The Making of a Diasporic Identity: The Case of the Sydney Chinese Commercial Elite, 1890s-1900s

Kuo Mei-fen

Abstract
This article is about a short moment in Chinese-Australian history at the turn of the 20th century when Chinese fruit and vegetable traders in Sydney were on the verge of major international success. The concerns of this new urban elite can be gleaned from their Chinese-language newspapers and civil societies which played an important role in the evolution of the diasporic identity of the Chinese in “White-Australia” — an experience involving more than merely a refinement of native kinship practices and inherited identities — in a process that invoked a distinctively modern sense of time, space, and the unfolding of history. This is an attempt to recount their experience chiefly by reference to the developments recorded in Chinese newspapers and the narratives related to the social institutions and networks associated with them in the Federation Era (1890s-1900s).

Introduction

Studies of Chinese-Australian history have tended to overlook the significance of identities embedded in informal social networks. Moreover, it is rare to find a study investigating the connection between commercial success and growing political and social associations founded by Sydney Chinese merchants since the late 19th and early 20th centuries by which time the Sydney Chinese merchants had built the largest commercial conglomerates and established new-style department store chains in Hong Kong, Canton and Shanghai. Their notable success in international ventures can be traced to the Heungshan County merchants in Sydney (Lai 1984: 233-55; Fitzgerald 2007: 190-91). Business historians have attributed the success of Chinese-Australian firms to kinship ties, nepotism, native-place networking and paternalism in building
their business and social networks in conjunction with practicing Western marketing and management techniques in their business operations (Chan 1982 and 1998; Lien 2005). Alternatively, a flexible and operational form of *Chineseness* with family-centerdness has been used to explain the connections between China and the overseas Chinese groups (Sangren 1984; Chan 2001: 9).

However, the notion of *Chineseness* has been queried by scholars because it does not address the heterogeneous diasporic conditions and experiences of Chinese overseas (Ang 1998; Chow 1998). Recently, John Fitzgerald commented that earlier studies had overlooked the social effects of White Australia on Chinese-Australians (Fitzgerald 2007: 177-209). He also made the point that the Chinese in Australia did not only want to be Australians but also to be modern and cosmopolitan (Fitzgerald 2007: 216-24).

Yet the participation of Sydney Chinese merchants in public affairs shows that they still embraced *Chineseness* in establishing new-style civic associations. In the early 20th century the influence of White Australia and Chinese patriotism together transformed the identity of the Chinese Australian community. In the earlier years of the Federation (established in 1901), negotiating and maintaining a dual Chinese and Australian vision of urban residential life presented challenges to the Chinese in Australia (Kuo 2008a: 42-91).

Being “Chinese” means different things in different contexts but I do not propose to dwell exclusively on the diversity of being Chinese-Australian. The aim of this article is to look for signs of coherence within this diversity. The distinct and overlapping spheres of local, national and transnational imaginaries constructed by Chinese-Australian newspapers for Chinese-language readers created a sense of “diaspora” as a coherent category and marked the boundaries of a common language and culture which brought them together across geographical boundaries. This paper attempts to rethink questions of Chinese diasporic identity through paying attention to the distinctive narratives and institutional status of the Sydney Chinese commercial elite. Members of the new urban Chinese elite shaped their imagined communities through the power of the narrative, their institutional innovations, and the visions which their narratives and institutional presence conveyed of communities of readers embedded in national and transnational networks while they were expanding their business operations. Furthermore, the growing influence and identity of Sydney Chinese merchants produced a new leadership paradigm that involved political and ideological choices befitting their particular positions in their communities.
Beyond Kinship: Bilingual Leadership and Its Influence in the Early 1890s

The formation of the identity of Chinese Australians over the Federation period (which coincided with the last decades of the Chinese Empire) was deeply influenced by the distinctive politics of community and nation characterized by new patterns of leadership in the major urban cities. During this period the Chinese-Australian community underwent a notable transformation. First, in the wake of the gold rush and mining boom, the largely male Chinese population shrank from 38,077 in 1891 to 33,165 in 1901, and again to 25,772 in 1911, although this rate of decline was not unusual among immigrant mining populations.

More significant was the increasing mobility of the Chinese immigrants in Australia (Fitzgerald 2007: 51-54). As Sydney developed into an international trading center by the late 19th century, it also became a hub for mobile Chinese traders and laborers. Michael Williams argues that Chinese Australians in Sydney had by this time established identifiable patterns of business and social networking that linked up with communities in Hong Kong and home villages in South China (Williams 1998: 85-86). Archival records of Exemption from the Dictation Test from 1902 to 1959 indicate that 27,654 Chinese passed through Sydney on their journeys (Williams 1998: 23).

Thirdly, Chinese settlement tended to concentrate more heavily in urban areas, giving the Chinese in Australia by the turn of the century a distinctively modern urban inflection. Between 1881 and 1901, the concentration of Chinese in major Australian cities increased between two- and threefold. By 1947 ninety percent of Chinese were living in urban centers (Jones 2005: 17). The greatest concentrations were found in capital cities such as Sydney and Melbourne.

Sydney was not merely a hub of Chinese activity but also a center of community mobilization and identity formation from the late 19th century. With their high concentration in the city, Chinese-Australian merchants were among the earliest in the diaspora to recognize the importance of civic associations and newspapers for their business networking (Cai 2005: 199; Fitzgerald 2007: 181). At the beginning of the 1890s, these successors of a bilingual Chinese elite were engaged in public ceremonies and activities and

---

2 H.A. Smith F.S.S., Official Year Book of N.S.W. 1920, Sydney, 1921, p. 66.
3 For example, German population in Australia had declined from 45,000 in 1891 to 33,000 in 1911. See Miriam Gilson and Jerzy Zubrzycki (1967: 22).
used their wealth and newspaper circulation to mobilize the Sydney Chinese to participate in Australian economic, legal and religious life. Their commitment to public and civic duties paved the way for the Sydney Chinese merchant community to make the transition from social networks based on clan and kinship to wider forms of public association.

The main task facing the Chinese leadership in the 1890s was negotiating between Chinese and dominant Anglophone communities with a view to reducing conflict and competition among contending groups of Chinese in the inner-city area (Kuo 2008a: 389-95). In the decade from 1881 to 1891, Sydney's commercial and financial vitality can be attributed to the contributions of its many immigrant communities, including the Chinese (Coghlan 1894: 127 and 1903: 137). Sydney historian Shirley Fitzgerald has emphasized the contribution of the Chinese community toward the creation of the city (Fitzgerald 1997: 6). From the 1860s to the late 1880s, the Sydney Chinese community was established on the harbor foreshore in The Rocks district — beneath the Harbour Bridge today — with the help of the county headmen. Prior to the 1890s, favorable commercial circumstances contributed to the growth of the Chinese corner of the Rocks. After 1891, when shipping began to shift to Darling Harbour, the Chinese laborers and merchants relocated from The Rocks to the Belmore Markets district (Woods 1994: 22-24). The changing patterns of commercial, professional, and residential life created new spaces and opportunities for social mobility and in time for the emergence of a new leadership stratum. A number of bilingual Chinese leaders came to the fore — specialist interpreters who enjoyed close relations with Chinese residents — and facilitated the latter in their communications with the legal, commercial and social system of the colonies.

