

HISTORY OF CHUNG WAH ASSOCIATION PART TWO: 1985- 1995

From the Chung Wah 85th Anniversary Magazine 1910-1995

by YEE Kee Yong

At dawn, on the first day of November 1985, four Elders of the Association marched towards the James Street end of the entrance to the Perth Cultural Centre. They hung a big red banner between two lamp posts across James Street announcing to the general public that the Chung Wah Association was 75 years old and inviting them to join the Association in celebrating the occasion.

The activities of the 75th Anniversary Celebration lasted five months. They included exhibitions, public lectures, a Chinese film festival, dragon boat racing, a Chinese chess competition, cultural concert, banquet, gala ball and special luncheon honouring our senior citizens. The commemorative ceremony at the Alexander Library was opened by Mr Ron Davies, the Minister for Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs, on 8 November 1985.

These celebrations had a profound impact on the direction the Association would take in the following years. The prior years' effort in rejuvenating, rebuilding and consolidating had finally pushed the Association to its plateau. From then on, the Association was more concerned with the image it projected to the Chinese community as it recognised its potential economic power and influence.

In 1984 the debate on Australia's immigration policy, particularly Asian migration, was fuelled by Professor Blainey. While this debate was rampant, the Australian National Movement (ANM), an anti-Asian organisation was formed in 1985. The Association called a special Executive Committee meeting to discuss the ANM. A subsequent representation was made to the Minister for Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs expressing our concern over racist posters.

At the 1985-86 Annual General Meeting, members saw fit to create a Council of Elders. This was to ensure that the services of past presidents, trustees and long standing Executive Committee members were retained and their efforts recognised appropriately. More importantly they could act as the caretaker management team in the event of an emergency, should it ever arise.

The concept of forming a national organisation of Chinese associations in Australia was raised in August 1985. More than a year later a national conference on the issue took place in Sydney. This historical event involved 33 organisations from every state and territory in Australia with nearly 200 delegates in attendance. Our Association sent the biggest interstate contingent. At the conclusion of the conference, all delegates agreed that they had a common desire to establish a national Chinese Australian organisation at an appropriate time. The second conference was held in Melbourne in December 1990.

In 1986, members witnessed for the first time, a State Governor gracing our Chinese New Year Ball in the then Merlin Hotel. In the same year the Association successfully obtained its second grant from the Federal Government to employ a full time social worker. The importance of this grant and the successive grants must be seen in perspective. Without the grant it would be difficult for the Association to provide its welfare services to the community; which was one of the most important objectives of the Association when it was first established. This helped to attract the senior members, particularly new comers, to the Chung Wah Hall everyday, to learn conversational English, get fit, eat "yum cha", read Chinese newspapers and magazines or meet other new arrivals. This created a liveliness in the Hall which is considered essential to its meaningful existence.

Also in 1986 the Association, in conjunction with the WA Museum and WA Multicultural Education Advisory Committee, successfully completed a series of Community Workshops in the Chung Wah Hall and Fremantle Museum. These workshops involved Chung Wah members in group discussions with teachers from both private and state schools. The aim was to develop an increased understanding and awareness of Chinese culture. The workshops were particularly important during those days, bearing in mind that there was a frightful and unceasing attack on Asian migration and multiculturalism.

The introduction of the Business Migration Programme introduced by the Australian Government in the early 1980s saw an influx of business migrants from South East Asia, particularly Malaysia, many of whom became members of the Association. In August 1985 the Association formed a Business and Professional Group in response to the needs and interest of these members. There was, however, some disquiet among members who considered that the Association had created an elite group.

On 16 February 1987, the Association established an autonomous body called the Western Australian Chinese Chamber of Commerce Inc. The Association handed over control of the Chamber to its inaugural President Datuk Cheah Sin Bee on 15 March 1987. The fact that the Chamber was founded by the Association was enshrined in the Chamber's constitution.

Chung Wah Autumn Centre was formed in 1987 with the laudable objective of providing low cost accommodation and a respite centre for elderly members.

In 1987 the Historical Group suggested that an intricately woven, gold-threaded banner, which was made in the early 1910s, was worthy of conservation. Efforts made to raise funds for this project, together with National Trust classification, should see work commence very soon.

The increasing number of business migrants and their families to Perth, the most popular city in Australia for Malaysians and Singaporeans in the mid-80s, meant the demand for places in our Chinese Schools grew out of control. The second Chinese School was opened in Lynwood in 1985 and is currently located at Parkwood Primary School. In 1991 the third Chinese School was established in Leeming. The total number of students enrolled in the three Chinese schools is well in excess of 1, 100, with a long waiting list too! From a humble beginning of 12 students in 1974 the growth has been a phenomenal achievement for the Association. It would be amiss if the Association fails to seize the potential of this development and quicken its pace in building its own Chinese school on the Balcatta land. Many members share this vision. When one considers the importance of the Chinese language, especially when APEC comes to full force in 2020, that vision may not be a pipe dream after all.

