

TALES OF LITTLE BOURKE ST

BY SOPHIE COUCHMAN

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1. BACKGROUND

With the rise in Asian immigration to Australia after World War II it is easy to forget that there was a time when Chinese were not welcome in Australia.

In 1857 Victoria's Chinese population was just over 25,000 or 6% of the total population. Concerned about possible racial tensions, the colonial government introduced legislation in the 1860s that specifically restricted further Chinese immigration. This was later repealed, but new legislation was introduced again in the 1880s as Australia's newly urbanising Chinese population became more visible. In 1901 existing colonial legislation was consolidated to cover the whole of Australia. All 'coloured' immigrants, not just Chinese, now had to pass the notorious dictation test which could be set in any European language.

By 1901 Victoria's China-born population had dropped to just over 6,000. Just fewer than 2,500 or 38% of that population lived in Melbourne. By 1921 Victoria's Chinese population was only a little over 4,000 and roughly a quarter of that population was part Chinese. After World War II with the loosening of immigration restrictions, and particularly after 1973 when immigration quotas no longer discriminated on the basis of race, the number of immigrants of Chinese ancestry has grown enormously. According to the 2006 Australian Census 304,775 or 1.5% of Australians indicated they were born in China, Hong Kong or Taiwan.

In Melbourne, 182,550 people or 5.1% of the population identified themselves as having some Chinese ancestry. From the earliest significant Chinese migration in the mid-1850s through to the present day, the Little Bourke Street area, also known as Melbourne's Chinatown or Tung Yun Gai, has been a focal point for Chinese-Australian social and business life and an integral part of Melbourne life.



Image above
Wood engraving published in *The Australian News* for home readers, 1863, which shows Little Bourke Street residents going about their daily activities.

Images opposite page
Common sights of Little Bourke Street. Windows filled with Melburnians enjoying their meals, with others queuing for a free table, and a warm welcome from one of the many restaurant workers on Little Bourke Street.

2. GATEWAY TO CHINATOWN: SWANSTON — LITTLE BOURKE STREET CORNER

Wandering through the Melbourne CBD a visitor knows they've stumbled upon Chinatown when they see the four archways that span Little Bourke Street.

There's one at Swanston Street, and then following the trail of suspended lanterns up the hill towards Parliament House, one on each of the major streets. At Spring Street is a more modern arch and the site of the Tianjin Chinese Gardens, jointly designed by the City of Melbourne and its sister city in China, Tianjin.

A fifth arch, the 'Facing Heaven' archway, stands across the entrance of Cohen Place between Russell and Exhibition Streets and welcomes visitors to the Chinese Museum. This arch is a replica of a gate in Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province and was made in China and the pieces assembled in Melbourne in 1985 to mark Victoria's 150th anniversary. Archways such as these have often been offered as gifts to cities by the Chinese government and have become emblematic of Chinatowns outside Asia in places such as Canada, north America, Hawaii and Peru.



Image above
Archway constructed for the royal visit to Melbourne in 1901 by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York, and the opening of the first federal parliament.

...DECKED IN 'RICH SILKS, BELLS AND SYMBOLS DEAR TO THE CHINESE HEART'



Melbourne's archways at Swanston, Russell and Exhibition Streets were, however, the brainchild of Melbourne City Councillor, David Wang. In the 1970s he sought to revitalise the Little Bourke Street area as a distinctive 'Chinatown' with imported Chinese archways and lantern-style streetlights to draw in Melbourne shoppers and tourists. Not all shared the Shanghai-born Councillor's vision.

His critics were concerned that the development would turn Melbourne's Chinese Community into a curiosity. Others found the term 'Chinatown' offensive, and one which harked back to the bad days of immigration restrictions and racism and further ostracised Chinese Australians from inclusion in Australia as ordinary Australians. Despite this opposition, the development of the Chinatown precinct went ahead and was launched in 1976.

The arches in Chinatown are not, however, the first Chinese arches to grace the area. In 1901, as part of the celebrations of the opening of the first Federal parliament by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York, the Chinese community raised £800 for the construction of a 'Chinese Citizens Arch', one of eight celebratory archways that were erected along Swanston Street. The Chinese Citizens' Arch spanned Swanston Street at Little Bourke Street and was composed of two pagodas.

In the main span was a 'band house', complete with Chinese musicians, and in the pagodas, 'gorgeously-dressed' Chinese playing gongs. According to the Herald newspaper in 1901, the whole structure was decked in '*rich silks, bells and symbols dear to the Chinese heart*', the roofs of the pagoda and band house were '*fantastically tiled*' and at night the arch was lit by lanterns. Along with other immigrants who had made Australia home, Chinese Australians were excited about the possibilities of Australia's Federation and proud to call themselves Chinese citizens of Australia.

These citizens also took to the streets in the procession to welcome the Duke of York who officially opened Australia's first Federal parliament. Following the mounted Stockman's Procession, about 300 Chinese dressed in colourful costumes, some on white horses, marched along the streets of Melbourne alongside two Chinese dragons, a Chinese lion and a Chinese orchestra. One dragon came from Bendigo and was normally used during its annual Easter Fair procession and the other belonged to the See Yup Society in Melbourne.

Images above
Archways of Chinatown.

3. LIONS AND DRAGONS

Chinese dragon street processions are now a familiar part of Melbourne's street life. At Chinese New Year, the Millennium Dai Loong Dragon is awakened from its slumber at the Chinese Museum and, accompanied by dancing lions and colourfully-dressed attendants, parades along Little Bourke Street to the rhythm of pounding drums, the chiming gongs and the rapid-fire explosions of crackers. People of all ancestry cram the streets and lanes of Little Bourke Street to catch sight of this spectacular beast and perhaps touch one of his scales for luck. His head alone weighs 200 kilograms and it takes eight people to carry it.

The Millennium Dai Loong Dragon, built in 2003, is Melbourne's youngest dragon. His father, Dai Loong, first trod the streets of Melbourne in 1979 as part of Melbourne's iconic Moomba Parade and was used annually in Chinese New Year celebrations. Before that, was Sun Loong, a dragon brought out from Foshan in Guangdong province by the Young Chinese League in the 1950s. He was awakened to help raise funds at Lord Mayor's Labour Day Charity Parade Charity Parade, the precursor of Moomba.