The old pattern of Sydney's Chinese settlement based in The Rocks was marked by clan and native-place connections. However, from the late 19th century the Sydney Chinese began to focus on their social relationships with the colonials rather than the interpersonal relationships of their kin and native-place networks. The emergence of the leadership of the bilingual elites and their role in assisting their compatriots in renegotiating their place within colonial society became highly important in shaping the future direction of the Chinese community in Sydney (See Kuo 2008a: 28-92). These bilingual elites went on to attain remarkable success in the following years. Specifically, Sun Johnson (Sun Junchen 孫俊臣), Quong Tart (Mei Guangda 梅光達, 1850-1903), William Robert George Lee (Li Yihui 李益徽, also known as Lee Yikfai, 1844-1911) and Rev. John Young Wai (周容威, 1847-1930) began to assist Chinese residents to acquire new social and cultural skills suited to the rhythms, customs and manners of Australian urban life.
This new style of civic leadership was concerned not with mediating inter-clan conflicts, as of old, but with facilitating network connections within and between sections of the community and between the community and the broader Anglophone society. The urban elites mobilized their communities by appealing to the latter’s modern sense of civic morality and the public good through their civic organizations, public meetings, and acts of benevolence. The success of the Chinese processions in the Queen’s Jubilee celebration in 1897 shows the influence of bilingual Chinese leadership in uniting the Sydney Chinese community in order to project a new public image to the Anglophone communities.

The bilingual elite attained much popular success in 1897 when the Chinese processions which they organized for the carnivals for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee shed further light on its leadership of the urban Chinese community in turn-of-the-century Sydney. The two Chinese ceremonial processions not only raised the profile of the Chinese bilingual elite, but also, by being reported in the *Chinese Australian Herald* (1894-1923, hereafter, *Herald*), the first Chinese press, a new social image of the Chinese was projected, effectively reconfiguring the Chinese-Australian community (Kuo 2008b: 34-53). Much of this may be attributed to Sun Johnson, the press’ Chinese editor and a bilingual intellectual. W.R.G. Lee, Quong Tart and Sun together brought about a rapport between their fellow-Chinese and the other spectators bringing about a sense of shared and expanded community.

While members of the Sydney Chinese bilingual elite enhanced their leadership, they also influenced many Chinese in the working class to cross over to the business class. Significantly from the late 1890s increasing numbers of Chinese fruit traders expanded their wealth and the scope of their social networks. They were on the lookout for a new paradigm to enhance their commercial dynamic and searching for alternative routes to expand their enterprises. In this they received help from the bilingual elite, such as Rev. John Young Wai of the Presbyterian Mission, who helped the Sydney Chinese fruit and vegetable traders to cope with the problems arising from cultural differences in the same way that the Anglophone citizens of Australia were baffled by Chinese languages and customs (Fitzgerald 2007: 201-205; Kuo 2008a: 71-89).

Rev. Young Wai was a good illustration of the influence of bilingual Chinese on the transformation of the Sydney Chinese from fruit sellers to international commercial elite. Because almost all the Chinese who came to Sydney originated from rural villages with no education, the night school run by the church played an invaluable role in helping them not only to improve their English, but also to learn the culture and acquire the skills they needed to survive and thrive in a Western environment. Young Wai gradually established his influ-
ence through conducting evening services and giving English classes to Chinese market gardeners, hawkers and other members of the working class. After the Chinese Presbyterian Church was opened in 1893, the night school there became the largest organization running regular Chinese classes in the late 19th century.

The language classes also promoted and enhanced friendships among Chinese from different clans, counties and socio-economic strata. While the younger Chinese attended the night school for educational purposes, the larger church environment created a new public space for the coming-together of Chinese immigrants. Under the leadership of John Young Wai, ever-growing numbers of educated Chinese fruit gardeners, hawkers and traders were encouraged to participate in the wider social networks and to engage in secular activities well outside their particular areas of business through their work with the Church. In other words, the Chinese Presbyterian Church provided a space for Chinese to network with other Chinese and the Europeans in order to enhance their commercial activities and mobilize their social resources. It also supports Denise Austin’s argument that “the Christians played a crucial role within the Chinese community during the federation era…” (2004: 76).

Within this wider secular context, religious ties also enhanced the trust among fruit traders in the course of business competition. Some of the younger members of Rev. Young Wai’s congregation established their enterprises in Sydney with his support and subsequently went on to start up multiple enterprises in Hong Kong, Guangdong and Shanghai that thrived until World War II. The lessons and Christian values they learned at the Chinese Presbyterian Church became infused with the business style of a number of Chinese-Australian enterprises (Fitzgerald 2007: 201-205).

**Agent of Rising Chinese Commercial Elite and Emerging Nationalism:**
The *Tung Wah News* and Chinese Empire Reform Association, 1898-1900

At the turn of the 20th century, Sydney’s Chinese community was still the largest in Australia (Yong 1977: 261), with about 4,000 living in the metropolitan area. The rise of a substantial Chinese fruit-trader class in the late 19th century had seen the Sydney and Melbourne Chinese agents controlling the banana market (Roll 1996: 91), the Sydney traders in particular conducting a flourishing trade with banana suppliers in Queensland and Fiji. The reason for the rise in fruit traders seems to rest, straightforwardly, on a decline in the vegetable market in 1890 and 1891 — a decline in fact reported by Chinese
market gardeners. The largest Chinese fruit firms were Wing Sang and Co. (永生果欄 Yongsheng Guolan) established in 1890, Tiy Sang and Co. (泰生果欄 Taisheng Guolan) established in 1893, and Wing On and Co. established in 1898. From the late 1890s, these firms were in control of the Australian banana market.

However, the Queensland banana growers could fully satisfy neither market nor merchant, whereas the Melbourne and Sydney Chinese fruit traders had aspirations to cultivate and exploit the banana industry in Fiji. In 1902, three Chinese firms, Wing Sang, Wing On and Wing Tiy amalgamated to form Sang On Tiy and Co. to cultivate and ship bananas from Fiji to Sydney at a rate of at least 2,000 bunches per week (Yong 1977: 50). It dramatically increased the wealth of the Sydney Chinese banana traders.

As the Sydney Chinese fruit merchants promoted their interests and identity as a coherent group, they also presented challenges to the social leadership of the bilingual elite. The fruits sellers soon came to prominence through innovative forms of association and the adventurous use of the Chinese-language press. In particular, its members began to encourage Sydney’s Chinese community to orient itself toward identification with China and with a sort of diasporic Chinese nation rather than to imagine itself as part of an Anglicized “colonial-imperial” society.

In 1898, the Sydney Chinese merchants started work on setting up the Tung Wah News (hereafter, News, or TWN, renamed Tung Wah Times in 1902). In late 1899 the leading figures behind the News established the New South Wales Chinese Empire Reform Association (Baohuanghui, also known as Aozhou Niaoxiuweisheng Baojiu Guangxuhuangdi Hui, hereafter, CERA, or Association) to promote radical change in China.

