CHAPTER TWO

THE FORMATION OF THE STUDENT ISSUE

The fact that this group of Chinese nationals were away from their home country shaped their protection campaign in Australia in a number of ways. They needed to familiarize themselves with various aspects of their host society. They needed to find out about the local people’s attitudes towards June 4. They needed to learn what the locals understood a genuine refugee to be. They had to learn about the legitimate ways for seeking asylum. They needed to know how to interact with various sections of local Australian society that became involved with their cause. This chapter traces how the issue of asylum-seeking by Chinese students in Australia in 1989 took shape, and provides a context for the story of their political activism. It discusses how the Chinese student issue was first raised in Australian society in general and within the student community itself. The discussion goes on to identify the involvement of six local organizations or agencies and the interactions between them. It then examines the changes that came about in the newly formed student community as their residency or asylum-seeking issue took shape, noting the structural changes in the students’ primary social groups in response to their changing circumstances.

The first hint that asylum was being considered for the Chinese students living in Australia in 1989 appeared in the mainstream English-language print media as early as 6 June, only two days after the June 4 incident. A report titled ‘Asylum likely for students,’ published in The Australian (one of the most influential, and more conservative, English daily newspapers in Australia), included the following words:

[The Australian Government] will consider granting asylum or refugee status to any of the 8,200 Chinese students studying in Australia who fear persecutions if they return home. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Evans, said he did not know of any applications from Chinese students, but each case would be considered on its merits (The Australian, 6 June 1989).
The next day, all the Australian English-language and Chinese-language newspapers contained lengthy coverage of the Chinese student protection issue. The *Australian Chinese Daily* (*ACD* or *Xinbao* in Chinese), the most-read Chinese-language community newspaper among PRC students at the time, carried the headline ‘Chinese students seek political asylum, PM Hawke promises to consider’ (*ACD*, 7 June 1989). At a time when many students were deeply worried by what had occurred in China, and especially by the rumors of a looming civil war, the media’s focus on the issue of protection not only made them aware of a potential chance to stay, but also indirectly seemed to be urging them to consider taking this opportunity. In a sense, this was the beginning of a shift in the students’ attention: from June 4 to their own protection issue, and from short-term student visa extensions to seeking asylum.

Even before the students’ actions took the form of a campaign, their reactions to June 4 had changed in response to changes to the ways in which both they and local Australians understood the new issue of their chance—indeed their right—to stay in Australia and be protected. The media coverage seemed to be generating pressure on the government to offer them a visa extension. At the time, only a handful of students (those whose student visas had expired, or were close to expiry) were in need of a visa extension. Now, however, it appeared that a visa extension could potentially be made available to anyone who wished to have one without paying any tuition fees.

This change in perception became visible because thousands of PRC students rushed to the local DILGEA offices, desperately seeking application forms for either ‘residency on strong humanitarian grounds’ or refugee status. The largest convergences of students in several DILGEA offices occurred precisely, and ironically, on the day when a series of emotional memorial services were held throughout Australia for the victims of June 4 (*The Age*, 10 June 1989). By 14 June 1989, more than 5,000 Chinese nationals were reported to have presented themselves at DILGEA branches countrywide and picked up the application forms (*ACD*, 14 June 1989). According to an internal report prepared by a Melbourne-based Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS), so high was the demand for the forms that the DILGEA branches were rapidly running out of them, and some migration agents decided to sell them for AU$10 each so as to make as much profit as they could from these potential asylum seekers (RACS, 1990: 6).

The change in the local people’s perception of the students was evident within just a few days in a shift in the focus of coverage, in both the