

## THE ROLE OF THE SEE YUP SOCIETY IN MELBOURNE AND VICTORIA

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I must first state that I am not a professional historian, but just an interested amateur researcher. My interest in the See Yup Society began in the thirties when I came to Australia as a student and through my father, met many of the Chinese old-timers who had arrived in Australia just after the gold rush. The predominant group among the Chinese in Victoria was See Yup people, comprising about 90% of the Chinese population. Living near the southern coast of China, they were victims of the disastrous Opium War, after which, China was forced to pay indemnities of twice its annual national revenue to Britain, cede Hong Kong and open five treaty ports.\* Guangdong paid more than half the indemnity, leaving its population facing starvation. Males were forced to leave China and seek their living overseas.

I went back to China but returned to Melbourne to my father's business just before the Japanese invaded Hong Kong. I began to actively participate in the work of the Society from about the end of the War and am still very involved. I have subsequently been privileged to be President eight or nine times and Secretary for as many times of the Society, so have a fair knowledge of its workings and work. It was my good fortune to have been able to read most of the early records of the Society including the minutes of meetings held in the 1880s and early 20th. century because these historical records, by an unfortunate accident no longer exist. However, as I had intended doing some research on the Society, I luckily took copies of some documents which I am able to show you today.

Many people talk about mysterious Chinese secret societies, but the See Yup Society is a very open society and although its membership is limited to people who were born in the 4 (now 5) districts in Guangdong Province (show map), anyone who can vouch that their ancestors originally came from that district no matter how many generations ago, can become a member. The four districts are Xin Hui, En Ping, Tai Shan and Kaiping. The Xin Hui people had already formed a Kong Chew Society in Melbourne two or three years prior to the See Yup Society's formation.

When the first Chinese arrived in Australia, there was no diplomatic representative to protect them, so the See Yup Society was formed in 1854 as a mutual self-help organization. Each district had its own society which democratically elected members to the Executive Committee of the See Yup Society which comprised the President, Secretary and Social Organizer. The Executive Committee rotated yearly among the four district committees. Only merchants or managers of businesses in Little Bourke Street were eligible to serve as President or Secretary and were paid a nominal salary. They functioned along the lines of elders of a village. Policy was decided by general meetings of the Society's members. The goals of the early Society were to build a Temple as a place of worship for their members, to build a memorial hall to commemorate fellow members who had died and to carry out charity and welfare work.

The President was responsible for implementing the resolutions of members' general meetings, and for handling all financial matters. The Secretary's duty was to assist needy members. If members were sick, without money and unable to work, he arranged their passage back to China, paid by the Society. He also arranged funerals for members who were unable to pay funeral expenses, so that no Chinese was forced to be buried as a pauper. When a member left Australia to return to China, he was expected to donate 6 pounds to the Society for "the oil lamp" in the Temple. By 1940, when I returned home, I had to pay 10 pounds, although I had been earning only 10/- a week as a part-time worker! The Society also set out guidelines on behaviour, and even gave advice to all members including miners on the gold fields, on the appropriate clothing to wear so as to minimize friction with the white settlers. After the proclamation of the White Australia Policy in 1901, the Society helped many members with problems of immigration.

The structure of the society remained unchanged until 1980 when it was altered by the formation of a Representative Council of sixteen, comprising four members elected from each district. The Representative Council elects an Executive of President, Vice-President - Treasurer and two Secretaries - Chinese and English - and various sub-committees.

The charities regularly supported by the Society were the Royal Melbourne Hospital, the Alfred Hospital, the Mental Asylum and the Women's and Children's Hospitals. It also donated money to local appeals such as Bushfire Relief as well as sending money home to China for Flood and Famine Relief. Since the 1860s, to raise money for hospitals, the Society had held annual colourful street processions with a dragon followed by members wearing beautiful, ancient costumes, embroidered with silk and gold thread in traditional designs, beating gongs and playing music. From the last remains of the dragon - the magnificent head - which can still be seen in the Temple, we can imagine the glory of its heyday in the 19th. century. In 1901, as you can see by the flier announcing this Conference, the Chinese in Melbourne, the majority of whom were See Yup people and non-citizens, staged a huge procession to welcome the Duke and Duchess of York.

In 1912, the Society was forced through lack of funds to scale down the amount of donations given to charity. This continued till the Second world War when because of costly renovations to the Temple and maintenance of properties from which little or no rent was received, the Society lacked funds to maintain donations to charities. For example, the building rented out to the Chung Hwa Society brought in only 8 pounds 15 rental per week whereas the estimated rent was 100 pounds per week.

