



THE ASSIMILATION OF THE
CHINESE IN AUSTRALIA

Arthur Huck

The thirtieth George Ernest Morrison
lecture in ethnology 1969

This book was published by ANU Press between 1965–1991.

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Australian National University Press
Canberra 1970

publication date
12/2/71

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ISBN 0 7081 0265 4

The Assimilation of the Chinese in Australia

It is an honour for me to follow the many distinguished predecessors who have lectured on such a wide range of topics in Chinese history and culture. In talking about the assimilation of the Chinese in Australia I can perhaps claim to be bringing the series back a little closer to its original title, 'The George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology', but I cannot claim to have followed one of the principal research methods of the remarkable man in whose name the series was established. This consisted in walking the length and breadth of the country he was interested in. It is I suppose still possible, if you really set your mind to it, to walk across Australia from south to north or even from east to west. It is, unhappily, no longer possible to walk from Chungking to Burma as Morrison did. (Walking, camping, hitchhiking, are specifically not permitted the foreign tourist in China.)

The research methods I have used have been pedestrian in another sense—the perusal of puzzling statistics, the sampling and survey methods of the social sciences. And my starting point will be a simple statistical one. It used to be commonly assumed that, given Australia's immigration policies, the non-European percentage of the population would continue to decline as it had done ever since the period of the gold rushes. In fact, since 1947 the absolute number of Chinese in Australia has steadily increased. Changes in the administrative rules governing the admittance of non-Europeans, and particularly changes in the procedures relating to naturalisation of non-Europeans or the registration of non-Europeans who are already British subjects, have allowed the permanent

Chinese population to increase considerably in recent years. With the increase in the Australian-born population included, the total of Chinese permanently resident has risen by about a thousand a year for a number of years. The total figure for mid-1969 can be estimated at about 23,000. (This figure does not include the large number of Chinese who are temporarily resident as students, a group which has amounted to another 9-10,000 in recent years.) There are some signs that the figures might now be tapering off somewhat but the absolute increase and the small but distinct increase in the *proportion* of the whole population which is Chinese is undeniable. This proportion is still very small—about 0.15 per cent in 1961, 0.17 per cent in 1965, 0.18 per cent in 1969—but it represents a group which is larger than any other Asian group and larger than many of the smaller groups of European settlers in Australia (Estonians, Finns, French, Swedish, Swiss, for example).¹

What do we know about this population? The general literature on the Overseas Chinese is not much help. In all the discussion about whether Australia is part of Asia, at least one set of literature is not in two minds: the writing on the Overseas Chinese rarely mentions Australia at all. The few exceptions to this are mostly in Chinese sources but these are not up-to-date and tell us nothing about recent trends.

The figures I have used are for Chinese permanently settled in the country. At any time the actual number is a great deal

1. For details, and for problems in the figures, see Arthur Huck, *The Chinese in Australia*, Ch. 1. I would estimate the total of Chinese permanently settled in Australia in 1969 as follows:

a.	Australian born	9,826
b.	Naturalised	6,551
c.	Aliens registered	4,705
d.	Granted citizenship by registration	1,907
	Total	22,989

The source for a is Huck, *op. cit.*, Ch. 1; for b and c Department of Immigration, *Australian Immigration Consolidated Statistics*, No. 3, 1969; for d, a plus b has been subtracted from the figure given in *Australian Immigration* for 'permanent and long term arrivals'. This figure is consistent with earlier estimates of those granted citizenship by registration.

higher due to the large number of transitory people among the Chinese—visitors, seamen, and above all students, who may stay for several years but come and go in large numbers. I want to concentrate this evening not on the transitory but on the permanent who are made up of Chinese long settled here or born here and a new wave of immigrants which has arrived since the Second World War.

There has been much speculation about this new wave and it has often been assumed that they represent a very different migration stream from that which provided the pre-war population. There are some differences among segments of the new arrivals but a careful study of their known characteristics reveals many more similarities with the earlier population. Indeed I would argue that what we have had is a limited revival, under changed conditions, of a pattern of migration with which we have been long familiar.

