

## **Asia Rising Podcast**

### **History of Chinatown, Melbourne, Australia**

#### **Matt Smith**

Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast of La Trobe Asia where we discuss the news, views and general happenings of Asian States and Societies. I'm your host Matt Smith and joining me today will be Dr Sophie Couchman.

She's an Honorary Research Associate in the History Programme at La Trobe University and she is also the curator of the Australian - Chinese Museum in Chinatown Melbourne which brings us nicely to our topic today; the history of Chinatown in Melbourne. This podcast was recorded live on the streets about a week before the Chinese New Year. Here is Sophie Couchman.

#### **Dr Sophie Couchman**

I find Chinatown a really interesting space, because I think there's so many layers to it. Obviously now when you walk along the street you're looking at something that's pretty typical or pretty clichéd kind of Chinatown that you might see in lots of places around the world. There's stone lions, there's decorative archways, there's lots of Chinese restaurants, but Melbourne's Chinatown I think is particularly special, not necessarily unique because it does actually have a lot of history that sits behind it.

This has been a Chinatown since the gold rush period in the 1850's. So when Chinese are first arriving, they're coming and docking on the Yarra, first arriving to Melbourne during the gold rushes. Just got off the boat after several months travel, they come to lodging houses that are in this area, actually in Celestial Avenue which is right down near Swanston Street. And in fact, when they first start settling there in lodging houses, it's actually a lane that doesn't have a name and after a year or so it becomes called Celestial Avenue. Celestial was a term that was used to describe Chinese; became quite a derogatory term because it was used in negative contexts, but the idea is that the emperor is the heavenly representative and the Chinese are the other, you know, fall under heaven and that's where celestial comes to being.

As lodging houses when these people arrived, they came, they bought their picks and shovels and travel goods and then they headed off to the goldfields and so this space here, is not a goldfields era place really. It grows to its largest extent post gold rushes, so from the 1870's, 1880's, around the turn of the century is when it's at its real peak and it's a very complex place. You've got Chinese newspapers, you've got a whole lot of Chinese associations; both the traditional ones that are set up during the goldfields era and then more contemporary ones that are engaging contemporary Chinese politics.

#### **Matt Smith**

So is it Chinatown, I mean this is 20 years or so after Melbourne's been founded, so is it going to be intentional back then or is it something that grows organically? How did that happen?

#### **Sophie Couchman**

It's an organic process and I think it's a fairly natural human response to coming to a place that's different. I mean Earls Court in London is where Australians group and of course not all Australians go there...

#### **Matt Smith**

Kangaroo Court?

**Sophie Couchman**

That's right, and so it's described as a Chinese Quarter very early. You've got people you can speak to, there's people you can get advice from - of course you're going to stay there. It makes a lot of sense.

**Matt Smith**

And people that can point you towards the gold fields?

**Sophie Couchman**

That's right. And you can team up and go with groups and all that sort of thing. So once the gold rush is over it's not just Chinese it's everyone actually on the goldfields, they start moving towards the cities, they're looking for employment opportunities. This is when Chinese start moving into market gardening in a really big way. Chinese newspapers and there's Chinese associations and these associations are important because they're still active today and a lot of them have premises in Chinatown and this is one of the things that I think is what makes Chinatown a really complex place in Melbourne.

Because on the one hand it's everything that's a bit tacky and a bit crass about Chinese'ness and Chinese Culture, but on the other hand there's really genuine Chinese'ness in that space.

**Matt Smith**

Should we go for a walk?

**Sophie Couchman**

Yes, let's do.

**Matt Smith**

Which direction?

**Sophie Couchman**

We're just at Cohen Place where there's a great big enormous archway that was gifted to the City of Melbourne by Jiangsu Province, which is our sister state, and actually on this block here used to be what was called The Munster Arms which was an old pub, but it was occupied by the Chin family and there were quite a large number of children in the Chin family. They were involved in the Young Chinese League, they established the Young Chinese League, which was an association for young Chinese people to get together and socialise. They had a football team, they ran debutante balls, they had picnics, they did this kind of thing and one of the things they also did was bring in some Chinese Dragons.

So we're heading down towards Swanston Street from that archway and we've got Number 109 which at the moment is a shop that's selling duty free material for Chinese tourists. One of the things that I think's quite funny about what's happened to Chinatown over the last few years, is that it's a Chinatown but there's increasing numbers of these duty free shops that are selling Australian goods to Chinese tourists, so in a funny way Chinatown has become very Australian in that respect.

This building is interesting for two reasons, one because if you go down the laneway there's an entrance to the Chinese Nationalist Party the Kuomintang. They still operate it's the Victorian Branch, there's also a NSW branch and a branch in Sydney. They took over this building around 1921 and they renovated the façade of the building and if you have a look you can see some of it, you can see where some decorations have fallen off and if you go into the museum you can see

some photos from when it was first built and it looks space age. It had these extraordinary little turrets at the top, beautiful decoration and it was designed by the Burley Griffins who designed Canberra. It's extraordinary because it looks really space age and I think that that was deliberate. When the Kuomintang, when the Chinese Nationalist Party formed in the 1920's, they were looking to be modern, they were looking to find new ways to be Chinese and this building symbolised everything that was new and different and unusual.

