters. Their positive images were quite different from the gold diggers. Australian society slowly changed their attitude towards the Asians.

In 1958, the Government formally discarded the Dictation Test. The Immigration Minister announced the non-discriminatory immigration policy that all Australian residents, regardless their race, colour, gender, were allowed to naturalise to be Australian citizens after five years residency in March 9, 1966.⁷ Before then, the non-white residents had to wait for 15 years to be naturalised compared to 5 years for whites.

In 1972, the Government announced multicultural policy so that the “White Australia” policy was finally abolished. In December of the year, the Whitlam Government formally established foreign relationship with China. From 1970s till now, there have been many waves of Asian migrants coming to Australia under various immigration programs, such as, skilled, business and humanitarian migration schemes.⁸ There are also thousands of students from surrounding Asian countries as Australian's education industry flourished.

The notable Asian migration waves were: the Vietnamese refugees' influx in late 1970s, the Cambodian refugees in early 1980. After Tiananmen Massacre in June 4, 1989, 40,000 Chinese students and their immediate family members were allowed to stay and apply for

⁷ Willard, Myra (1974), *History of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press.

⁸ Sherrington, Geoffrey (1989), *Australian Immigrants 1788-1978*, George Allen & Unwin.

permanent residency after four years temporary visas. Before the decision made on November 1, 1994, a number of researches found that 75 % of the Chinese students had tertiary qualification, 84% of them were under 40 years old and their cost on Medicare per capita were less than half of the average Australians.⁹

4. About Myself

The latest wave of Chinese migrants mainly came from Mainland China between late 1980s and early 1990s. Forty thousand of the Chinese students and their immediate family members were granted Australian permanent residency around 1995 after four years temporary entry permit. I am one of those.

I came to Australia in September 1988 as a self-funded student. I studied at International College of Language, located opposite the Ross House at the Flinders lane. Now, it is a police station.

I was qualified teacher for chemistry and English in China. But I could not find any job of teaching apart from teaching Chinese at weekend schools. I worked in clothing factories, restaurants, hotels etc. My first job was making wigs because I am good at embroidery and knitting.

I realised my best way of achieving a professional was to attend university and gain an Australian qualification. I went to Deakin University and obtained my Graduation Diploma in Translation and Interpreting. After the graduation in 1992, SBS Radio started to increase airtime for a number of ethnic languages and Mandarin program increased its airtime from half an hour to 3 hours per week. I applied for and got the position as Head of Group Mandarin. At the time, we were called B/Js (Broadcasters and Journalists). Now, we are qualified as producers aligned with other public broadcasters, such as, ABC and BBC.

My commitment is to help the Chinese make Australia home by contributing the multicultural society and equally sharing the rights and responsibilities with all ethnic communities. At the Australian Chinese Museum at Chinatown, I learnt the history of the Chinese gold diggers. There were questions in my mind all the time – why were the Chinese ancestors excluded by the country? Why did they refuse to assimilate into the local community even though they lived here for several generations? Obviously, the reason came from three dimensions: the language barrier, the culture difference and, most importantly, the Government policy.

SBS Radio overcomes the language barrier. It opens a window to the Chinese to see, to listen, to understand the new country they live, study and work by using their own language. I lead the

⁹ Hu, May et. al.(1996), Australia Down-under, Golden Land Publishing House, Melbourne, p.28

Mandarin team serving the Chinese audiences by providing informative, educational and entertaining radio programs in their own language.

I, as an educator, have produced numerous programs, documentary, series, radio drama to help the Chinese listeners to understand Australian history, culture, value, Australian political and democratic system by providing many quality radio series, such as, *Guide of living in Australia* (1993), 10 episodes of *Australia Today* (1994), a series of 40 episodes of *Knowing Australia – History, Arts and Sports* (2008-09), *Australian Political System and Voting System* (1995 & 2002).

The programs educate the audience to know their rights and responsibility, and involve the audience in discussions of being a conscientious citizen rather than a temporary visitor, unlike their ancestors. My programs change the Chinese traditional view that “falling leaves are always retuning to their roots” and encourage them to make Australia home. My radio program “*Love Across Borders*” won the Old People Speak Out (OPSO) National Award in 2002. I became the first Australian Chinese to win a mainstream media award.

I worked as a guide for the thousands of Chinese students who came to Australia in late 1980s and early 1990s through the regular talkback programs with the officials of Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) for them to apply for the permanent residency in Australia. These talkback programs guided them to go through the settlement procedures - the applications of the four years temporary protection visas following by the permanent residency under the government’s November 1 Decision in 1994. I was inducted on the Women’s Honour Roll in Victoria in March 2010 for my contribution to the large number of Chinese migrants and the Australian society.