Dragons danced in the Lord Mayor's parade as early as the 1920s and in the 1930s. The Chinese Masonic Society also had two small creatures described as 'sea lions' that were used at the Police Carnival in 1933. Sun Loong and Dai Loong have both retired now and sleep with the Millennium dragons at the Chinese Museum.

It was only in 1980 that Chinese dragons began parading at Chinese New Year. Up till then it was only the lions of the Chinese Youth Society of Melbourne and the Chinese Masonic Society who danced on the footpaths in Chinatown. Dragons only came out as part of fundraising events for hospitals, for visiting dignitaries and special events. Although distinctly Chinese, these dragons have been as much a part of the culture of Australian streetlife, as they have been expressions of Chinese culture. The men who help carry the dragon these days are as likely to have Anglo-Saxon faces as Asian ones.

Image opposite (top)
The Melbourne Dai Loong Association's Dancing Lions 'awakened from their slumber' to join in the Chinese New Year celebrations. The lions are on permanent display at the Chinese Museum.

Image opposite (bottom)
Finishing touches to the lions by former Premier of Victoria Steve Bracks.

4. BUILDING CHINATOWN

Chinatown can be traced back to a few boarding houses and stores in Little Bourke Street and its lanes between Swanston and Russell Streets catering to prospective Chinese miners on their way to the goldfields. As miners returned from the goldfields and started seeking their fortunes in Australia's cities, this cluster of businesses and lodging houses expanded along the street and its lanes. Even though the numbers of Chinese people in Victoria were dropping, Chinatown was coming into its own. By 1911 it had expanded up to Spring Street and as far over as La Trobe Street.

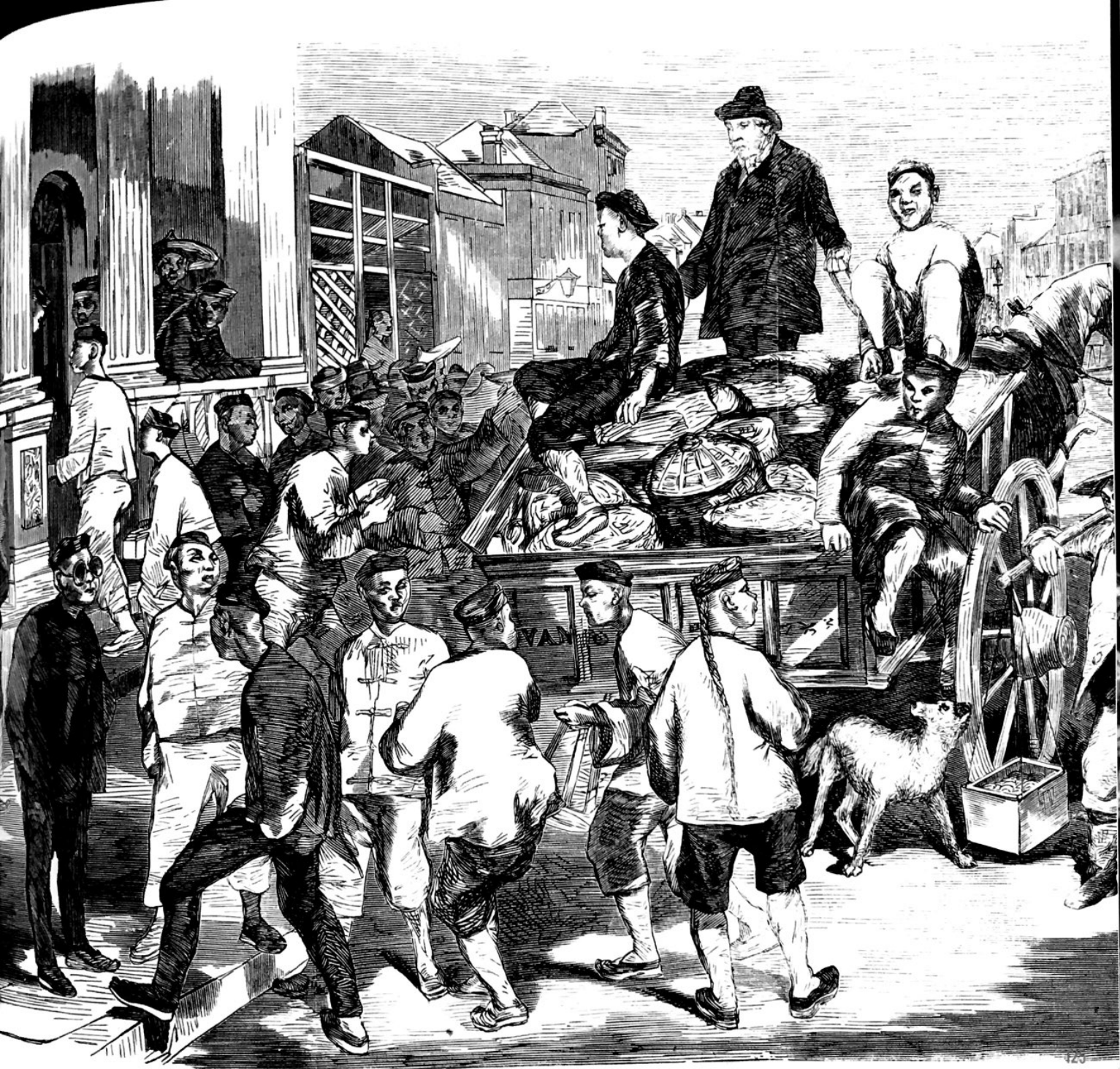
As the 20th century progressed and restrictions on Chinese immigration took effect, Melbourne's Chinese population also began to decrease and Chinatown began to shrink. This was in part because the CBD was also changing. The fruit and vegetable wholesaling industry became consolidated at the Queen Victoria Market, factories became larger and moved away and the city's residents also found new homes in the inner city suburbs. By the 1940s and 50s the Chinatown area was confined to a few businesses, churches and clubhouses in the block between Swanston and Russell Street again. After the loosening of immigration restrictions the area grew again.