Most of the new arrivals have been born in China. They have come here via a stopping place like Hong Kong. Many of them have had family connections of some sort with Australia. It is not the case that in origin they are substantially different from their predecessors. In particular it is not true that more than a small minority are northerners; most of them still come from the traditional emigrant areas of south-east China, predominantly from Kwangtung. In ordinary English usage they are mostly Cantonese.²

Of the new arrivals who are born in China, over 90 per cent in Victoria and Queensland can be described as Cantonese and over 80 per cent in New South Wales. Other southerners account for an additional 10 per cent in New South Wales. The proportion of non-southerners, people from Shanghai, the north and elsewhere account for from three to eight per cent in different States.³

What I want to say about the assimilation of these people will not be particularly technical. The term 'assimilation' itself is not a technical term; it is in fact notoriously ambiguous.

2. For a discussion of the ambiguities of this term see Huck, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

3. See Huck, *op. cit.*, Table VII.

ous. It can be turned into a technical term by giving it an exact definition and sticking to it throughout a piece of scientific work. Such a usage, however, can have no impact beyond the circle of those willing to accept the definitional limitation. I propose to attempt no precise definition but only to make one important distinction. There is one sense of assimilation which I think has often been current in Australia which is the equivalent of absorption—the digestive metaphor, it could be called. In this usage the migrant is called upon to assimilate, to become totally absorbed in the host society and disappear from view. This makes sense if we are thinking of long-term ethnic absorption in which intermarriage over a number of ethnic generations results in the disappearance of the minority ethnic group. This has occurred, for example, with many Chinese in Thailand. What I am interested in, however, is the other sense in which assimilation simply means *becoming similar or like the host society*.⁴

Similar in what respects? I want to begin by describing some of the more easily measurable indices and then move to some that can be less easily quantified.

In the first place, where do the Chinese live? The answer is that Chinese may be found in every State and Territory of the Commonwealth, but by far the greatest number live in New South Wales. Of these by far the greatest number live in Sydney. The next most numerous group is to be found in Victoria and Melbourne. That is to say the Chinese follow the Australian pattern of population concentration. They are a highly urbanised community, even more so than the Australian population in general, which is one of the most highly urbanised in the world. A smaller proportion of Chinese lives in the country or in towns other than metropolitan cities than does the general population.

Something like 70 per cent of all Chinese live in one or other of the State capital cities but it is important to realise that within these they do not typically live in 'China towns'. Melbourne and Sydney in particular have areas which can be identified as old centres of something like the China towns

4. See Bibliographical Note appended.

so well known in the United States, but these are no longer the chief centres of Chinese population even if they still have a concentration of Chinese businesses. The Chinese, like other Australians, have made the great trek to the suburbs and can be found widely distributed in both new and old suburban areas. (In a detailed study which I made with Michael Leigh some time ago we analysed the changes of address of a large number of recent Chinese arriving in Melbourne: for every migrant who moved to the centre of Melbourne, three had moved out to the suburbs.)

Just as their residential patterns have changed so have their occupations. Very few Chinese can now be found in the old occupations like market gardening which were common in the years after the gold rushes. Newer European immigrant groups have tended to take over this activity and the Chinese have moved on to other fields. Fruit and vegetable retailing still has some Chinese operators and there are important Chinese wholesale businesses, but on the whole there has been a marked shift away from primary industry. The greater gainer has been the cafe industry and, whereas Chinese restaurants were once limited to a few inner urban sites, they are now to be found in nearly every suburb of the large cities and in many smaller places as well. This has absorbed a good number of the less qualified population, but there has also been an increasing spread into white collar occupations. Levels of education of the Chinese population have been rising and they may now be found in many professional occupations, especially medicine. There are no very large Chinese businesses but many small scale ones. Generally it can be said that the Chinese population is in neither the commercially dominant position which many Chinese communities have in South East Asia nor the exploited poor immigrant position of the past.