Walking along Chinatown there's lots to distract you at ground level, particularly people making dumplings, but you need to look up and the buildings that you can see here are just absolutely extraordinary. So the one that's got Shanghai Village, which is a very popular eatery with people, is one of the two buildings that's on the Victorian heritage list. That building was put on the list in about the 1970's and I think there's some buildings that need to go on that were, the façades were designed in the 1970's for example; the fabulous Orchid Garden Restaurant façade, that's a façade you're not going to see in a hurry and its Chinoiserie, really over the top.

**Matt Smith**

So how quickly is Chinatown changing then because Melbourne never seems to sit still from one month to the next, so is there a lot of turnover going on in Chinatown? Can it change from month to month like that?

**Sophie Couchman**

Absolutely, and I think at the moment, I've been looking at and walking down Melbourne's Chinatown for probably close to twenty years and at the moment the rate of change is phenomenal. There's restaurants and businesses turning over all the time. It's a product of the growth in the Chinese population and the Asian population in Melbourne.

**Matt Smith**

Is it a struggle to retain the Chinese aspect of Chinatown then?

**Sophie Couchman**

They're still Chinese businesses.

**Matt Smith**

Yeah.

**Sophie Couchman**

You know the duty free shop that I pointed out at 109, that will be a Chinese business and if you go to some of the restaurants and things, they might be an Asian business but you might find that they're run by Chinese or Chinese Australians. Although that again is changing also as Australians immigration changes.

You've then got things like Chinese medicine, so we've passed one up on the corner where the archway is, very well respected and they've just opened up there recently, but there's this Chinese medicine centre here that does massage, there's another one around the corner in Russell Street. There's been Chinese medicine in this street for as long as I can remember.

**Matt Smith**

You just said there's one around the corner in Russell Street, how much does Chinatown leak out?

**Sophie Couchman**

Well, it's an interesting question, so it changes. It waxes and wanes with the population. When I talk about the peak of Chinatown around the turn of the century, you're looking at it extending

from Swanston Street right up to Spring Street, the lanes that come off and then over into the Little Lonsdale and Lonsdale Street behind the State Library. You can call all of that broadly Chinatown, it's got a very dominant Chinese population but there's a lot of other people that are also operating at the same time.

If you look at San Francisco I think it was a much bigger area, there was just a bigger population but Melbourne's Chinatown was always smaller. The core of Chinatown has always been from Swanston to Russell or Swanston to Exhibition Street and the lanes that come off.

The thing that I think is very interesting now is that, we only know this as Chinatown because there's archways. There are Chinese and Asian restaurants and businesses over the whole of Melbourne's CBD and over the whole of Melbourne, and that's a wonderful contradiction that exists.

### **Matt Smith**

I am curious if a lot of people still consider it Chinatown or if they even would if these arches weren't here?

### **Sophie Couchman**

I don't think things have to be hard and fast. The archways and the labelling of Chinatown as a Chinatown now, also adds, (as I was alluding to before) it's a marketing ploy about promoting Chinese business. I suspect that by calling it a Chinatown, you encourage more businesses to open here because it's a recognised place where people know they can go. There's two Asian grocers here, so if you're in the CBD you know you can come here and there are supermarkets.

I mean memory is very powerful too, there's still a lot of people who have strong memories of this place before the 1970's when immigration opened up and for them I think they will always look at it through that Chinese lens. What Chinatown means to each of those people? It's going to be different.

### **Matt Smith**

Can we talk about the immigration policy and how that kind of thing changed Chinatown during the early 1900's and that era?

### **Sophie Couchman**

Immigration restrictions, (we've still got immigration restrictions) play a bit part in what's going on. Restrictions are placed on Chinese immigration during the gold rushes in Victoria. Each colony was slightly different and then at Federation, very famously, the Immigration Restriction Act was put in place. What was interesting about that from an immigration perspective is prior to that it was only Chinese who were targeted, the Immigration Restriction Act broadened that to be 'anybody'. The dictation test that was part of that process could be applied how you wished basically.

The population didn't immediately disappear, one of the things that's interesting about those restrictions is they go to an enormous amount of trouble to ensure that Chinese who have been in Australia, who have been law abiding, who have been living here for a long time, can still remain here. They can leave the country and they can come back here. The huge immigration files that historians might come across; family historians might come across, are the files of people who were allowed to be here, but documentation, certificates all had to be issued so that they could be distinguished from anyone who's new. So basically the laws were about, "we don't want new Chinese, but we're happy to keep the ones that we've got." So it took a while for those policies to have an impact.