Today, the area enclosed by the Chinese arches provides one of many focal points for Melbourne's Chinese communities. These communities are much less homogeneous than prior to World War II. Immigrants with Chinese backgrounds come from Timor, Indochina, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and from all across China. Melbourne's Chinatown remains an important Chinese node in the city but Chinese businesses operate throughout the CBD area and there are now other important community nodes in places such as Footscray, Richmond, Springvale and Box Hill.

Compared to Chinatowns in north America and Canada, Melbourne's Chinatown is tiny. It has also never been the exclusive Chinese enclave it is perhaps imagined to be. In the late 19th century the Chinese furniture makers at the top end of Little Bourke Street and in Little Lonsdale Street worked alongside Jewish and other furniture workers. Around their small furniture factories, Melbourne's 'ladies of the night' sought to sell their bodies to those prepared to pay the right price.

The female typists who worked at Melbourne's Table Talk magazine walked into the heart of Chinatown to go to work, as did the ardent cyclists of the 1890s who wanted to purchase a set of the newly-invented pneumatic tyres from the Dunlop factory in Heffernan Lane, off Little Bourke Street. As is still the case today, beside, between and across the road from Chinese businesses and residences, there have always been those of other immigrants and settlers with different ancestry.

Image right
Chinese unloading goods outside
the Num Pon Soon society
building during the goldrushes.



ARRIVAL OF CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN LITTLE BOURKE STREET.



Image left
Customers queuing at the Supper Inn, Celestial Avenue.

5. NAME CALLING: CELESTIAL AVENUE

Following the dragon up Little Bourke Street from Swanston Street we come to Celestial Avenue which runs off Little Bourke Street on the left. The word 'Celestial' is believed to have derived from the Chinese name for China — 'Heavenly Dynasty' — but later in the 19th century came to have derogatory connotations. In 1857, two years before this laneway was even named, the first Chinese lodging houses were here in this small street — probably named after its newly arrived residents. Unlike the other small streets and laneways off Little Bourke Street this street was rather grandly named an 'avenue'.

It was also around this time that Melbourne newspapers started referring to this part of the Little Bourke Street area as Melbourne's 'Chinese Quarter'. The term 'Chinatown', does not appear to have been applied to the area until around the 1880s and was then used when making comparisons between the area and the much larger Chinatowns in San Francisco and Manhattan.

On the other hand, Chinese Australians in Melbourne have long called the area Tong Yun Gai (in Cantonese) which translates to 'Street of the people of the Tang Dynasty'. This is because most of Melbourne's Chinese immigration prior to World War II came from southern China and many southern Chinese refer to themselves as 'people of the Tang Dynasty', after the large migration of northern Han Chinese to the southern China during the Tang dynasty (618 - 907). The Tang dynasty is also considered one of the highs in China's economic, political, military and cultural history.

The original plan for Melbourne originally did not include any lanes or 'Little' Streets, such as 'Little Bourke Street' within its familiar grid plan. These 'Little' Streets were added by Sir Richard Bourke in 1837, to service the larger streets, in other words, as rather large lanes. As the original government allotments in the grid were purchased and subdivided, however, substantial buildings were constructed on the 'Little' Streets and numerous small lanes emerged to service the buildings on the 'Little' Streets. By 1895 there were 158 lanes, most of which ran off the 'Little' Streets. Most of these lanes disappeared as the 20th century progressed and larger buildings were constructed and small laneways were built in.

Many, however, have also survived. To explore Melbourne's Chinatown is to venture down its many laneways and investigate the layers of buildings, warehouses and developments that have shaped them over time. Many of the names of the streets contain stories. Brown's Lane was renamed Cohen Place when the Cohen brothers, who built the warehouse the Chinese Museum occupies, suggested the lane needed a new name as it was now much more substantial than just a lane.

A group of Chinese and non-Chinese landowners and residents in 1909 were unsuccessful, however, in persuading the Council to rename Heffernan Lane. They wished to call it Reid's Place after a Mr Reid who had '*bought and erected a factory on the land where the last brothels in the street were*'. The Council disagreed as they did not want to dishonour the memory of Rody Heffernan, an early settler to Victoria, after whom the lane was named.

MELBOURNE'S CHINATOWN... THE LONGEST CONTINUOUS CHINESE SETTLEMENT IN THE WESTERN WORLD.



Image above (left)
Mrs Lup Mun with Celestial Avenue children

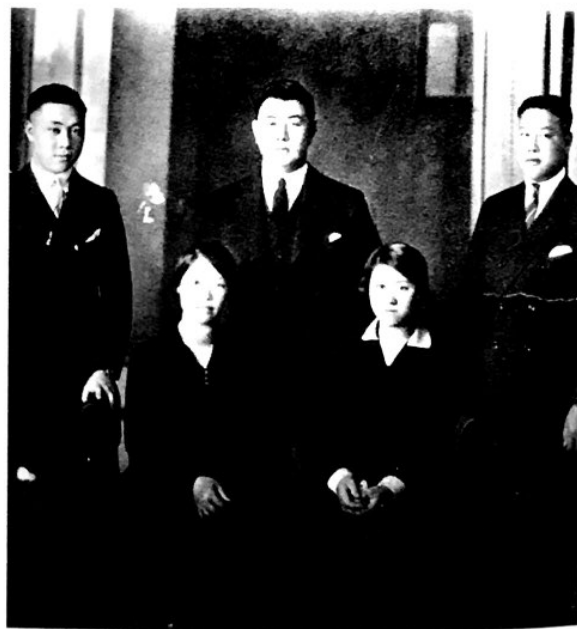
Image above (right)
Looking along bluestone paved laneway, down
buildings along road, by K. J. Halla 1974.

MELBOURNE'S CHINATOWN... THE LONGEST CONTINUOUS CHINESE SETTLEMENT IN THE WESTERN WORLD.



Image above (left)
Mrs Lup Mun with Celestial Avenue children.

Image above (right)
Looking along bluestone paved laneway, double storey brick
buildings along road, by K.J Halla 1974.



CELESTIAL AVENUE - A MICROCOSM OF RESIDENTIAL LIFE IN THE PRE-WORLD WAR II ERA.

6. A CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITY

As well as the first Chinese-occupied properties, Celestial Avenue was also home to some of the last Chinese families to live in the area. Lodging houses remained a feature of the street until well into the 20th century when the area had become not only a place to live and work but also a place to break the journey back to China or to Hong Kong. Lodging houses provided a bed for a night or two and also offered cheap accommodation for men without family who had not found their fortunes on the goldfields. Alongside these lodging houses were family homes, retail businesses, cafés, importers, light industry and a few places to go and smoke opium or to gamble.