It is not difficult to see some of the factors which have made it easier for the Chinese population to become more like the main population. Perhaps the most direct way of doing this is to point up the contrast with the position of the Chinese in many parts of South East Asia. In Australia their numbers have been comparatively small. Even at the height

of the gold rushes the proportion of Chinese in the total population barely passed 3 per cent. They have never been dominant in the economy and have not been seen as an economic threat. They have suffered very little from legal discrimination. Discretionary immigration regulations have been used against them, but despite these a Chinese population has existed in Australia since the 1840s and is now increasing again in size. The possibility of applying for citizenship after five years' residence removed the main discriminatory rule.

Chinese who have in fact settled in Australia have not had to face the problems of legal discrimination which have often intensified their feeling of separateness in countries in South East Asia. The Australian society they have found themselves in has not presented insuperable problems of adaptation or understanding. Many Chinese migrants may have had rural backgrounds but typically they have emerged from them some time ago; they have made the break to the city, first Chinese and then foreign. The large Australian city holds few mysteries for them. The Australian society they have found themselves in is overwhelmingly urban or suburban; it is materialistic and commercial, not obviously dominated by religious values or divided by religious barriers. In such a world Chinese immigrants can rapidly feel at home.

It is true, of course, that in the nineteenth century there was considerable anti-Chinese feeling in the country and there are memories of overt hostility, but nowadays the general atmosphere is quite different. Even in Darwin, where there has been some unease at the growth of Chinese holdings, most observers feel that the atmosphere is much more relaxed than before the War. In 1965 an Australian-born Chinese was elected President of the Northern Territory Legislative Council and in 1966 the same man became Mayor of Darwin.

The decline of ethnic organisations is in itself evidence of the changed situation. The old-type organisations tend to decline as the old hostilities decline; the comparative lack of ethnic organisation itself hastens the process of assimilation.

On paper there are still many Chinese organisations of the type usual among overseas Chinese—district associations for

people from the same areas, Chambers of Commerce, Chinese churches, joss houses—but when the actual level of activity is investigated, a fairly uniform condition is found. The district associations are considered old-fashioned by the new generations. Bodies which served to unite, protect, and succour people with the bond of common district origin are now social centres frequented mostly by the old. The surviving joss houses are little used, even though one has recently been restored in Brisbane. Chinese schools have completely disappeared. Chinese language classes are occasionally conducted in churches and clubs for members who cannot read or write Chinese, but such activities are a very pale substitute for a real Chinese education, the lack of which always hastens the process of local assimilation.

The contrast with South East Asia is perhaps most marked in the relative unimportance of the Chinese Chambers of Commerce. This key organisation in many parts of South East Asia, in Melbourne has no permanent organisation or headquarters and in Sydney no longer performs many of the co-operative functions it once had.

The Chinese Masonic Societies provide good examples of bodies which have lost their original point. They are descended from anti-Manchu secret societies sometimes known in English as Triad societies. It is difficult to separate fact and fiction in their histories, but they certainly played some part in the overthrow of the Ch'ing dynasty. Unsuccessful rebellions in the nineteenth century led many Triad members to flee abroad to escape the retribution of the Ch'ing. Many went to the goldfields of America and Australia, while others went to the South Seas and Malaya. Wherever they went they remained true to the Society and set up new lodges. Sun Yat-sen is supposed to have been a Triad official and to have used their overseas organisations in his revolutionary activities. Many branches declined into more or less criminal organisations. Extortions practised in the coolie trade and which led to rioting in Hong Kong in 1886 have been charged to them. The boarding houses where the coolies stayed prior to shipment overseas were mainly controlled by Triad elements

and their owners generally acted as agents obtaining passages, etc., for their guests. Opportunities for racketeering were plentiful. The societies in Australia found little scope for their program of overthrowing the Ch'ing and restoring the Ming. As early as 1905 one observer found them 'submerged in a sea of petty local affairs'.⁵ They took on the respectable English title of Chinese Masonic Society which completely misled Lyng in his 1927 work *Non-Britishers in Australia* (Melbourne). He assumed that the spread of 'Chinese branches of the Freemasonry order' was evidence of 'westernising influences' at work. In fact members of these associations included many of the least assimilated of the old immigrants. Nowadays members apparently devote themselves to feasting, gambling, and drinking without in any way disturbing the public peace. Their substantial building in Melbourne still bears, however, the mystic characters 'Hung Men' over its entrance, witness to the organisation's turbulent secret past.