The strength of our youth in supporting and preserving Chinese culture slowly emerged from the mid-80s. In 1986 the Cultural Dancing Group performed its first public concert in the Octagon Theatre at University of Western Australia. The Lion Dance Troupe started teaching lion dance in the Chinese Schools. The Dragon Boat Club staged a spectacular international dragon boat race in 1988 adjacent to the Burswood Resort foreshore. Dragon boat racing in Western Australia has now spread to Bunbury in the south and as far north as Broome.

The success of the Dragon Boat Club has also thrown some light on the reality of multiculturalism. A motion was put forward by a senior member of the Club to the Executive Committee to accept an amendment to the Association constitution removing the restriction on ordinary membership to persons of non-Chinese descent. This was rejected by a majority of 9:6 votes.

In order to enrich the talent of our dancers in the Cultural Group, Professor Li from the Beijing Dance Academy was invited to Perth in August 1987 to run dance workshops. The latest performance by the Group in the first ever dance theatre production, *The Butterfly Lovers*, at the Playhouse Theatre in October 1995, was a shining example of the skill of the senior dancers.

The debate on Australia's immigration policy reared its ugly head again in 1988 with Mr John Howard, Member of Parliament, suggesting that the rate of Asian migration into Australia should be slowed down "... *in the interest of social cohesion...*". However in 1995, Mr Howard, as Federal Opposition Leader, did admit while in Perth, that those suggestions were wrong and that he "... *believed and felt strongly, on reflection, that those remarks were wrong and clumsy, they gave an incorrect impression...*". Mr Howard went on to say, "*I was, personally, very hurt by the suggestion made that in some ways I held racist views. I don't. I never have and I never will.*"

The shocking news on 18 February 1988 of the death in our community of a Chinese taxi driver, Peter Tan, who was viciously beaten, sent shivers down the spines of many of our members. Anti-Asian feeling was probably at its worst. In June 1989 the Association wrote to the Attorney General stating the Association's stand, and concern with the case, at the same time raising \$12,500 for Mrs Tan and family.

After a frightful period, Association members and the Chinese community rejoiced in September 1989 when they received news concerning the arrests of the ANM leaders. These leaders were later convicted and jailed for terms ranging from three to 18 years.

The Australia Day Award in January 1988 saw the most popular and respected member in the post-War history of the Association, Mrs Edie Hoy Poy, become a member of the Order of Australia for her meritorious contribution and voluntary services to the Perth Chinese community.



H. M. Queen Elizabeth II presenting Mrs Edie Hoy Poy with the Order of Australia medal at Government House, 23 April 1988, Courtesy Sunday Times Newspaper

Mrs Hoy Poy was personally vested the Medal by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Government House Ballroom in April 1988. This was an honour richly deserved and proudly felt by all members and the Chinese community.

The South West branch of the Chung Wah Association was endorsed by the Executive Committee in June 1989. The then President and Vice President went to Bunbury to meet with a group who had expressed a desire to join the Association, and the South West Chung Wah was established soon after.

The Tiananmen Square incident prompted the Association to pass a motion supporting public condemnation of the Chinese Government for the killing of many Chinese students at the Square. Numerous letters from churches and other non-Chinese organisations expressing their deepest sympathy and concern for families, friends and relatives of those who lost their lives during the protest were received by the Association.

The birth of the Oz Concert on 26 January 1990 was a huge success with the Australian community. Since its inception the Oz Concert has grown with participants from various ethnic communities each Australia Day, and is a truly multicultural showpiece. The success of the Oz Concert can be attributed largely to the vision and untiring effort of its inaugural Chairman, Dr Eric Tan AM.

In April 1990 the Association saw the departure of its most articulate President, Dr Eric Tan AM. His push for projecting the image of the Chinese community and reinforcing good relationships with other ethnic communities and the formation of the National Chinese Organisation not only put the Association at the forefront but also earned for himself a Life Membership of the Association on his departure. Earlier in 1995 he became the second member of the Association to become a Member of the Order of Australia.

In August 1990, the Metropolitan Cemetery Board advised the Association that the Chinese section at Karrakatta was running out of space. In order to alleviate the situation, the Board relocated a number of expired headstones after due advertisement in *The West Australian* newspaper and the *Chung Wah News*. The Association contributed its share of relocation costs. In 1995 the Board offered a new section in Karrakatta to the Chinese community for future use.

The Association Lion and Dragon Dance Troupe performed beyond expectation in the international tournament in Malaysia at the end of 1990. They finished seventh out of 23 teams from 11 countries. The same troupe also competed in Hong Kong in 1994 and made it to the finals. Their dare-devil performance at the 1994 Chinese Chamber of Commerce Ball commanded a highly praiseworthy letter from the former Premier of Western Australia, Sir Charles Court.