The News was the first Chinese-Australian corporation which was set up as a joint-stock company (CAH, 12 July 1902: 2). The proprietors were all ethnic Chinese who held joint-stock options. Its start-up capital of £1,000 was made up of 5,000 shares at four shillings each. Its management style reflected the newspaper’s diverse ownership and corporate structure. In addition, a number of rules and procedures were laid down relating to the share-holders, managers, editors, and those in charge of printing, in order to ensure that the News was run as efficiently as possible, and in keeping with the modern style of

---

4 Report of the Royal commission on alleged Chinese gambling and immorality and charges of bribery against members of the police force, 1891-1892, Q. 15760 and 14142.

5 Defunct Company packet in State Records of NSW, Tung Wah Newspaper, item no. 3/5733 in 1723. Yong claims that the £1,000 capital of Tung Wah News was divided into 4,000 shares, but this appears to be an error. See Yong 1977: 117.
contemporary newspapers (CAH, 12 April 1902: 5). The establishment of the News shows that Chinese-Australian newspapers had come to reflect their different allegiances through a variety of preferred vernaculars and formats.

The European proprietors and bilingual editors of the Herald adopted a vernacular style to appeal to the less-educated Chinese readers and chose to focus on topics touching on the cultural differences between Chinese and Westerners, including different social customs and manners. Both of the Chinese newspapers emphasized the importance of celebrating Australian public holidays for the promotion of civic virtue. The Herald focused on the celebration of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 and the celebration of Federation in 1901; both occasions demonstrated the symbolic power of public holidays and public commemorations in the making of 20th-century Australia. By the turn of the century, a number of new holidays held in veneration of the Chinese Emperor and Confucius, which were celebrated in China, were recommended by the News to be added to the local Australian calendars. By publicly celebrating these new festivals the Chinese of Sydney introduced a wide array of Chinese national symbols to the residents of the city. The invocation of Confucius as a national sage on the model of a Western-style saint, or national hero, reflected the sense of historical consciousness associated with the urbanity promoted by the News.

The founder of the News, Thomas Yee Hing (Liu Ruxing a.k.a. Liu Yuan-chun, 1860-1921), also aspired to generate a Confucian revival, and promote a broader cultural nationalism. Yee Hing was keen to establish a Confucian “church” for the scholarly education of the Chinese community in Sydney (TWN, 30 August 1899: 3). Neither plan had much success. That said, the News did provide dates according to the reputed Confucian calendar on its front page from 12 August 1899. In September 1900, the News held a ceremony celebrating the birthday of Confucius. This was part of its plan to reframe its position in regard to the shaping of Chinese nationalism (TWN, 5 September: 2, 15 September: 2 and 26 September 1900: 3).

The News’s founders were also interested in the Chinese reform movement, which in turn led to the establishment of the CERA. A significant factor was the involvement of Yee Hing who was the paper’s biggest share-holder. In 1898, while providing capital to support the News, he published an article in the paper expounding on his project to unite all overseas Chinese without regard to native-place divisions. He further defined the meaning of brotherhood, speaking of it in terms of international kinship rather than provincial identity (TWN, 17 August 1898: 4).

Yee Hing exerted strong influence over the News and took a very different position from the Herald regarding China’s process of domestic reform and the
place of Chinese in the world. By late 1898, however, the concerns of the News were showing the influence of the reformists in China. After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, many Chinese began advocating reform along Western lines in order to establish a powerful and independent China free of foreign occupation. This reform movement was integrated in June 1898 with systemic reforms at the political, social and cultural levels launched by Emperor Guangxu with the advice and support of leading reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. As it happened, the first issue of the News appeared in Sydney in the same month that the young Emperor Guangxu announced this radical program, known as the “Hundred Days Reforms.” The new paper took an optimistic view of the reform movement in China (TWN, 16 July 1898: 3) and supported the idea of the power of the newspaper in promoting social reform (TWN, 16 July 1898: 3). It reprinted a number of important statements and official reports made by Chinese reformers involved in the “Hundred Days” movement (TWN, 29 June 1898: 3, 30 July 1898: 3, 24 and 28 September 1898: 3, and 1 October 1898: 3). Its initial priorities, however, were not as closely focused on the political concerns of the Chinese reformers as on the issues of commerce and modern education.

Things began to change after the “Hundred Days Reform” movement collapsed in September 1898, and a number of the leading reformers fled the country. The News’ position then shifted to one of unflagging support for the Chinese reformers. Also, in March 1899, it became an agent of Qingyibao 清議報 (China Discussion, 1898-1901) (TWN, 1 March 1899: 4). This shift is an important indicator of the political ramifications of the News’ new concerns. It is clear that after 1899 the News used its connection with Qingyibao specifically to evoke enthusiasm among Chinese Australians in supporting the Chinese reformers. The News’ political agenda was explicit from this moment onward as can be seen from the formation of a network of Chinese Australian monarchists and other Chinese associations and newspapers in Southeast Asia, Japan and North America. It is clear that the TWN had established a style similar to that of the Chinese newspapers in Singapore, Honolulu, Japan, Hong Kong and Macau.

The News’ role in politics extended well beyond its editorial position, so much so that it became an active branch of the CERA which aimed at seeking support from Chinese abroad for the restoration of the young Emperor Guangxu. After this Kang sent his followers to Japan, the U.S., Hong Kong, Macau and Australia to organize other branches (Kang 1972: 2). The first

---

6 In fact, in its early days the TWN focused on social reforms in the Western education system, feminism and the anti-opium movement. See TWN, 30 July: 3, 3 Aug: 2, 27 Aug: 3, and 7 Sept 1898: 3.
meeting of the Sydney CERA was held at the building of the News on the same day of the opening of the Honolulu branch on 14 January 1900 (TWN, 1 March 1899: 4, and 17 January 1900: 3). In just one month the CERA membership grew to several hundred (TWN, 7 February 1900: 5). With over 3,000 shares at four shillings each (TWN, 21 February 1900: Supplement), the Association received over £600 in subscriptions. Many fruit merchants belonging to the Chinese Presbyterian Church were supporters of the CERA.7 Other proprietors and managers of a number of Chinese fruit firms also appeared on the list of founders of the CERA (TWN, 21 February 1900: Supplement).

Two events of 1900, viz. the outbreak of a plague in Sydney and the Boxer Rebellion in China, provoked a significant shift in the attitude and tone of the Chinese papers from one of general optimism to increasing anxiety about their future in Australia. The pages of the Chinese-Australian newspapers of the day reflected a sense of isolation among the Chinese immigrants in Australia.

Politically, the outbreak of the plague did more than merely unite the Sydney Chinese; it was also undeniably helpful for the expansion of the CERA. Chinese reformists in exile were keen to arouse nationalistic sentiments in the Chinese abroad, as they attributed anti-Chinese prejudice in Western societies to a weak China.8 By 1900 the leading Chinese reformists and revolutionists had expanded their political network and influence over much of the Pacific area, in the process stimulating a political consciousness and national awareness among the Chinese abroad (Wang 1985: 17). Yet their success in building Chinese political networks in the Pacific was also a response to anti-Chinese restrictions. Chinese in Australia and North America were faced with White racism and restrictive regulations, which not surprisingly turned many Chinese in those regions to Chinese nationalism. Furthermore, the insecurity typically felt by the Singapore Chinese community following the Banishment Ordinance of 1899 (Shinozaki 2002: 59-79) proved a significant spur to the unification movement within the overseas Chinese community, specifically in Sydney. In early 1900, the Town Hall authorized the closure of Wexford Street and the nearby areas with the effect that Chinese residents were evicted immediately, together with their belongings (CAH, 21 April 1900: 4).