You probably start seeing in Chinatown there's a decline in the 1920's and the 1930's, but you also have different things starting to happen. Chinese immigrants, you've got multiple descendants now, they start disappearing into the historical record a bit more. Chinatown itself starts getting smaller but it gets smaller for a range of reasons. So there used to be banana ripening rooms all along this street, but when the Queen Victoria Market opened there was a lot more space, so they all moved there. Celestial Avenue, there were little houses there where people lived. There were kids who grew up there, played in the streets, went to local schools, they moved out and they moved into the suburbs and that was what was happening to Central Melbourne. Central Melbourne was changing from a place that had residents and light industry, into a business district which is what it is now.

So by the 1970's you really notice it's a very small community in this space and a terrific example, have we walked past it? No we haven't yet. There's a beautiful old church here which is the Gospel Hall, which is one of my favourite buildings in the street on the corner of Heffernan Lane and I heard this wonderful story about this church. When you got to the 1950's – 1940's, there's a very small congregation here, it's an Anglican, now Uniting Church, but it was Anglican for a long time. It was so small that the Presbyterians were worshipping here as well and people would come, there would maybe be half a dozen regular worshippers.

When immigration was opened up again between the 1950's and the 1970's, the population had grown so much and the new immigrants that were coming in also were bringing Christianity with them. So it went from having half a dozen people coming to worship, to having so many people, people were all milled out the front of the hall, they set up a speaker system and people were all packed upstairs listening to the speaker system, to the point where they struck a deal with the Wesleyan Church which is on Lonsdale Street, where they would do their main worshipping there.

The other thing that happened was it was the Church were worshipping in Cantonese because the early immigrants were Cantonese, but the new immigrants coming in were speaking Mandarin, speaking other languages and they're going, "we want a Mandarin Service" and once you have enough you go off and set up your own church. There's about five or six churches in Melbourne that traced their origins to this little unassuming Gospel Hall.

#### **Matt Smith**

Yeah it's quite a small bit of space, I like what they've done with the real estate though, they must have packed quite a lot of people in there.

#### **Sophie Couchman**

Sometimes it's open and it's worth going in, it's a lovely little building.

Coming up here we have the Num Pon Soon society.

#### **Matt Smith**

We have a blue plaque.

#### **Sophie Couchman**

Yes a blue plaque. So Num Pon Soon is a district association, so what that means is that people who came from the Sam Yup District belonged this society and these district societies operated a bit like insurance and social welfare at a time when those things weren't really part of what the government provided. They helped you with translation, they helped you buy tickets to go back home, they shipped your bones back home when you died, they provided a space where people could get together and socialise. They had a 'Save this Shrine', it's a blended spirituality.

**Matt Smith**

1860's, so Melbourne's 30. Here is Celestial Avenue which you were referring to before. So what you're describing here about Chinatown seems to be very much, I can't help but notice how community oriented this is. Imagine people came here just to catch up even if they weren't living here.

**Sophie Couchman**

Lots of people remember the Chinese vegetable hawkers in Melbourne who in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century would deliver vegetables to the door. They would go to the Vic Market very early in the morning, pick up their produce, or the market gardeners would drop it off, and they they'd come to Chinatown to have something to eat.

The stores were often clan based stores, clan is basically the family name, so there might be the Chen Family General Store and if you were from the Chen Clan you would go to that store and they sometimes had a cook on staff who would, if you were from that clan, they'd make you a cheap meal. There were cook shops and little café's along here too, but there was a mixture. And the other thing I should point out is that, not everyone got along. We're not talking about one community here and it's just the same today as it was back then and there were divisions within the community, people disagreed over all sorts of things.

**Matt Smith**

The parade's going to come up here and I suppose it ends outside Sun Yat Sen in the courtyard there.

**Sophie Couchman**

The dragon comes out of the museum. He's due to come out about 11.30, he'll come out of the big archway in Cohen Place, then turn left and then he's doing a sort of figure eight, so going along Russell Street, then down and back up here and then he backs into the museum.

**Matt Smith**

Yeah

**Sophie Couchman**

I have to say it is a really exciting thing to come and see him. It's a daggy thing to admit, because you kind of go "dragon parade – right", but then you come and there's the crackers and there's the drumming and he's just beautiful.

**Matt Smith**

You must go past him every day going, "not long now dragon, not long now".

**Sophie Couchman**

Yeah, we're very fond of him.

**Matt Smith**

Get some fresh air.

**Sophie Couchman**

There's a little old park that's used as part of the 'Awakening Ceremony' for the dragon and there's often a staff member who will light the incense in the morning and pay suitable respect.

**Matt Smith**

That's Dr Sophie Couchman an honorary at the history programme at La Trobe University and Curator of the Australian Chinese Museum in Chinatown Melbourne.

You've been listening to Asia Rising, the podcast of La Trobe Asia. You can subscribe to this podcast in both iTunes and Soundcloud, please leave us a review there and tell your friends about the podcast. You can follow myself and Sophie Couchman on Twitter. Sophie is @sophiecouchman and I'm @nightlightguy.

That's all the time we have today on Asia Rising, so until the next episode, I'm Matt Smith, have a happy Year of the Monkey and thanks for listening.