Not all societies are moribund. The Melbourne Sze Yap Society, for instance, a long established association of the dominant Melbourne group, has recently realised that its old central city properties have greatly increased in value and, under the stimulus of a young architect, has built itself a new headquarters on one of its old sites. The Kong Chew Society has converted a North Melbourne building to house a few retired old men who are in need of a home.

The old societies, however, have mostly lost their mutual help functions and are seen by many Chinese as no longer serving any useful purpose. The associations which do flourish to some extent are more simply social. Brisbane has an active Chinese social centre and in Melbourne the Young Chinese League organises dances, an annual ball, tennis, and football for members who can claim Chinese or part Chinese descent, even if the part be only one-sixteenth. To visiting Chinese students it appears a very Australian organisation.

Chinese churches do exist in the big cities but their

5. In *The Age*, Melbourne, 14 Oct. 1905, cited by C.F. Yong, 'The Chinese Revolution of 1911', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 46, April 1966: 219.

congregations are small (typically 25 to 50 for a service in Cantonese or English or both). One exception is the Sydney Presbyterian Church in Crown Street, where the congregation might number 250 and many Swatow Presbyterians are active. Increasingly, though, Chinese who are Christians take part in the activities of their ordinary local church. The Catholics in particular strive to integrate their members into their local parish.

Community politics is now distinctly muted. Whereas at the turn of the century a lively vernacular press discussed the great events of the day in China and the issues of Empire versus Republic and reform and revolution were hotly debated, there is now no Chinese press in Australia and few willing to engage in open debate on current matters of controversy. The political context is, of course, very different. Fifty years ago few Australians knew or cared about what was going on in China; today it is difficult to escape noticing something about it however distant international politics are felt to be.

The formal position of the Australian government is not without ambiguity. It does not recognise the People's Republic but permits extensive trade with it; it received diplomatic and consular officials from the Republic of China, but for eighteen years until 1967 sent none in return. Many Chinese who in other contexts would be regarded as 'influentials' in this situation retire into private life and say nothing. The existing branches of the Kuomintang no longer have the large following they had when they were a centre of patriotic anti-Japanese organisation. On the other hand few who sympathise with the mainland government are prepared to engage in open activity in support of it. Those who are not yet naturalised have every reason not to do so; if they come to the attention of the Australian Security Organisation they jeopardise their chances of becoming full citizens. This is clearly understood by the organisers of one Sydney organisation sympathetic to the People's Republic: they do not expect their numbers to flourish.

Under these conditions it is impossible to obtain a reliable index of the real international political sympathies of the

disparate groups which make up the different Chinese communities. There are many convinced anti-Communists, some staunch Nationalist supporters, some Communist sympathisers. Probably the great majority genuinely feel that these are times in which, more than usually so, it is a good idea not to be politically involved.

To my knowledge there has only been one detailed attempt at studying the politics of Chinese in Australia. This was a survey which my department in Melbourne University sponsored in 1964. In this inquiry the occasion of the State election in Victoria was used to question a sample of Melbourne voters who were Chinese and a matched sample of their non-Chinese neighbours (the details of this are reported in *The Chinese in Australia*, Ch. 3). There were four groups of Chinese voters who could be distinguished:

1. A group of voters in a working class area who were citizens by naturalisation or registration.

2. A group of Australian-born voters in the same area.

3. A group of voters in a middle class area who were citizens by naturalisation or registration.

4. A group of Australian-born voters in the same area.

The general picture of these Chinese voters that emerged was of people either more detached from politics or more conservative than their neighbours. Within this framework the Australian-born groups (2 and 4) came closer to the local expectations of political behaviour; that is, half those in the working class area intended to vote Labor and more than half those in the middle class area expected to vote Liberal.