A sense of vulnerability among the Chinese intensified after the outbreak of the plague in Sydney. Chinese newspapers including the News and the Herald

---

7 See photo of NSW CERA in Chinese Museum (Melbourne).
8 CERA argued that Chinese abroad suffered from anti-Chinese prejudice on account of China’s weakness as a state. TWN, 8 Nov 1899: Supplement. See also Kang Youwei yu Baohuan-gui: 244-47.
strongly promoted Chinese nationalism through publishing narratives on Chinese immigration, and the countless instances of suffering due to the unfair policies of foreign governments toward the diaspora (TWN, 21 April 1900: 2, 25 April 1900: 2, and 19 May 1900: 2; CAH, 9 June 1900: 2, 16 June 1900: 2, 11 August: 2, and 25 August 1900: 4). By 1900 the propaganda activities of Chinese nationalists, and a sense of insecurity regarding a putatively failing Chinese nation, had produced the necessary conditions to shape an emerging Chinese-Australian nationalism.

The Boxer Rebellion and the failed Hankow uprising that followed played a contributory role in undermining the standing of the CERA among the Chinese in Australia. Many Sydney Chinese became disillusioned with the Chinese Empire, and this sentiment subsequently led to something of a transformation of attitudes from reformists to revolutionaries among leading Chinese, who supported the young Chinese Emperor (Yen 1976: 55). In June 1900, the Boxers, acting with official acquiescence, moved on the capital. They violently attacked foreign missionaries and foreign diplomats, with the aim of upholding Chinese authority and sovereignty. After several violent weeks in which the foreign legations were besieged, the allied forces of eight foreign nations intervened. They eliminated the Boxer forces and demanded reparations and made other harsh demands on China. Both the rebellion itself, and the unjust treaties subsequently imposed on China, worsened relations between the Chinese abroad and the local societies in which they resided. Chinese-Australian leaders were concerned that the Boxer rebellion would further jeopardize relations between the Chinese and Australian society in general. From July to August, the Sydney Chinese made contributions to the Australian contingent in China in a gesture to distance themselves from the Boxers (CAH, 1 September 1900: 2).

Engagement of Social Leadership: Crisis of the Chinese Empire Reform Association (CERA), 1900

The editors and journalists of the News had explicitly made its influence felt on the establishment and civic agendas of the CERA; such activism was consistent with the News’ fundamental ethos. As such the leading figures of the News exercised their social leadership through the press and the first Chinese political organization in Sydney, not only through modern social networks that crossed native-place boundaries, as its 1890s predecessor had done, but also through new forms of political participation that involved organized political parties.
After Sydney Chinese merchants founded alternative newspapers to project a different vision toward modernity of the Chinese they also started to establish the first political association. The bilingual and cross-clan leaders used this political association to challenge the leadership of Lin Yik Tong, which was controlled by individual county leaders, an unsatisfactory situation as seen by the new group of Chinese merchants. Where the rival Herald enjoyed the institutional support of the Lin Yik Tong, the News had little to fall back on except for the resources of its own board and shareholders; it adopted the CERA as its vehicle.

However, bilingual Chinese membership was an important factor in the CERA’s initial development. The key individual behind its establishment was Quong Tart (Kuo 2008a: 145-46). The involvement of the Lin Yik Tong and its leader, W.R.G. Lee, was a further factor behind the establishment of the CERA in 1900. Lee’s involvement with CERA was aided by his friendship with Quong Tart. The success of the two Chinese processions in 1897 had also demonstrated Lee’s power and profile in Sydney’s public life, and there is no doubt that his influential position led to his being offered a leadership position within the CERA. Lee was the leading chairman in the initial meetings even though he was not the largest contributor. Also, the leading members arranged for Lee and one other leader, Thomas Yee Hing, to be the only two presidents with the authority to take care of the two seals of the Association. Lee’s position in the Association reflected his influential leadership but was seen as a threat by Yee Hing who was an enthusiastic supporter of the Association and its agenda.

Before the CERA was founded, the major commercial network was constituted by the Lin Yik Tong, which was a cause for dissatisfaction for those Chinese merchants who, not coming from the same counties, did not have the same opportunities to gain entry to the Lin Yik Tong, and who were also unable to join the bilingual Chinese group. Significantly, while Chinese nationalism united Chinese Australians, the involvement of the Sydney Chinese fruit merchants in the CERA also showed that they were on the lookout for a new organizational framework within which to enhance their commercial potential and were searching for alternative routes for the expansion of their enterprises.

---

9 See Records of Meetings before June 1900, no. 111/5, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU. Lee was the third-ranked contributor for the association. See T WN, 21 Feb 1900: Supplement.

10 Records of Meeting of 3 Jan 1900 (dated in lunar calendar), no. 111/5, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.
Under the leadership of Thomas Yee Hing, the Chinese fruit traders tried to bring about cooperation between the Lin Yik Tong and the CERA, but without success. In June 1900 Yee Hing announced his intention of resigning from the Lin Yik Tong, in which Lee held a dominant position, but was persuaded to stay on by other members. In the end, Lee withdrew from the CERA before the celebrations of the Chinese Emperor’s birthday (Chiu and Yeung 1999: 16-17). His name was deleted from the membership list of the CERA, and he did not attend the imperial birthday celebrations on 28 June (TWN, 21 July 1900: 3).

Meanwhile, several of Rev. Young Wai’s more prominent followers gave their support to the CERA while it was in decline in 1900. Later, the Rev. Young Wai and the representatives of 42 Chinese firms who were associated with the Lin Yik Tong but who were not part of its core leadership were invited to a meeting by Yee Hing. Under Yee Hing’s direction, these merchants resolved to make a request to the steamship companies for an increased number of discounted tickets for Chinese passengers. Significantly, they also sought the structural transformation of the Lin Yik Tong (TWN, 27 July 1901: 3). Under the new arrangements, the 12 administrative managers and two presidents would be elected annually by all the members, and empowered to do business with the steamships. Ordinary members would also have the right to supervise the Lin Yik Tong’s finances and administration (TWN, 24 July 1901: 3).

As it happened, the Lin Yik Tong did not reform its structure. Yet the alliance of Chinese fruit traders, Chinese Presbyterians and the CERA showed the potential for the Chinese urban elite to develop new organizational patterns, which in turn helped to transform the community’s earlier leadership formation. The Chinese urban elites in Sydney thus pursued an instrumentalist pattern of leadership based on a simple ethical principle: they were committed to creating inclusive organizations which could be accessed equally by individuals irrespective of their backgrounds. The basic condition of community formation for Sydney’s Chinese urban elites had thus changed; they were now free agents. Charles Taylor argues that the modern idealization of social order renders the existence of such free individuals as a modern social ideal, in contrast to former times when virtue was deemed the chief social good (Taylor 2004: 12-13). This development was reflected in a pattern of entrepreneurial cooperation through modern associations rather than just through kinship or county ties.