Celestial Avenue was a microcosm of residential life in the area in the pre-World War II era. Raymond Lew-Boar was born in 1934 at 16 Celestial Ave with the help of a Chinese mid-wife, Hung Mo. Raymond remembers her as *'a tiny lady and wore glasses, hair pulled back, very tiny feet and shuffled. I have a feeling that she may have had semi-bound feet'*. Raymond grew up playing with a girl called Lucy Ho who lived across the road in what is now the Supper Inn. Raymond remembers *'playing up and down the lane, we were quite safe, no traffic'*. They used to jump up on the ledge of the electricity sub-station that still stands on the right of the lane and perform small plays. When Raymond was growing up in the late 1930s there were few other children of his age but other older former residents remember walking to school in Carlton and collecting friends as they walked up Little Bourke Street on the way.

To the left at the end of the lane, just before it turns right, is an open car park. In the early 20th century there was a row of small terraces here. Raymond Lew-Boar describes them as resembling those on the British television soapie, Coronation Street. You can still see a silhouette of the roofline on the Lonsdale Street exterior wall of the Supper Inn. The Lew-Boars also lived in one of these terraces in the 1940s. The front door opened into a sitting room, there was a passageway leading to

another room the middle room and then quite grandly a curving staircase going upstairs to three bedrooms. Raymond shared a bedroom with one of his older brothers. The kitchen was at the back and the toilet and wash house in the backyard. Australian friends helped his mother repaint it with a mushroom-tinted calcimine paint. *'Actually it would be a quite nice townhouse now!'* jokes Raymond. Eventually, however, the family moved to Middle Park following in the footsteps of many other families who moved out of the CBD into nearby suburbs in the early decades of the 20th century.

Living in some of the other cottages in Celestial Avenue were the Wong Loy and the Gooley families who lived there until the 1930s. The Wong Loys ran the Yin Bun Low café around the corner in Little Bourke Street from 1899 till the business moved to Russell Street in 1919 where it operated until 1974 as the Oriental Café. They were also active members of the Wesleyan-Methodist church, now the Uniting Church Gospel Hall, up the road on the corner of Heffernan Lane. The Gooley boys were butchers and supplied all the Chinese stores and restaurants with pork. The Lew-Boars ran the Hong Kong Café on the corner of Celestial Avenue and Little Bourke Street.

Raymond Lew-Boar grew up eating meals at the café during the week and a roast cooked by his mother on Sundays. Lucy Ho's parents and grandmother, Mrs Lup Mun, imported, prescribed and sold Chinese medicinal herbs at Suey Gee Chong at 15 Celestial Avenue. Their warehouse contained large bails of herbs that the children in the street enjoyed playing on. Some of these families were extended families because it was considered inappropriate for a father to raise daughters on his own. Ken Wing Jan's two daughters, whose mother died when they were young, went to live with Mrs Lup Mun and the Wong Loy family raised Jean Chin Young (Yeung) and her sister whose mother had also died.

Image opposite page (far left)
Drawing showing the interior of a Chinese restaurant in Melbourne, 1901.

Image opposite page (top)
Raymond Lew-Boar and Thomas Leung who grew up on Little Bourke Street 1940s.

Image opposite page (bottom)
Mrs Wong Loy and her children, William, George, Ronald and Alma.



7. STREET SMELLS

Retracing your tracks back to Little Bourke Street it's worth taking in the varied smells of the streets and laneways. As you wander past the restaurants, cafés and bakeries that line the street, there's the delicious smell of stirfried vegetables, roast pork and duck, fresh baked custard tarts and deep fried dim sum treats that drift out their doors. The sharp scent of chili hangs in the area mingling with the pungent smell of salted plums, hundred-day-old eggs, soya sauce, Chinese vinegar and other Asian spices and delicacies. There are also the less appealing odours of the contents of restaurant rubbish bins waiting to be emptied and the exhaust fumes of trucks delivering vegetables, meat, seafood and other goods. Little Bourke Street is after all essentially a service lane to Bourke and Lonsdale Street and its lanes service Little Bourke Street.

A different and no less interesting array of scents greeted visitors to the area in the early 20th century. There was still the smell of horse manure from the horse-drawn carts used by Chinese market gardeners, of chook pens as restaurants kept live poultry to ensure their

ingredients were fresh. On the corner of Heffernan Lane there was a man who roasted chestnuts and another who made 'turkey lolly' or fairy floss. Raymond Lew-Boar remembers a fish hawker selling his wares door to door. Drifting out of the various district associations and some of the clan stores would have been the scent of incense lit as part of offerings made to gods and ancestors.

On a hot summer's night in the 1920s Ron Wong Loy remembers the *'heavy sweet smell'* of opium wafting out into the street. He remembers waking in a *'terrible fright'* during an opium raid as a child as the police often raided them at night. *'They knocked on the door and then BANG, BANG, BANG. They would be using their hammers to knock down the doors'*. There would then be a scattering of people as they fled the premises. Most Chinese-Australian residents were a little indignant at the time because instead of closing them down the police simply fined the owners. *'Of course they would just go back and set up business again, until the next raid,'* Ron recalls.



For Mabel Wang the smell of Chinese medicinal herbs brings back memories of going as a child with her mother to the herbal shop at 198 Little Bourke Street to have her prescription made out. *'...You walk into this dark, dark shop and the floor's rough, it's only asphalt floor and there's an old wooden counter, and all the walls, three walls, would be lined with small drawers — tiny, tiny drawers — and on each of the drawers there was written what the herb was.'* Mr Hee Darn, the herbalist would weigh out the different herbs required and place them on a white piece of paper along with two black dates. The dates were free because that's what you'd eat to take the taste away after drinking the medicine.

Other scents that greeted you as you walked along the street included the sweet smell of roast pork, particularly on Saturdays. At the back of Foon Kee's, a Chinese-style general store, there was a large brick pig oven where whole pigs were basted with herbs and spices and then lowered by rope and pulley into the oven to cook slowly overnight. In the morning as the pork was lifted out of the oven the aroma drifted out through the shop and into the street.