The Temple of the See Yup Society in South Melbourne (then called Emerald Hill) built in 1856 and rebuilt and enlarged in 1866 was the meeting place for members, and so bears only the name of the Society not the designation "temple". The Society held at least eight major religious services with offerings each year and people of all faiths were free to visit and/or worship at the temple at all times. In recent years, with the influx of new migrants to Victoria, many demands have been made to house their ancestors' tablets in the Memorial Hall which contains only tablets of See Yup members. To this end, plans have been drawn up for a special memorial hall to contain the tablets of non-members and the City Council has given the go ahead for its construction. In 1860, the Society first applied for an exemption as a place of worship, from Council rates, and was refused, as was a further application in 1916, and not until the early sixties, during my term as President were we successful.

The complex of the South Melbourne temple was built on land purchased with compulsory donations from Society members, and the six titles registered in the names of 6 individual trustees, as a society is legally a non-entity. The names of more than a thousand donors are inscribed on two stone steles at the Temple. The construction of the temple cost over four thousand pounds and the remainder of the donated money was invested in two properties in Little Bourke Street.

The See Yup temples in Ballarat, Bendigo, Castlemaine, Beechworth and other country towns were modelled on the South Melbourne Temple, although they were autonomous, and each local See Yup society bought land whose title was under the name of one or more trustees. There were also temples in these country towns owned by other Chinese country societies. In fact, there is an amusing story about a temple in Castlemaine. In 1917, the Society in Melbourne received a report from a member in Castlemaine that the land on which the temple had been built was in danger of being taken over by an Australian. The Society sent a member to Castlemaine to investigate and settled to sell the land. Two years later, the Sam Yup Society complained to the See Yup that they had sold the land their temple had been built on, and that the See Yup land was situated elsewhere. The upshot was that the See Yup Society instructed their members to reimburse the Sam Yup Society with the twenty pounds they had received, plus five pounds extra, so everyone was satisfied. Very often, disputes arose about the ownership of the land on which a Society's temple was built. In some country towns, where Chinese had returned home to China, after the death of the trustees, their Australian families claimed the land as their own, not realizing that the trustee had only held the land in trust for the Society. In many cases, as the land was legally in the name of the trustee, the Society lost the land.

In 1900, Melbourne was visited by Liang Qichao, a then constitutional monarchist, and native of Xin Hui. The Society hosted a large reception for him which was boycotted by a number of republicans in the Society. After the Chinese Revolution of 1911, the Society supported the Sun Yatsen government. In 1912, they sold two buildings owned by the Society off Little Bourke Street and sent 1000 pounds to bolster the funds of the new Republican government and was awarded a gold medal which we still possess. The same year, the Society gave 175 pounds to William Ah Ket to attend the First National Congress in Beijing.

It was there that he met George Morrison, the advisor to Yuan Shikai who shortly after proclaimed himself Emperor. On returning to Australia, William Ah Ket with William Liu raised money to set up the annual George Morrison lecture which continues today. From 1915 to 1917, the Society subsidized the new Chinese Consulate with more than one thousand pounds and in addition bought 1000 pounds of government bonds to help the struggling Republic. In 1916, the Society donated 30 pounds to the anti-Yuan Army to fight the unlawful government of Yuan Shikai and restore the Republican government. It also donated 30 pounds towards an Australian Army Concert in Melbourne.

In 1931, the Chinese Consulate asked the Society to re-establish the Chung Hwa Society which had lapsed for lack of funds about 1915. The revived Chung Hwa Society became a broader-based organization, raising money for the Chinese and later Australian War effort by donations, and organizing processions and pageants. The See Yup Society then reverted to looking after the welfare of its own members.

During and after the Second World War, many See Yup members invested enormous amounts of their savings in various bonds sold by the Nationalist government. These bonds were never redeemed by the Nationalists, and a few members lost their life savings and, sadly, were never able to return home like their compatriots. They died in poverty in Melbourne.

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, most See Yup members remained politically neutral with a small number actively supporting the Chiang Kaishek government and a tiny minority in favour of the new government. In 1941, the Society donated 10 pounds to the Nationalist Consulate to celebrate the birthday of Chiang Kaishek.

If the See Yup Society itself remained neutral, some See Yup members, against odds, supported the People's Republic, and on October 1st, 1949, they organized with Australian friends including the former Australian Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister Jim Cairns, a true friend of China, to celebrate the Founding of the People's Republic and have celebrated China's National Day ever since. However, the See Yup Society has rallied round to support Chinese victims of natural disasters like floods and earthquakes and has donated generously to help relieve the suffering of their countrymen.

In 1980, the Council decided to establish a school with moderate fees, where children could learn Cantonese and Mandarin, and something of their cultural heritage. The school was established in 1981 and continues today with an annual enrolment of about 400 children from prep to VCE. The teacher/student ratio is the best of all weekend Chinese schools and the results have been so successful that students come from as far away as Gippsland to attend the school. The Society's subsidy of \$25,000 a year ensures the high standard of tuition and well-qualified teachers.