---

11 See the front page of the Records of Meeting of CERA of NSW, no. 111/5, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.
However, the leading members of the CERA had begun to realize that without the support of the bilingual Chinese elite their influence would decline. This in turn prompted the Association to concentrate on promoting the impending visit by Liang Qichao in the hope of reviving the enthusiasm of the members.

The CERA had in fact been disappointed earlier in the year when a planned visit to Australia by Kang Youwei had to be cancelled. Kang had intended to visit in April in order to strengthen his political associations (CAH, 7 April 1900: 4). However, his visa application was unsuccessful (Yong 1977: 120; Chiu 1992: 53). To alleviate his followers’ disappointment, Kang suggested that Liang visit Australia in his stead; but in March, the CERA turned down the suggestion.12 The Association did eventually change its mind, and accepted Kang’s help in arranging the visit,13 but its support for the proposed visit remained markedly half-hearted, mainly because Liang was as yet not well known to the Chinese in Australia. The Association’s minutes of meetings also show very little enthusiasm for the event prior to Liang’s arrival. As it turned out, however, Liang’s visit to Australia between October 1900 and April 1901, brought about mainly by Chinese Christians within Young Wai’s circle of influence, did give rise to a renewed impetus in the Association.

Reconstruction of Political Identity and Social Leadership: Visit by Liang Qichao, 1900-1901

Liang visited Australia from 25 October 1900 to 14 April 1901. Although only 28 years of age then, his influence had already been felt by a new generation of Chinese intellectuals through his published writings (Huang 1972: 97). Nevertheless, he was largely unknown to the Chinese in Australia before his arrival and the Herald ran only one article reporting the visit a few weeks after he had disembarked (CAH, 15 December 1900: 2).

A major item on Liang’s agenda was fund-raising. Liang identified Sydney as a hub in the Reformists’ transnational network and encouraged Kang to set up the overseas headquarters in Australia rather than Singapore or Honolulu (Ding 1972: 111-12, 118). He also expected to collect between £40,000 and £50,000 during his visit. However, he quickly learned that the enthusiasm for the CERA in Australia was not nearly as high as he had hoped. In Melbourne

---
12 Records of Meeting of CERA, 21 Feb 1900 (lunar calendar), no. 111/5, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.
13 Records of Meeting of CERA, 15 Apr 1900 (lunar calendar).
his visit resulted in a branch being established but chiefly through his native-place connections (TWN, 15 December 1900: 3). Indeed Liang described the support of the Melbourne Chinese as stemming from native-place sympathy because his own clan originated in Xin Hui 新會, the native place of most of the Chinese in Melbourne (Ding 1972: 143).

Liang finally reached Sydney on 6 December 1900. He was impressed with the dynamism and fund-raising capacity of the Sydney Chinese. Given the extent of the existing CERA network in Sydney he was welcomed by the local Chinese merchants (Ding 1972: 143-44). Concerned over the increasing costs of his travels, Liang decided to stay in Sydney until his departure from Australia in May (Ding 1972: 143-44). Another reason for this decision was that the trip was proving to be a disappointment regarding donations, even though the Sydney Chinese had verbally agreed to donate a total of £5,000 to the CERA headquarters and the Penang branch over five or six separate meetings in the city.14 Questions concerning the financial contributions of the Chinese Australians were causing tensions between Khoo Seok-wan and Kang Youwei as well. After the Hankow uprising Khoo was increasingly anxious about the Association’s financial management being put under Kang’s leadership. In late 1900 he asked Liang to remit the collected Chinese-Australian funds to him to arrange appropriate disbursements (Ding 1972: 143). Putting his faith in the long and positive relationship between Khoo and Kang, Liang transferred £1,000 to Khoo in Singapore by telegraph.15 In the end, however, the money did not reach Kang. Yen Ching-hwang argues that the ensuing quarrel over the handling of 50,000 Singapore dollars in the Chinese-Australian donation was one reason for the deterioration in the relationship between Kang and Khoo in 1901 (Yen 1976: 56; Ding 1972: 143-44).

**Liang’s First Influence and White Australia: Revolutionary Sentiment and “Diasporic Chinese Nation”**

Despite its setbacks, Liang’s visit was by no means a failure. The first tangible effect was that the Sydney Chinese were brought round to giving greater consideration to his political ideas than to those promoted by Kang Youwei. In fact, after Liang’s visit, the News began rejecting Kang’s reports and essays. During Liang’s stay in Sydney he was introduced to the Chinese community

---

14 Records of Meetings of CERA, 19 and 27 Oct, 23 Nov 1900, and 26 Feb 1901 (lunar calendar), no. 111/5. Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.
15 Records of Meetings of CERA, 19 and 27 Oct 1900 (lunar calendar), no. 111/5, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.
via the pages of the News (TWN, 29 December 1900: 2, and 17 April 1901: 3). While he regularly gave lectures to Chinese audiences at the News premises (TWN, 17 April 1901: 3), he also provided the paper with materials published in many periodicals and publications relating to the development of Chinese nationalism.\(^{16}\) At the same time Liang himself completed writing an important article, “Tracing the Source of China’s Weakness” (Zhongguo jiruo suyuan lun 中國積弱溯源論), which was a collection of his speeches and thoughts in Sydney. The TWN published this long article — it ran to 20,000 words — in full and circulated it widely in the Chinese Australian community (TWN, 17 April 1901: 3). The essay was an important distillation of Liang’s views and concerns regarding Chinese nationalism (Laing 1936: 14-42). He believed that China could become strong and powerful if the Chinese were to establish a democratic state. This was in accord with his thinking over the preceding two or three years: his political ideals of constructing a new China had been infused with revolutionary sentiments since 1898; they would remain till 1903 (Huang 1972: 5; Chang 1964: 94-95).

Liang’s influence over the members of the CERA and the TWN also took other forms, in particular in bringing about the expansion of the paper’s scope of activist publishing. In February he arranged for the News to become an agent for Guominbao 國民報 and Kaizhilu 開智錄, two revolutionary periodicals published by Chinese students in Japan (TWN, 9 February 1901: 3). The authors writing for the periodicals lauded the French Revolution and its struggle for democracy and freedom (TWN, 9 and 13 February 1901: 3) and believed that there could be no democracy without revolution (TWN, 13 February 1901: 2). Such writings were an important exposition of revolutionary ideals for Sydney CERA members to take on board while Liang was present in their city. The year 1901 thus marked a beginning for the Sydney Chinese to publicly embrace revolutionary sentiments on the model of the Chinese in Southeast Asia who had begun to sympathize with revolutionary activism over the previous year.

The White Australia Policy that followed the political federation of the six Australian self-governing colonies in 1901 only reinforced this trend. At the turn of the century, the advent of the Australian Federation and the passage of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act significantly affected the Chinese community and its pattern of leadership. The new Chinese leadership and the Chinese press began to encourage the community in Sydney to orient itself

---

\(^{16}\) The TWN received a number of reformist publications published in Japan. See TWN, 16 Feb 1901: 3.
toward identification with China and with a “diasporic Chinese nation” rather than to imagine itself as part of an Anglo-British “colonial-imperial” society.