I do not want to suggest that there are no difficulties in the way of the assimilation of Chinese in Australia. There will clearly be a great deal of individual variation in the approach of the Chinese migrant to the country: for some it has been a refuge reluctantly chosen, for some a non-political haven, for some the promised land. We need to know a great deal more about particular family histories and individual life histories before we can generalise further. We know very little of the relations between generations, of methods of child rearing and political socialisation. The problems facing first generation

migrants are obviously different from the problems facing their grandchildren.

In general though, I would argue that there is very little basis for the widespread belief that some special characteristics of the Chinese make them less capable than others of attaching themselves to a new country. And I would argue this in spite of the problems of intermarriage which often loom large in these discussions. In the past many marriages between Australians and Chinese have occurred and there are considerable numbers of people in the country of part-Chinese descent. Attitudes opposed to intermarriage are nevertheless widespread. Indeed they seem to be similar among the Chinese and the non-Chinese. Miss Lee Siew-eng, in a study of the Sydney Chinese, found about 64 per cent of them opposed to intermarriage. From a study of Australian attitudes carried out in the same year as the electoral study I have mentioned I would estimate that about 69 per cent of the general Australian population would oppose intermarriage. If opposition to Asian immigration continues to decline, so probably will opposition to intermarriage as the two often seem closely connected. Counter-pressures favouring intermarriage can be expected to increase in the long run, but there is nothing inevitable about such a process. In the very unlikely event of a very large Chinese population building up in Australia, it is conceivable that attitudes might harden on both sides and the process of integration might be slowed down.

Even if the intermarriage rate, among new-comers especially, remains low, it does not follow that Chinese in considerable numbers cannot, in the official phrase, be 'generally integrated'. The increases in recent years have not been accompanied by any social friction and have indeed attracted very little attention. The process of assimilation continues, on the whole smoothly and uneventfully.

Bibliographical Note

For a comprehensive scholarly discussion of the notion of assimilation, acculturation, and related topics see the introductory article by Charles A. Price in his *Australian Immigration, A Bibliography and Digest* (Canberra, 1966). Section P of the Bibliography deals with 'White Australia': Restrictive Immigration Policy and Non-Europeans. Dr Price is working on a large study of non-European migration to Australia, New Zealand, British Columbia and California. The history of Chinese migration will play a large part in this work. Within the Department of Demography, Australian National University, Mr C.Y. Choi is working on a study of the assimilation of the Chinese in Melbourne. See Also

Huck, Arthur. *The Chinese in Australia*. Longmans, 1968.

Inglis, C.B. *The Darwin Chinese: A Study in Assimilation* (M.A. thesis, Department of Sociology, Australian National University, 1967).

Lee Siew-eng. *The Ecology of the Sydney Chinese* (B.A. (Hons) thesis, Department of Geography, University of Sydney, 1963).

The George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology

The George Ernest Morrison Lecture was founded by Chinese residents in Australia and others in honour of the late Dr G.E. Morrison, a native of Geelong, Victoria, Australia.

The objects of the foundation of the lectureship were to honour for all time the memory of a great Australian who rendered valuable services to China, and to improve cultural relations between China and Australia. The foundation of the lectureship had the official support of the Chinese Consulate-General, and was due in particular to the efforts of Mr William Liu, merchant, of Sydney; Mr William Ah Ket, barrister, of Melbourne; Mr F.J. Quinlan and Sir Colin MacKenzie, of Canberra. From the time of its inception until 1948 the lecture was associated with the Australian Institute of Anatomy, but in the latter year the responsibility for the management of the lectureship was taken over by the Australian National University, and the lectures delivered since that date have been given under the auspices of the University.

The following lectures have been delivered:

Inaugural: Dr W.P. Chen (Consul-General for China in Australia), *The Objects of the Foundation of the Lectureship, and a review of Dr Morrison's Life in China*, 10 May 1932.

Second: W. Ah Ket (Barrister at Law), *Eastern Thought, with More Particular Reference to Confucius*, 3 May 1933.

Third: J.S. MacDonald (Director, National Art Gallery, New South Wales), *The History and Development of Chinese Art*, 3 May 1934.