Chinese Australians and their friends came from all over Melbourne every Saturday to get their serving of roast pork. Sun Kwong Sing, a merchant at 209 Little Bourke Street was celebrated for the smell of the fermenting soya beans that emanated from the premises. They made tofu or bean curd in large wooden trays which was cut into cubes and supplied to all the restaurants.

At Wing Young & Co, the firm owned by Mabel Wang's father and uncles, she remembers the wonderful smell of fresh wood shavings from her uncle's furniture making business mingled with the nice smell of bananas from downstairs where the brothers ripened bananas imported from Queensland. These bananas were transported by horse-drawn lorries from the wharves on the river up to Little Bourke Street where they were placed in special chambers and ripened with gas. It was a painstaking and dangerous process that required regular monitoring as the bananas were ripened using natural gas. If you got it wrong you might lose a whole shipment of bananas or, worse still, cause an explosion.

Image opposite page
Peering through the windows on Little Bourke Street, you can see the chefs do their work.

Image above (left)
Dusk on Little Bourke Street.

Image above (right)
Enjoy a hearty bowl of freshly-made noodles.

8. KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY: SUN SHING LOONG'S

On Saturdays in the mid 20th century Chinese-Australian's from around Melbourne would come into the city to shop. Raymond Lew-Boar remembers that they would do their shopping at the Vic markets and in department stores such as Myer, and then, just before all the stores closed in the middle of the day, *'...about eleven-thirty, quarter to twelve, they'd all trundle up to Chinatown to get their pork and things because they'd be heavy, and also the vegetables would be in by then'.*

The store Raymond's family shopped in was the Sun Shing Loong's which was a store run by the 'Lew' clan and so generally patronised by the Lew people. As Raymond explains, it's like *'your favourite supermarket'*, you go there *'because you like it and you know the people'*.

Inside the shop there was a small counter, with shelves all around it filled with Chinese goods, from tins of preserved goods, to Chinese-language novels, to bags of rice. Other goods were presented in baskets on the floor. Raymond Lew-Boar remembers the bok choy, broccoli and snake beans that they sold. It was all very seasonal and they never had a lot of produce. You had to get in quick or you would miss out. They would sell *'anything'*, Alan Lew remembers.

Divided from the shop by a wooden partition was a lounge room, and beyond that, a small kitchen-dining space with a table. Alan Lew arrived in Australia on a student visa and lived with his father and cousin at Sun Shing Loong's. The bedrooms were upstairs. It was a *'very simple life'*, he recalls.

These clan stores provided more than just groceries. They were also important social centres and often helped with letter writing and transporting goods to China and Hong Kong. There was always a pot of tea in these stores, in a padded bamboo basket. Mabel remembers the old men of the area going from one shop to the next, having a chat with everyone over a cup of tea. Raymond Lew-Boar's father also used to go to Sun Shing Loong to catch up on the local gossip. They used to have a bamboo pipe that had a kerosene bottom filled with water and a Nestles tin attached to it where a roll of tobacco was added. It was a *'bit like a hooker pipe'* Raymond explains. His father *'used to roll tobacco and put it on the end of this spout and light it with a taper and just blow away on it for about 10 minutes and then go off again and go back to work. It was a social thing like having a coffee'*, says Raymond.

Image opposite page
There's many interesting gifts and treats to be found when exploring the shops in Chinatown.



NUM PON SOON BUILDING, LITTLE BOURKE STREET, MELBOURNE—PH: PHIL STU

9. LOOKING AFTER EACH OTHER: THE NUM PON SOON BUILDING

As you wander up Little Bourke Street towards Spring Street, make sure you pause to look at the tops of buildings. At the ground level, shops have been modernised at various times over the 20th century but their upper storeys often reveal their 19th century origins. If you do look up as you walk along the street you cannot help but be struck by the impressive Num Pon Soon building on the left-hand side of the street as you walk towards Spring Street.

This stuccoed brick building has inspired artists and photographers since it was built in 1860 - 61. It was built to the designs of J.G. Knight and Peter Kerr, who were architects for the Department of Public Works and also drew the plans for Parliament House. If you spend the time to look closely you will see European design features, such as classical Romanesque columns, mixed with Chinese elements, such as the wave pattern between the first and second floor, the flower-pattern glass window on the upper storey, the timber and gild Num Pon Soon panel in Chinese characters and the timber-framed etched-glass lanterns on the balcony.

Upstairs on the first floor the original altar is still used for worship. This is the earliest known surviving Chinese shrine in Australia and possibly the oldest outside Asia. Both the building and altar are listed as two of Victoria's significant cultural assets on Victoria's National Heritage Register. This building is the oldest surviving building constructed for Chinese in Australia and was erected as the clubrooms for the Num Pon Soon Society and funded through member donations.

The Num Pon Soon Society is a district society, which are benevolent associations that support members from the same district in China, in this

case, Sam Yup (or Sanyì in mandarin) or the so-called 'three districts' province in Guangdong. It was one of a number of district associations established in Melbourne which still operate today. The main district society in Melbourne is the See Yup Society for people from See Yup (or Siyi, four districts province in Guangdong). It has its clubrooms on the upper floors of 124 Little Bourke Street and a large temple in South Melbourne that has operated there since 1856.

Because of the large number of See Yup people in Melbourne, societies were also established for three of the four districts within the See Yup region as well. One of these, the Kong Chew Society, established in 1854, is the oldest district association in Melbourne. It built its clubrooms in 1862 but this magnificent building was demolished in the late 1960s and the association's clubrooms are now in Tattersall's Lane off Little Bourke Street near Swanston Street. The other district associations are the Ning Yang and the Chong Shen societies.

The Num Pon Soon Society, and other societies like it, continue to provide many of the same services as they did when they were first established. This includes financial support, dispute resolution, temporary accommodation, a place to worship and a friendly social environment for their members to talk about and catch up on news from home.

The societies are also particularly active in fundraising activities and support charitable causes in both Australia and China. As is typical of these district association buildings, the ground floor of the Num Pon Soon building has always been let to Chinese businesses with accommodation and other club space on the first and second floors.

Image above
Num Pon Soon building with classical features including columns, vermiculated ashlar and parapet, 1863.