Both of Sydney’s Chinese newspapers at the time embraced the concept of federation in Australia, urging their readers to become involved in the process. However, the restrictions imposed on Chinese participation in building the newly federated nation-state left the newspapers disappointed. In the meantime, it became apparent that naturalized Chinese did not have the same rights as white British subjects in White Australia. This became a sensitive issue in the Herald which advocated equality of rights for all British subjects, whether naturalized or native-born (CAH, 26 December 1903: 2). Furthermore, in the early years of the 20th century, the Chinese-Australian press placed considerable emphasis on the suffering of Chinese abroad due to increasing anti-Chinese prejudice and the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act (CAH, 9 June 1900: 2-3, 16 June 1900: 2, and 1 December 1900: 3). The latent tension between groups maintaining opposing ideologies became more explicit in July 1901, prompting the rival, Herald, to publish an essay aimed at reducing the division between the two sides of revolutionists and reformists (CAH, 20 July 1901: 3). The Herald was pursuing its own revolutionary agenda in 1901, not least by promoting in its special Chinese New Year issue the anti-Manchu stance of the republican revolutionaries (CAH, 23 February 1901: New Year Supplement). It further criticized the Manchu government for failing to establish consul-generals abroad, neglecting to protect the overseas Chinese, and acquiescing in restrictions imposed on the Chinese in foreign countries (CAH, 6 April 1901: 3).

In the first two or three years of the Federation, according to the Chinese press, the suffering of the Chinese in White Australia was a consequence of the despotism of the Manchu government. In this regard, both the Herald and the News by and large supported the cause of Chinese revolution. However, the conflict between the Lin Yik Tong and the CERA fueled much debate on the various positions of the revolutionary Chinese under White Australia and the imperial Manchu dynasty.

The Herald was highly critical of the Manchu government for its failure to provide official protection for the Chinese in Australia (CAH, 31 August 1899: 4). Although the Chinese-Australian press attacked the weak and conservative Manchu government for neglecting the overseas Chinese (CAH, 6 April 1901: 3), the Chinese in Australia increasingly valued being counted as national subjects of China. This sentiment was further encouraged by the Manchu government’s enactment, in the late 1890s, of a series of regulations designed to entice overseas Chinese to become involved in reforms and the development of industry in China (Li 1997: 21-33). Thus, beginning in the late 19th century and bear-
ing fruit in the early 20th century, the positive side of the idea of being a 
Chinese subject was driven home to the overseas Chinese.

In this context, the term *huaqiao* took on added significance. As Wang 
Gungwu first pointed out, after 1903 the term *huaqiao* referred specifically 
to the political recognition of “overseas Chinese” seeking official protection 
(Wang 1985: 75). Thus the notion of being recognized as a Chinese subject 
was reflected in the widespread adoption of the term *huaqiao*.

For the Chinese in Australia, the term *huaqiao* was adopted following 
the growing hostility toward the Chinese around 1904 and 1905. The anti-
American boycott movement was an added impetus for them to look to the 
Chinese diasporic network for guidance and leadership in the name of *hua-
qiao*. By 1905 the Chinese-language press had begun to use the term to refer 
to the Chinese in Australia, beginning with the *Chinese Times* of Melbourne 
and *Tung Wah Times* (e.g. *CT*, 18 March 1905: 3, 15 April 1905: Supplement, 
27 May 1905: 1 and Supplement, 23 September 1905: 3, and 18 November 
1905: 1).

**Liang’s Second Influence: Decline of the Old Model of Leadership**

Another significant outcome of Liang’s visit was the intensification of the 
struggle for social leadership between the Lin Yik Tong and the CERA. From 
one perspective this was a power struggle of an old and familiar kind. After 
Liang left Australia, late in May 1913, Yee Hing strengthened his infl uence 
over the Association and was disposed to challenge the leadership of Lee 
and the power of the Lin Yik Tong. Yee Hing and Lee then competed through 
their respective societies and networks for status and infl uence in the broader 
Chinese community.17

In another perspective, however, this contest marked the emergence of a 
new kind of civic association doing battle with the old. Before the 20th cen-
tury, leadership and social mobilization in Australia were based largely on 
wealth, mediated through established status in native-place associations, occupa-
tional societies, or temples, much as it was in Southeast Asia. Lee’s position 
was certainly strengthened by his association with the Lin Yik Tong, but he 
was, at the end of the day, only one of several leaders of that society. The Lin 
Yik Tong alone could not ensure his standing once other forms of association 
learned to compete effectively.

Lee established his leadership in the Lin Yik Tong through the infl uence 
commanded by his wealth, his native-place affiliations, and other markers of 

17 See Records of Meetings of CERA, no. 111/5, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.
social status. At this time an increasing number of Chinese fruit traders sought to enhance their standing through other status markers based on their business styles and their knowledge of the world. They supported the CERA and the News, and their support was an important factor in the relative decline of the Lin Yik Tong. The new Sydney Chinese elite exercised social leadership through newspapers, through non-particularistic social networks that crossed native-place boundaries, and through new forms of political participation that involved political parties. In 1901 and 1902 they challenged bilingual leaders such as Lee and Quong Tart, and succeeded in the attempt. Quong Tart died in 1903. Lee returned to China and left the Lin Yik Tong in his wake. A new Sydney Chinese merchant group then came to occupy a leading position through enhancing their entrepreneurial cooperation through new commercial associations rather than relying just on charisma and county ties as in the case of the Lin Yik Tong.


In 1903-1904, while developing their interests and identity as a coherent group, the Sydney Chinese merchants established their first two commercial organizations in order to secure and enhance their businesses on the national and international levels. In the face of a growing anti-Chinese movement the Chinese merchants united to safeguard their social and financial positions, particularly in the vicinity of the Belmore markets where their businesses congregated and where racist animosity was most intensely felt (Sydney Morning Herald, 22 August 1904: 5). Concerned over the declining value of their businesses in the anti-Chinese environment, leading Chinese merchants considered establishing an association expressly for the purpose of defending their rights.

The Chinese Merchants’ Society was eventually organized in September of 1903 after the funeral of Quong Tart and the departure of W.R.G. Lee for China.18 Initially named Ziyoushe 自由社 (Society for Freedom), the name was later changed to NSW Chinese Merchants’ Society.19 It proclaimed as its purpose the promotion of economic mobilization and explicitly approved of

18 See income records dated 9 Aug (lunar calendar) in “Records of Meetings, 1903-1904,” no. 111/4/1, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.
19 “Records of Meetings, 1903-1904,” no. 111/4/1, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.
the Western economic system and Western society (TWT, 14 November 1903: 3).