Fourth: Dr W.P. Chen (Consul-General for China in Australia), *The New Culture Movement in China*, 10 May 1935.

- Fifth: Dr Wu Lien-tah (Director, National Quarantine Service, China), *Reminiscences of George E. Morrison; and Chinese Abroad*, 2 September 1936.
- Sixth: Dr Chun-jien Pae (Consul-General for the Republic of China), *China Today: With Special Reference to Higher Education*, 4 May 1937.
- Seventh: A.F. Barker (Professor of Textile Industries, Chiao-Tung University, Shanghai, China), *The Impact of Western Industrialism on China*, 17 May 1938.
- Eighth: Professor S.H. Roberts (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney), *The Gifts of the Old China to the New*, 5 June 1939.
- Ninth: His Grace the Archbishop of Sydney, Howard Mowll, *West China as Seen Through the Eyes of the Westerner*, 29 May 1940.
- Tenth: Dr W.G. Goddard (President of the China Society of Australia), *The Ming Shen. A Study in Chinese Democracy*, 5 June 1941.
- Eleventh: Professor D.B. Copland (Vice-Chancellor, The Australian National University), *The Chinese Social Structure*, 27 September 1948.*
- Twelfth: Professor J.K. Rideout (Department of Oriental Languages, University of Sydney), *Politics in Medieval China*, 28 October 1949.
- Thirteenth: C.P. FitzGerald (Visiting Reader in Oriental Studies, The Australian National University), *The Revolutionary Tradition in China*, 19 March 1951.
- Fourteenth: The Rt Hon. H.V. Evatt (Leader of the Opposition in the Commonwealth Parliament), *Some Aspects of Morrison's Life and Work*, 4 December 1952.
- Fifteenth: Lord Lindsay of Birker (Department of International Affairs, The Australian National University), *China and the West*, 20 October 1953.
- Sixteenth: M. Titiev (Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan), *Chinese Elements in Japanese Culture*, 27 July 1954.
- Seventeenth: H. Bielenstein (Professor of Oriental Studies, Canberra University College), *Emperor Kuang-Wu (A.D. 25-27) and the Northern Barbarians*, 2 November 1955.*
- Eighteenth: Dr Leonard B. Cox (Honorary Curator of Oriental

- Art, National Gallery of Victoria), *The Buddhist Temples of Yün-Kang and Lung-Mên*, 17 October 1956.*
- Nineteenth: Otto P.N. Berkelbach van der Sprenkel (Senior Lecturer in Oriental Civilization, Canberra University College), *The Chinese Civil Service*, 4 November 1957.
- Twentieth: A.R. Davies (Professor of Oriental Studies, University of Sydney), *The Narrow Lane: Some Observations on the Recluse in Traditional Chinese Society*, 19 November 1958.
- Twenty-first: C.N. Spinks (Counsellor of the Embassy of the United States of America), *The Khmèr Temple of Práh Vihar*, 6 October 1959.*
- Twenty-second: H.E. Dr Chen Chin-mai (Ambassador for China), *Chinese Landscape Painting: The Golden Age*, 5 October 1960.*
- Twenty-third: L. Carrington Goodrich (Dean Lung Professor Emeritus of Chinese, Columbia University), *China's Contacts with Other Parts of Asia in Ancient Times*, 1 August 1961.*
- Twenty-fourth: N.G.D. Malmqvist (Professor of Chinese and Dean of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, The Australian National University), *Problems and Methods in Chinese Linguistics*, 22 November 1962.*
- Twenty-fifth: H.F. Simon (Professor of Oriental Studies, University of Melbourne), *Some Motivations of Chinese Foreign Policy*, 3 October 1963.
- Twenty-sixth: Dr Wang Ling (Professorial Fellow in Far Eastern History, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University), *Calendar, Cannon and Clock in the Cultural Relations between Europe and China*, 18 November 1964.
- Twenty-seventh: Dr A.M. Halpern (Research Associate in the Center for International Affairs, Harvard University), *Chinese Foreign Policy—Success or Failure?*, 9 August 1966.*
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***All currently in print.**