I, as a messenger, convey information from the government agencies, such as, Centrelink, Australian Taxation Office and Immigration to the Chinese migrants in all ages. I organize radio forums on current affairs, education and settlement issues, and report on arts and cultural events and festivals. My interview program helped women escaping from domestic violence and helped aged people knowing about social welfare. Many Chinese migrants say that “the three best known people to us are, the Prime Minister of the country, the Premier of the State and May Hu at SBS. Without the SBS program, we could be deaf, blind and dumb here”. I was awarded for Excellence in Multicultural Affairs for the outstanding work in media field by then Premier Steve Bracks in 2006.

I, as a liaison, link more than 100 organizations with various dialects and diverse backgrounds from more than 10 different countries and origins. The ethnic community organizations that I have been working with include Hakka, Hokian, Teochow, Timorese and the Chinese from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and Singapore etc.

Some of them are rivals with political conflicts such as the people from Taiwan and Mainland China. I use the journalist skills and political consciousness to balance their views on air and keep the harmony in the society so that I won a lot of respect and my radio programs enjoy high reputation in Victorian Chinese community.

I have been the busiest master of ceremony/festival host/organiser of the most major celebrations in the Chinese community, such as, organised and hosted the Celebration of 100th Federation of Australia by Chinese community nationwide at Melbourne Town Hall in May 2001, Charity Concert for the Tsunami organized by 35 Chinese organizations in Jan 2005, Charity Concert for the Chinese Anti-Cancer Society in Victoria in 2001, the Celebration of Hong Kong Handover in 1997 and the Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of P.R. China for the biggest Federation of Chinese Associations in Victoria, not to mention the numerous celebration for Chinese New Year and Moon Festival every year for various community organizations and those radiothons. In order to recognize the outstanding contribution to the community, I received the Certificates of Recognition for Voluntary Service to the Community by Victorian Governments in 2001.

5. West meets East

We want to achieve an ideal world. That is, men and women are equal. Big countries and small ones are equal. All human beings, regardless their skin, race, gender and religion, are equal. This is not easy to achieve. Thousands of pioneers around the world have been fighting it for many generations.

There are many pioneers, world leaders, great talents from various countries with different ethnicities. The American people elected a black President, Barack Obama. The UN Secretary – General, Ban Ki-moon is an Asian from South Korea. The Director General of World Health Organisation (WHO), Mrs Margret Chan, is from Hong Kong China.

China now is the biggest manufacturer in the world. It is the second largest global economy after taking over Japan in 2010. The Australian Chinese are no longer treated as sub-human in the multicultural society. There are many women pioneers with Asian backgrounds. Penny Wong, the Federal Minister for Finance, has a Malaysian Chinese father and an Australian mother. The former State Parliament Speaker of NSW, Helen Sham-Ho, is from Hong Kong. Professor Alice Tay AM, who passed a way in 2004, was President of Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and a member of Australia-China Council. The 2011 Australian Day Ambassador Marion Lau OAM, the former Chairwomen of Council of Ethnic Community Victoria, is an Australian Chinese, too. Just to name a few. There are more Australian Chinese women pioneers in all walks.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, thanks to Australia for accepting the migrants and refugees from more than 150 countries in the world in a spirit of non-discrimination, humanity and inclusion so that the residents with non-English Speaking backgrounds (NESB) and their descendants with cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD) can easily settle down and make their contribution to Australian multicultural society.

Thanks to SBS for overcoming the barrier of languages and culture, and bridging the gaps between the Australian mainstream society and the ethnic community. SBS Radio broadcasts 68 languages nationally and helps the migrants to communicate, understand and integrate into their new homeland in Australia.

Thanks to China for bringing silk, tea, porcelain, china, embroidery, delicious cuisines, beautiful jewellerys in the past hundreds of years. Many Australian Chinese contribute their great skills and talents to our country, such as, the legend heart surgeon, Victor Chang, and former Mayor of Melbourne, John So. Just to remind you that it was China that played the major role of helping Australia to overcome the global finance crisis while most of the European countries were still in deep financial trouble last year.

I sincerely wish that my speech would help all of you, women pioneers, my sisters and brothers, to understand more about the Australian Chinese and the Chinese culture, and to be able to accept the Australian Chinese women like me as one of us. I believe that, when the West meets East and learns from each other, we will get mutual benefits from each other. Let us work together to make our life better, and the world would be brighter.

Thank you !