Image opposite page
The building as it is today.



10. EMBRACING THE GOSPEL

On the corner of Heffernan Lane and Little Bourke Street is a beautiful polychrome brickwork church that was recently restored in 2000. The church is an early example of this style of 19th century brickwork and the style of architecture, and the way it is set flush to the line of the street, set the pattern for the other Chinese Christian churches in the street. The hall was originally built as a Wesleyan Methodist church but now operates as the Chinese Uniting Church Gospel Hall. The characters above the door of the church on the corner of Heffernan Lane read *'The Hall of Gospel'* or *'Gospel Hall'*. It is significant as the first Chinese church of its kind built in Melbourne.

Funds were raised by Chinese-born convert James Moy Ling (1832 - 1911) to purchase the land and construct the building in 1871 and the church was complete in 1872. Rev Moy Ling had been active in the Victorian goldfields as a Chinese catechist having been converted in Daylesford in 1865. He was popular and well respected and was successful in converting many Chinese in Victoria and was ordained as the Gospel Hall's pastor in 1877 and continued to regularly work in rural Victoria. An etching published in the *Illustrated Australian News* on 16 July 1872 probably shows him preaching in this church. The Reverend was also a significant community leader and instrumental in

establishing the Christian Chinese Union of Victoria in 1903 which brought together Anglican, Presbyterian, Wesleyan / Methodist and Baptist converts. He also worked with Wong Shi Geen, the president of the See Yup Society, to organise the Chinese procession and the construction of citizen's arch as part of Federation celebrations in 1901. He is remembered in the church as its founder. On the top floor of the building is a large painting of him with an inscription in English and Chinese taken from his headstone at the Melbourne Cemetery. Two large photographic portraits of him and his wife also hang on the wall opposite.

After Moy Ling's death in 1911, Rev Leong Gie oversaw the Gospel Hall ministry from 1917 until he passed away in 1956. There is a wonderful photograph taken in the 1940s that shows Leong Gie with three other members of the church singing hymns out on the street. A piano has been wheeled out on to the pavement to accompany them and a board with the hymns is on display. The decline in the Chinese population over the 20th century took a heavy toll on the number of worshippers at the church. After World War II they only had 10 members.

The relaxing of immigration restrictions in the 1950s and 60s helped to reinforce congregation numbers. At this time it was one of only two

churches in Melbourne which held Chinese-language services. Both the Methodist and Presbyterian Chinese congregations were worshipping at the hall. The Methodist congregation had their Cantonese service on Sunday mornings and the Presbyterian Sunday school followed afterwards and the day ended with an English Presbyterian service for the older folk in the evening. The Presbyterians congregation went in their own direction in 1977 when the Methodist congregation joined the Uniting Church of Australia (UCA).

Since that time the congregation has steadily grown. Many other Chinese churches in Melbourne can trace their origins from the congregation of this small gospel hall. The congregation grew to such an extent that a sound system was installed in the 1970s so that the service could be heard by worshippers upstairs. Some were still left standing out on the street. The problem was solved when the minister of the Wesleyan Church on Lonsdale Street invited them to worship there which they still do today. The Little Bourke Street hall is used for smaller events. In 1993 the Gospel Hall extended its ministry to a church in Camberwell where English-language services were held and in 2001 the Uniting Church Gospel Hall Melbourne and South Camberwell Uniting Church Gospel Hall were launched as two independent congregations.

11. CHEOK HONG CHEONG'S CHURCHES

In the block between Russell and Exhibition Streets there are another two Chinese churches. Both of these churches were built by Cheok Hong Cheong (1851 - 1928). Cheong was born in Taishan but grew up in Ballarat where his father, after converting, worked as an interpreter for the Presbyterian Chinese Mission. Cheong was well educated and grew up to become a prominent missionary and community leader.

With Lowe Kong Meng and Louis Ah Mouy he wrote and published a pamphlet that responded to anti-Chinese actions in the shipping industry. He was secretary of the Melbourne Chinese Residents Committee which spoke out against anti-Chinese immigration and employment legislation. He also founded the Victorian Chinese Anti-Opium Society which lobbied for the banning of opium and had links with the British Anti-Opium Society.

His relationship with Anglican Church authorities was a tempestuous one and it was this that led to him building two Chinese churches in Little Bourke Street at the turn of the 19th century. The first church building he raised funds for was the polychrome brick building, with white trimmings on the corner of Cohen Place at 110 Little Bourke Street. This was built by the Anglican Church in 1894 and later taken over by the Presbyterian Church in 1919. It was converted to commercial use some time in the mid 19th century and the congregation worshipped down the road at the church at 194 Little Bourke Street for a period.

Soon after the building's construction, however, Cheong had a falling out with church authorities and began raising funds for another church hall. In the meantime he held services at the Temperance Hall around the corner in Russell Street. The Chinese Mission Church with Chinese characters on the front that translate to 'Worshipping Hall' at 123 Little Bourke Street was built in 1902. A few years after it was built Cheong resolved his differences with church authorities and this church hall was formally recognised by the Anglican Church and called the Church of England Chinese Mission of the Epiphany.



Image above
Crowds around Chinese Mission of the Epiphany (119-121 Little Bourke St built in 1902 for the Anglican church) taken in the early 20th century by Chinese-Australian commercial photographer Samuel Him.

Image opposite page
Chinese family watching a festival from a window of the Chinese Mission Church, by Emmanuel Santos.

12. CHUNG WAH: COMING TOGETHER

If you glance down Heffernan Lane around the corner from the Uniting Church Gospel Hall, you'll see a four-storey red brick building with the rapidly-fading sign 'Chung Wah Café' painted down its side. There's also the remnants of a gantry beam that was used to help pull goods up to the upper levels of the building. The building has been occupied by a Chinese restaurant since it was first constructed in 1894 for the Wing Ching restaurant. Then the Quon Che On café served meals there in the early part of the 20th century and from 1916 it operated as the Chung Wah Café for many decades. It had a Chinese and western menu as was common and in the 1930s and 40s was frequented by intellectuals and young students, including Melbourne artist, Mirka Mora. Ron Wong Loy remembers it as a *'shabby-looking old place but with the best Chinese cooking'*. In those days it was *'sweet and sour pork, chicken and almonds and short soup'*, explains Mabel Wang. *'Everybody went there'*.