The records of the Chinese Merchants’ Society in 1903 and 1904 list 31 Chinese firms as members including the largest Sydney Chinese fruit firms (TWT, 14 November 1903: 3). Wing On and Co. was one of the eight Chinese firms that served as representatives of the Society (TWT, 31 October 1903: 3). The organization's structure, consisting of these eight representatives, together with the setup for selling steamship tickets, was in some degree similar to the defunct Lin Yik Tong. But the native-place affiliations of the representatives were not emphasized in relation to their functions within the organization. Furthermore, the representatives held their positions in a voluntary capacity. They met every three months to monitor and report on the development of the society, with each meeting chaired and conducted in accordance with Western-style procedures (TWT, 14 November 1903: 3). This demonstrated the determination of the Chinese merchants, including fruit traders, to establish and run their business society in the style of Western democratic institutions.

Another difference between the Lin Yik Tong and the Chinese Merchants’ Society lay in the ways in which the two organizations identified themselves and their respective functions in the Chinese community. The Lin Yik Tong, as reflected in its Chinese title, was set up as a representative of the Chinese community. Its role was in some ways similar to that of a guild, whose function was to negotiate between its members and the outside world. The Chinese Merchants’ Society, on the other hand, was founded as an embodiment of capitalism and enterprise. This reflected a developing trend among Chinese merchant groups to identify themselves in terms of their occupations, which in turn signified an emphasis on the spirit of capitalism and democracy in their approach to the construction of society. It was also a demonstration of the Sydney Chinese merchants playing new roles as they adopted wider Australian values for their social and economic mobilization.

The transformation of the Sydney Chinese merchant groups from guild to modern association further reflected the growing international network of the group. After its establishment in 1903, the Chinese Merchants’ Society responded positively to a plan by the Zhongguo Shangwu Gongsi 中國商務公司 (Chinese Commercial Company) to collect capital from the overseas Chinese which was in turn a response to an initiative of the Hong Kong CERA branch. In Sydney, Yee Hing was gathering the Chinese merchants to collect capital for the same venture (TWT, 14 November 1903: 3). The Sydney merchants contributed 53,530 yuan, which constituted the first fruits of Yee Hing's efforts. In the end, the Sydney Chinese collected 85,250 yuan from
Melbourne and Western Australia to send to the Hong Kong headquarters of Zhongguo Shangwu Gongsi (TWT, 1 August 1903: 3). In the following years, the Chinese Merchants’ Society devoted itself to developing the CERA’s business enterprises.20

The success of this fundraising venture gives some indication of the power of the merchants belonging to the Chinese Merchants’ Society and the CERA. It also demonstrates the capacity for social mobilization of the Sydney Chinese merchants not only in the state of NSW but also at the international level. In progressing from guild to modern alliance, the Sydney Chinese commercial elite had established highly effective patterns of networking. Furthermore, members of this elite group had helped to raise the consciousness of merchants generally, enhancing their capacity to secure their social position, consolidate their property and strengthen their leadership.

In July 1904, ten months after the establishment of the Chinese Merchants’ Society, the Sydney Chinese merchants were prompted by developments in Australia to form another organization, the NSW Chinese Merchants’ Defence Association, hereafter, CMDA (TWT, 16 July 1904: Supplement). The aim of the CMDA was to combat the Anti-Chinese League. When the CMDA was formed, the Tung Wah Times reported that over 300 people attended its inaugural meeting on 20 July (TWT, 16 and 23 July 1904: Supplement). The year 1904 was one of trepidation for the Sydney Chinese merchants (Yong 1977: 73). In May, the Anti-Chinese League and the Anti-Asiatic League were formed through an amalgamation of the Liberal and Reform Association, the Shop Assistants’ Union, the Sydney Labour Council, the United Furniture Traders’ Association and the NSW Retail Grocers’ Association. This was a powerful alliance, formed to defend trade union interests from “Chinese competition” (Sydney Morning Herald, 5 May 1904: 8). The founding of the Anti-Chinese League in Sydney in particular alerted the Sydney Chinese merchants to the need for organizing another society to secure their rights and positions more effectively.

The establishment of the CMDA was also a response to the Russo-Japanese War. The two events — the Anti-Chinese League and the Russo-Japanese War — impelled the founders to adopt the term “Social Darwinism” 社會達爾文主義 (shehui Daerwen zhuyi) to highlight their endangered position as members of a transnational Chinese diaspora. The sudden outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War also prompted the Chinese merchants to advocate the

20 In 1905, one in particular, the Zhongguo Shangwu Gongsi in Hong Kong, changed its name to War Yick and Co. and returning Sydney Chinese merchant David O’Young became one of the enterprise’s managers. See TWT, 19 Aug 1905: 3.
militarization of China (TWT, 27 February 1904: 2 and 19 March 1904: 2). The Sydney Chinese merchants and members of the CERA petitioned the Manchu government to ally with Japan (TWT, 9 April 1904: 2). Furthermore, the merchants collected donations for Chinese casualties incurred during the war (TWT, 12 March 1904: 2). Meanwhile, reports in the Times emphasized the tragic circumstances of Chinese laborers in Africa and Australia in order to bolster their appeals to the Australian and Chinese governments for further political protection (TWT, 23 January 1904: 3, 2 April 1904: 2, and 30 April 1904: 3). However, the failure of Chinese diplomacy made the merchants realize that it was not realistic to pin their hopes on political protection from China to transform their position in Australia.

At the first meeting of the CMDA, Chan Harr was elected president, and six storekeepers — two fruit traders, two grocers and two cabinet makers — were appointed committee members (TWT, 23 July 1904: Supplement). The CMDA members stated that they believed they were being made victims of the Anti-Chinese League. They made known their intention of working to bring about an environment conducive to stable commercial activity (TWT, 16 July 1904: Supplement; CAH, 19 November 1904: 5). The alliance of the Chinese Presbyterians, CERA, Chinese Merchants’ Society and CMDA sustained the Sydney Chinese merchant community through those difficult times.

Chan Harr’s presidency in particular shows that the new community leadership did not rely on traditional kinship or native-place loyalties alone. Chan Harr’s business roots lay in Western Australia. He made connections with the Sydney Chinese in 1900 during Liang Qichao’s visit to Australia. Sometime after this, he moved to Sydney, joined the Western Confectionery Company (TWT, 15 October 1904: 3) and became a spokesman for the Chinese community with the support of the CERA, the Chinese Merchants’ Society, and the Chinese Presbyterian Church.

In 1904, Chan gave a speech at the inauguration of the revived night school of the Sydney Chinese Presbyterian Church. He proclaimed in Christian spirit, “We should be one people.” These words infused a sense of universalism into the Sydney Chinese Presbyterian merchants vis-à-vis White Australia. The success of Chan Harr’s social leadership with the broad support of various organizations did not depend on his personal relationships and wealth alone. His manifestly positive attitude, together with his bilingual abilities, emboldened Chinese merchants to negotiate and engage with the wider Sydney public. It is worth noting that for him, the equality of access to modern systems

was not merely a means to conduct commerce but also an ethical principle for political inclusion.

In August of 1904, Chan Harr engaged in a debate in the *Sydney Morning Herald* with the Anti-Chinese League and the Asiatic League in his capacity as the president of CMDA. He emphasized the virtues of the British heritage of liberty, fair play and commercialism. He also proclaimed that Chinese merchants and traders were seeking commercial peace and equality rather than antagonism with the Europeans (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 1904: 8). After this, the demands of the Anti-Chinese League generated no further discussions in the state or federal parliaments.