The alienation of Chinese from white settlers in the early days because of the language barrier, and the relatively low education standard of the Chinese, resulted in the development of a sort of "patois", a mixture of the Tai Shan dialect and corrupted English. For example, the word for Savings Bank became "laosa bung." Laosa = "servant" in the Tai Shan dialect, and Chinese had misheard "savings" for "servant". A railway platform became a "train jetty" in Tai Shan dialect, and there were many more examples.

These words could not be understood in Tai Shan itself. This patois persisted right up until the 1970s when a better educated generation of Chinese used the correct terms.

In recent years, the Society has donated \$10,000 to the Chinese Australian Museum, \$35,000 to the Ararat Chinese Heritage Society, initiated by an all- Australian committee, to buy land for a museum and car park, \$10,000 towards the restoration of Chinese graves in EchUCA and Ballarat, \$10,000 to the Victorian Elderly Chinese Society and \$10,000 to the Chinese Elderly Home. Last year, the Society awarded a scholarship of \$4000 to the top Chinese VCE student in Victoria and donated to various Melbourne hospitals and local charities.

Since 1949, the disunity of Taiwan and the mainland has greatly affected overseas Chinese, but I am happy to say that our See Yup Society has remained united, peaceful and tolerant, agreeing to disagree on certain aspects. Our future goals are clear. We will build our new memorial hall, continue to educate our young on their heritage, support local charities and serve not only our own members but our community. Together, we will strive to implement the principles and aims of our Society as laid down by our predecessors, for, as the ancient Chinese proverb says::"Though brothers may squabble within the house, they can unite against intrusion from without."

Maurice Leong Kwok Cheong

Melbourne

1 July 2000

#### Notes

Original documents of See Yup Society, Melbourne

\* Wu Dan Chu, "Opium War and Overseas Chinese", *Wuyi Overseas Chinese History*, .....  
*Jiangmen*, Vol.9, 1990, p.2.



Receipt for  
purchase of  
water by cart-  
loads before pipes  
were laid.

For water 4.3 loads & water

Chinese characters: 水 三 月 十 五 日 收 銀 肆 元 三 角 六 分

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27/4/6

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MUNICIPALITY OF EMERALD HILL.

Notice from Emerald Hill  
(South Melbourne) City  
Council for unpaid Town  
rates.

No. of Assessment 10338 & 10343  
Name Chinese Street Streets,  
Address of Clarendon St.

I the Officer, That the Collector has called twice for the amount of Town  
Rates for 1858-9, viz., £ 17 : 17 due on 1st November, 1858. Unless the  
same be paid within two days from the date of this notice, you will  
be summoned for the same.

The Collector will attend daily at the Council Chambers, from 9 to 10 o'clock  
to receive payment of the Rates.

John G. Sullivan Collector.  
Please bring this Notice with you.

Authorization to  
pay contractor  
for work done at  
Temple, signed by  
See Yup Treasurer,  
Ah Mouy and built  
George Wharton.

No. 10338 & 10343 Melbourne Dec 18th 1858  
I hereby state that the sum of £4.50 : 0 : 0  
Contracted, is owing to the sum of £4.50 : 0 : 0  
(four hundred and fifty pence) in account of work  
done at the Chinese Cemetery &c  
This is the 18th Instant. John Wharton  
£4.50 0 0  
Ah Mouy & Co

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黃修璽 梅健 溫松 黃景懷 劉栢 黃日成 李父鴻 陳三樂 值理張椿 陸亞德 馬五祿 阮作 林作 閔國基 朱高寬

Melbourne Hospital,

10<sup>th</sup> November 1864

Gentlemen,

I am directed to  
acknowledge the receipt of your beloved  
favor of the 12<sup>th</sup> inst, enclosing Cheque  
for £50 and of the funds of the  
Hospital, and at some time to offer  
the best thanks of the Committee of  
Management for so handsome a Contribution.

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I have the honor to be  
Dear Sir,

Yours truly,  
Geo. W. Stevenson

William

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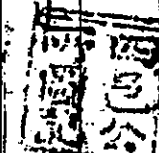
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拾尸、向內欠本舖員冬拾七尸。久欠之員或拾三尸。  
是時催收甚急難以久容而獨是計倘艱難又恐  
縣主之用意難測倘或拖欠日久將由或至事務之  
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之急項待本行陳運季以充 司理人然係原數  
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此奉

趙均啟 陳孔祥 雷道洪 黃世彥 潘卓繁 陳良茂 陳定能 鍾孔學 朱基珍 陳朝常 陳尊俸

伍學晃 劉晃學 陳子威 胡林 余博禮 譚明 余紀 伍朝 何立文 李逢 梁彥

列位先生均照  
六月拾陸



劉炳 字叔

陳子宜 陳悅琮

利倫

彭梓童

黃棟標

黃天爵

李超