Across the lane at 14 - 16 Heffernan Lane was the Chung Wah Society or Chung Wah Kung Hwei. 'Chung Wah' was a patriotic uniting term for China, popular in the Republican era after the fall of the Qing dynasty. The society was formed in 1932 as a unifying organisation that embraced Chinese from different districts and with political beliefs. When it started, its primary aim was to raise awareness and funds to support Chinese refugees during the second Sino-Japanese war. Although the Chinese community in Melbourne was shrinking, the horrors of the war galvanised people. Many Chinese Australians enlisted in the Australian Army and those who remained at home were also active supporting the war effort in China.

In the 1930s and 40s the society used to regularly hold theatrical performances at the Temperance Hall in Russell Street as part of its fundraising activities. Cantonese operas and plays were staged, some of the plays, such as *Shee Chung Yuen*, a romance about two young scholars who run away to Canton and fall in love, were written by members of the Chung Wah Society. Costumes were imported from China and the plays accompanied by a Chinese orchestra. You can see the backdrops used in the Cantonese opera performances they staged at the Temperance Hall and some of the Chinese musical instruments owned by residents of Little Bourke Street at the Chinese Museum.



Image left
Looking across Little Bourke Street to the
Chung Wah Café, 1966. By K. J. Halla.

澳華戲院 From 25/2/94
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Image above
 Flyer from the premiere of Jackie Chan's *Drunken Master 2* at the Capitol cinema, 1994. On its opening week *Drunken Master 2* was the main feature on a double-bill with John Woo's bullet-fest *Hard-boiled*.

13. FROM CLASSIC FU TO 'THE LOVES OF FU SEN'

As you wander up Little Bourke Street, entertainment posters plaster the spare walls and ever-present building scaffolding. They advertise everything from the latest visiting rock bands, to current theatrical performances and comedy events. On the right as you near Russell Street is an underground car park where the Mid City Complex arcade runs through to Bourke Street. Peppered along the arcade are Hong Kong fashion stores, beauty salons, video rental shops, advertisements for the latest visiting Cantopop stars and posters for Cantonese romantic comedies and action films from Hong Kong.

These film posters are remnants from the Chinatown Cinema which opened in an old Hoyts cinema from 1992 to the end of 2007 when it shut its doors, a victim of the demand for inner city housing and a rise in the popularity of DVDs and more recently the downloading of films. From the late 70s through to the mid-90s, Chinese-language cinemas were established across Australia in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Darwin. The first such cinema in Melbourne to show Chinese-language films seven days a week opened in 1979 at 108 Lonsdale Street. Before then various cinemas around Melbourne, including the Capital Cinema in Swanston Street, were hired to show these films on the weekends. In 1993 when the Hoyts Cinema at 200 Bourke Street, closed the Chinatown cinema moved from Lonsdale to Bourke Street. It specialised in the latest release martial arts films and romantic comedies, as well as classic kung fu movies and some Bollywood and Korean film and Japanese animation. This cinema played an important role in bringing the big Hong Kong movie stars such

as Jackie Chan, John Wu and Jet Li to Chinese and English-speaking audiences in Melbourne.

Melbourne's history of Chinese-language film, however, dates back much further than the 1970s. China first began to export films in the 1920s and some time in late 1930 or early 1931 a group of Chinese-Melburnians, perhaps the Chung Wah Society, bought a print of the silent feature film, *The Poor Daughter in Law*. It was originally produced in Shanghai by Great China Liliun Co but was subtitled and renamed *The Loves of Fu Sen* for its Melbourne showing. It was a complex story of siblings separated as children, unhappy marriages and clandestine romances that ended in a bittersweet family union. It was popular with Chinese and English-speaking audiences alike. It was shown twice daily and ran for two weeks at the Auditorium theatre in Collins Street to strong reviews in *The Bulletin*, *The Sun*, *Table Talk*, *The Argus*, *The Australasian*.

**BRINGING THE BIG
 HONG KONG MOVIE
 STARS SUCH AS JACKIE
 CHAN, JOHN WU AND
 JET LI TO CHINESE
 AND ENGLISH-
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Image left
The Kun Ming Café on Little Bourke Street was fondly remembered by Melburnians for many decades, pictured here in 1966.

Image opposite page
Exterior of Shanghai Village.

14. FROM HOME-STYLE COOK SHOPS...

One of the defining characteristics of the Little Bourke Street area today is its restaurants, not just serving Chinese food but also Indian, Malaysian, Thai, Japanese, German and Greek. Food from all over China, not just Cantonese, is also available, including dishes from Beijing and Sichuan as well as modernised Chinese cuisine. Hong Kong and Cantonese food is still the most common style of Chinese served and yum cha on the weekends remains a popular family outing. Many small cafés are scattered through the area around Little Bourke Street catering to the many overseas students based in the city.

Restaurants were not always a key feature of the area but have developed over time. The first Chinese establishments were not recorded in commercial directories until the 1880s. Before that there were a few 'cookshops'. Cookshops were small eating establishments and it seems a number of them were semi-private businesses associated with a particular district or clan. Russell Moy remembers that even as late as the 1920s his father's banana wholesaling firm, Hoong Cheong at 137 - 141 Little Bourke Street, had a cook who would prepare food for anyone in the Leong clan. Clan members would pay by donation.

Some cookshops were certainly open to the wider public as the Argus newspaper reported in 1907 that there were Chinese cookshops 'where the long soup is good and where the short

soup makes a winter's night an evening in December'. A loosening of restrictions on Chinese immigration in the 1930s and 40s meant that cooks and café workers, who were often family members, were allowed to enter Australia for limited periods. This helped boost the restaurant industry at a time when the Chinese population was declining and the economy depressed. It also shaped the kind of food eaten as authorities favoured restaurants that served 'Chinese' food but with a strong western client base. World War II was also a boost for these restaurants, as there were many more people were working in the city in war-related industries, and servicemen, particularly Allied ones, preferred to eat out than eat at their barracks. Many in the Chinese community credit the American presence in their restaurants in 1942 and 1943 with changing local attitudes towards Chinese food.