The establishment of the Sydney group was intended to provide a model for the democratization of merchant organizations, as an alternative to the traditional style and function of the guild. The fact that it was registered with the relevant authorities in Sydney shows that the members were motivated to become part of a legal, Western-style system, not least in order to secure their position. Chinese merchants in Hong Kong had been taught the same lesson by their engagement with British colonialism (Wong 1991: 26; Fitzgerald 2007: 178-80). Further to this assertive autonomy, the establishment of the CMDA showed that the Sydney Chinese merchants were capable of mobilizing themselves to fight for their rights within the Australian economic and political system.

Compared with other Chinese chambers of commerce around the Pacific area, the Sydney Chinese Merchants’ Society was remarkable for its self-reliance and success in mobilization. Chen Laixing has analyzed the initial establishment of Chinese chambers of commerce in Singapore, Batavia, Manila, San Francisco and Kobe. He argues that these institutions were Chinese merchant societies established in response to the prompting of Chinese consul-generals in concert with existing communal societies such as native-place and kinship associations (Chen 2002: 354). Members of the Sydney group, on the other hand, organized themselves on their own accord in the absence of a consul-general. In fact, the mode of establishment of both the Sydney Chinese Merchants’ Society and the CMDA was similar to that of the Hong Kong Chinese Chamber of Commerce which was influenced by British colonial and Western practices.

When social life becomes urbanized and complex, personal trust and relationships intersect with what German sociologist Niklas Luhmann calls “system trust.” System trust is sustained by the calculation of economic and human resources. Wong Siu-lun, in arguing that system trust and personal trust were mutually reinforcing in the case of the Hong Kong and overseas Chinese merchants, makes the point that those communities had trust in Western styles of
conduct and formal systems of negotiation as a way to securing and sustaining their leadership. Such was the background to the establishment of both the Hong Kong and Sydney Chinese merchants’ societies. In the case of the Sydney societies, there is additional evidence of Chinese merchants striving for recognition in Australian society despite the White Australia policy’s rejection of the Chinese as part of Australian society.

The process of transformation from guild to modern association was sustained by notions of legitimation. Joseph Fewsmith has noted that the transformation of merchant organizations in modern China was “part of a wider movement to mobilize society and formalize the participation of local elites” (Fewsmith 1985: 25-26). He further argues that this transformation is a manifestation of the relationship between state and society, public and private (Fewsmith 1985: 30-32). A similar process took place among Sydney Chinese merchants in the reconfiguration of their social status and leadership.22 A willingness to engage in a registration process is an important signifier of the Chinese merchants’ desire to formalize their participation in the state on an institutional level, by legitimation, rather than by way of personal relationships and networks. It also highlights the role of the Sydney Chinese merchants as brokers between state and society. In other words, the leadership of the Sydney Chinese merchants was now rooted in state sanction rather than in personal relationships, and the notion of legitimation itself became a focus and source of authority and leadership for the merchants as they established organizations aimed at equalizing access to commerce and democratic participation. In this sense, the Sydney Chinese merchants considered their social role and position to be different from that of other Chinese communities in Australia.

In addition to developing its social status and leadership over this period, Sydney’s Chinese commercial class came to appreciate its own growing importance, and to become institutionalized. Sydney merchants established their position by putting up the first Chinese-Australian merchant association in the country. In this regard they were similar to the Chinese commercial elite of Hong Kong who established commercial associations on their own initiative rather than wait for political or government representatives to advocate the formation of chambers of commerce, as in China. They mobilized their resources to counter the ill effects of White-Australian nationalism and fought

---

to maintain their position in the face of crude Social Darwinism that prevailed at the time. In this context they came to extol and embrace modern models of good citizenship as a foundation of public life.

Conclusion

In the 1890s, bilingual Chinese elites dominated the leadership of the Sydney Chinese community. They faced an additional hurdle in so far as the global phenomenon (in which the rapid growth of new commercial cities brought patriarchal ethics of the old empire into conflict with the industrial and commercial lifestyles of the modern city) was overwritten with locally-inflected concerns about race and culture, where “Chinese” were associated with inherited and unchanging customs and traditions, and “Australians” were associated with enlightened and modern ethics and lifestyles.

Over the first decade of the 20th century the rising Sydney Chinese commercial elite had established an alternative pattern of leadership in an environment where new kinds of social alliances yielded new patterns of mobilization and new kinds of political ideology. Each of these innovations was closely informed by concurrent developments abroad, particularly in China, Hong Kong, and North America. What made them distinctively Australian was the specific translation of global developments into local and national idioms in White Australia.

The anti-Chinese racism of White Australia converged with partisan Chinese nationalist politics to evoke a shared vision for members of a transnational community that pined for a homeland and yet lay rooted in Australian soil. In this process, the Sydney Chinese commercial elite were encouraged to mobilize their resources by linking up with an international network of patriots among the Chinese diaspora. Chinese newspapers had been active agents in the shaping of urban elites and community leaders for the Chinese community since the late 19th century. This is nowhere more apparent than in the complex relationships and occasional conflicts that arose among local Chinese newspapers and civic associations in the 1890s and early 1900s, and the transnational connections established by Chinese merchants with Chinese newspapers and associations outside Australia. From 1905 the Sydney Chinese merchants emerged as a distinctly modern merchant stratum; their influence was at its peak in 1907 and 1908.

In this context, a growing preoccupation with the idea of *huaqiao* in the local Chinese press reflected the increasing nationalization of the Chinese identity in Australia within a transnational frame of reference. Newspaper
commentaries of the time confirm that social identities and patterns of mobilization that were grounded in competing narratives were now incorporated in a larger and coherent narrative of a *huaqiao* diaspora. The notion of *huaqiao* was sufficiently broad to embrace Confucian revivalists and revolutionary republican networks and sufficiently flexible to accommodate a range of distinct identities, values, aspirations and dreams.

In conclusion, politics was essential for shaping the new profile of the Sydney Chinese commercial elite through this period of social transition. There was an emerging sense of community and diasporic identity in a developing political consciousness and new political practices which were embedded, in turn, in wider processes of social transformation affecting the Sydney Chinese commercial group and Chinese-Australian community. Elite politics focused its attention on particular issues of community and nation. The rise of the Sydney Chinese commercial elite, in so far as it was related to the development of Chinese nationalism in Australia, was more closely related to social leadership, social transformation, print culture and pattern of mobilization than it was to native identities and ties of clan and kinship.

**References**

**Archival Material**

(National Library of Australia)

Minutes of the Chinese Empire Reform Association of N.S.W., 1899-1906, no. 111/5.
Records of Meetings, 1903-1904, no. 111/4/1.
(Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University)

(State Records of NSW)

Report of the Royal commission on alleged Chinese gambling and immorality and charges of bribery against members of the police force, 1891-1892. Sydney : Govt. printer, 1892.
(State Library of New South Wales)

**Chinese Newspapers in Australia**

*Chinese Australian Herald* 廣益華報 *Guangyihuabao*
*Chinese Times* 愛國報 *Aiguobao*
*Tung Wah News* 東華新報 *Donghuaxinbao*
*Tung Wah Times* 東華報 *Donghuabao*