In January 1991 the Ladies Group made a donation of \$1000 to UNICEF. This was not the first time this social support arm of the Association has made such a donation. Nor will it be the last.

The formation of the Youth Group in 1990 by the then President Dr Pek Goh was another recent initiative. Previously, the younger members of the Association were loosely linked together through the Dragon Boat Club, the Cultural Group and the Lion Dance Troupe. Any young member who was not interested in these activities was left out. As a result, the Association suffered a lack of young members. By 1992 the Youth Group had come into its own. They had broadened their aims and activities to cultivate a better appreciation of Chinese culture and share the responsibility of maintaining the Association whilst retaining the essence of youth.

A young members tour of China in 1990 proved to be popular. It gave the participating youths an opportunity to meet their counterparts from other Australian states. More importantly the tour exposed them to some knowledge of their Chinese heritage and culture. Similar tours were organised in 1992 and 1994.

As part of the overall plan to push new policies to the foreground, a forum was held in 1992 amongst the members of the Executive Committee and members of the various sub-committees and groups. It was reported to be a great success as many ideas were put forward. Sadly though it has been the only meeting of that type to be held.

Another important Association role has been to welcome, host and entertain overseas Chinese visitors, mostly from the People's Republic of China and South East Asia, whenever the Association was advised of their visits. These have included trade delegations, government officials, sporting groups and even Shanghai puppeteers. The Association has at all times maintained a non-political stand. During the years 1985-1995 the Association has invited and welcomed politicians from both sides of the Australian political arena to many functions.

The Association, in conjunction with Edith Cowan University, erected a marble monument to commemorate the early pioneers who died in Western Australia. The Governor of WA, Major General Michael Jeffery AO MC, together with Trustee Edie Hoy Poy OAM unveiled the monument in September 1994.

Chinese radio broadcasting is another important community service provided by the Association. The programmes include news, weather, music, interviews, dissemination of important Government and local news and even a talk back segment.

Before the commencement of the Executive Committee meeting on 5 May 1994, the whole Committee stood for a minute's silence in honour of the late James Lee Wood. He was a former President and one of the Trustees who signed the Affidavit of the new constitution for the Association submitted to the Supreme Court for registration in July 1951.

In May 1994 the Association decided to set up a special task force to carry out an overall review of its constitution and it was hoped that the amendments would qualify the Association as a charitable organisation. After months of discussion, review and amendments, the revamped constitution was finally presented to members at an Extraordinary General Meeting in April 1995. The amendments were unanimously accepted for adoption.

The first term of the Property Development Committee expired in August 1987. At the end of its first term it left an accumulated fund of \$273,100 for the Association. It conducted a survey of members as to how best to use the Balcatta land and the James Street property and implemented a decision to invite different architects to submit concept plans based on the specifications drawn up from the results.

The eventual winner of the six architectural plans was chosen in early 1988. It was estimated that the winning design would cost \$4.5 million. With that kind of cost it was considered too ambitious to make an attempt to build and the project was eventually abandoned in 1990.

The need to provide a better facility for members to meet was still very much at the heart of the Executive Committee. An alternative plan to renovate the James Street Hall was in progress by mid-1990 and was completed by mid-1992. The total cost, including furnishing, amounted to nearly \$254,000. Part of the funds left by the Property Development Committee was used, together with a generous donation of \$100,000 from Mr Simon Lee AO, to complete the renovation.

The Association bought the Balcatta land in 1984 from the City of Stirling with the condition that the Association develop the land within ten years. In 1992 some concerned members of the original Property Development Committee made a representation to the Executive Committee about the apparent lack of action on the Balcatta land. They reminded the Association about the development condition in the contract which must be complied with by 1995. This resulted in the formation of 1993 Balcatta Proper Development Committee in February 1993.

In January 1994 the Executive Committee gave approval to the Property Development Committee to proceed with the development of stages 1 and 2 of the approved plans, subject to the availability of funds. By October 1995 the concrete foundation and steel frame for the school assembly hall was completed. The occasion was celebrated by erecting a plaque which was unveiled by the President James Chong and the President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce Simon Lee AO.

For many years of dedicated service to the Association, Elder Albert Hwee was accepted as a Life Member at the AGM in May 1995.

Throughout the history of the Association, all members in the Executive Committee, sub-committees and groups carried out their duties and responsibilities on a voluntary basis. It is not by accident that the Chung Wah Association is the strength and soul of the Chinese community in Perth. Every member should feel proud of its achievements. It reflects the unity of the ordinary people in the Chinese community who share the common desire to protect their interests and well being and to foster and preserve their culture and heritage.

With the increasing number of young people involved in the activities of the Association which can only be increased further with the opening of the new Chinese School and Cultural Centre - the future of the Association is confidently assured to run for more than its present record of 85 years.