Even as early as the 1930s, city workers, business associations, intellectuals, university students and newly arrived refugees from Europe were regularly enjoying meals along with the Chinese community in restaurants and cafés in Chinatown. It was at this time that 'Australian' Chinese dishes such as sweet and sour and a greater variety of beef dishes, rather than more standard pork and fish dishes were served.



Some of the Chinese restaurants from the pre-war era survived, albeit with different owners and managers, until the next wave of Chinese restaurants were established in the 1970s. The Hong Kong Café, run by Raymond's parents for a period, dished up cheap tasty food from 1913, changing hands and becoming the Kun Ming Café which still operates today. According to Raymond they had 'fairly basic meals, not grand — not as exotic as they are now'. People would come to his parents' café — the Hong Kong Café — for dim sims. 'It was like McDonalds in a way, people would come in and buy three dim sims and eat them on the way down the street... just have them as a snack'.

The Oriental Café, originally called the Yin Bun Low, first opened its doors in 1899 in Little Bourke Street before moving to Russell Street in 1920 and operating there until well after the 1970s. Ron Wong Loy remembers the pastry cook who worked upstairs at the Oriental Café in Russell Street:

'They used to make a Chinese flaky pastry that was so delicate, it was made with lard of course and inside they would fill it with a nut mix. You could hear the thumping as he was rolling out the pastry. You have to do a lot of rolling, it was a real art. I watched him doing it, almost like physical exercise, jumping up and down, it was terrific'.

15. ...TO WORLD-CLASS RESTAURANTS

The relaxing of immigration restrictions and their eventual removal in the 1970s led to whole new groups of immigrants with Chinese ancestry arriving in Australia. Some came from southern China, but also increasingly from Taiwan and the south-east Asian countries of Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The Golden Orchards restaurant opened in 1973 and claims to be the first restaurant to serve Malaysian food in Melbourne. Two years earlier, in 1971, Gilbert Lau and Ken Louey established the Empress of China, reputedly the first Chinese restaurant in Little Bourke Street to cover its laminex tables with white table clothes. For Gilbert Lau this was just a practice run. In 1975 he left the partnership and opened the Flower Drum which has become one of Australia's top restaurants.

Gilbert Lau arrived in Australia in 1957 when he was only 18, however like many old Chinese-Australian families the Laus had long ties with Australia. Gilbert's grandfather and great-grandfather had been here during the gold rushes and his father lived in Melbourne in 1929 for a while before returning to work and to support his family in Hong Kong. Gilbert's restaurant career began in Hong Kong when he was 15 or 16: *'All my pocket money came from restaurants,'* he recalls.

When he came to Melbourne it was the restaurant industry that he turned to for a living. After seven years in Melbourne he was itchy for new experiences and returned to Hong Kong for a spell before travelling to Canada and the US, working his way around different restaurants. In San Francisco he was particularly inspired by the smart Empress of China.

When he returned to Melbourne with his wife and rest of the Lau family in 1969 he was full of inspiration and ideas for of his own. He teamed up with Ken Louey to open the Empress of China which is remembered as the first 'up market' restaurant in Chinatown. Gilbert Lau attributes it to the ingredients they used real soy sauce, instead of a cheap substitute commonly used in other places, and sought out ingredients that others didn't use, such as barramundi, banana prawns and eye fillet.

After a few years the pair went their separate ways. Ken Louey stayed at the Empress of China which still operates today and Gilbert Lau opened the Flower Drum, named after the famous Rodger and Hammerstein musical and film, in a converted car park at 103 Little Bourke Street. A few years later it moved to its current location in Market Lane.

The first few years were tough. Lau recalls working up to 90 hours a week during the first seven months and it was three years before he knew that they had made it. The Flower Drum became famous not only for its first-class food, but also Gilbert Lau's masterful management of the front of house, and his ability to remember guests by name who had not visited the restaurant for years. In 2003 he sold the Flower Drum to three of his long-serving employees, but stayed on as a consultant. The legacy of the Flower Drum also extends to many of Melbourne's other fine Chinese restaurants, which have been established or run by many of Lau's former staff.



16. LOWE KONG MENG'S BUILDING AND BUSINESS 112 - 114 LITTLE BOURKE STREET

The striking three storey building, next door to Cheok Hong Cheong's first church, just before you get to Cohen Place, has one of the most elaborately modelled facades in the street. Just like the Num Pon Soon building, its architect George De Lacy Evans incorporated Chinese architectural motifs within its elaborate boom-style classical façade. It was built by the Sun Kum Lee trading firm. Lowe Kong Meng, a significant civic leader and merchant in Melbourne, was one of the principals of the firm. He arrived in 1853 very early in the Victorian gold rushes and quickly became a very successful businessman with interests in a wide range of activities both in the Australian colonies and abroad, with large interests in Hong Kong, Cairns and Queensland. He owned a fleet of six ships, was one of the first to attempt trade between Melbourne and Darwin and bought a gold mine in Majorca as well as speculating in many other mining ventures. In 1866 he served on the provisional committee of the new Commercial Bank of Australia.

As Lowe Kong Meng was born in Penang then educated in Mauritius, he grew up speaking fluent Malaysian, Cantonese, French and English. This made him well suited to working as an interpreter and mediator for the Chinese

community and in 1863 he was granted the title of mandarin of the blue button by the Chinese Emperor. He also actively protested against colonial immigration restrictions in Victoria. He was one of the joint authors of *The Chinese Question in Australia*, 1878 - 1879 and was also one of the leading Chinese who petitioned the visiting Chinese Commissioners during their visit in 1887 for better conditions for Chinese in Australia.

Constructed in 1887, this building was not occupied for long by the Sun Kum Lee firm as Lowe Kong Meng died in 1888. In 1889, Maurice Brodzky, a well-known Jewish journalist and newspaper owner, moved in with his newspaper *Table Talk* into the building. *Table Talk* was notable in the 1890s depression for its exposes on the corruption and speculative land deals of Melbourne's so called land boomers. After a successful libel case in 1903 the newspaper was sold and eventually taken over by the *Melbourne Herald*. It continued as a social journal until 1939 but not in this building. Aside from a few banana merchants and a boarding house, the building was largely vacant. Raymond Lew-Boar remembers it as a kid in the 1930s and 40s as a haunted house with barbed wire running across it.

Image (top)
The late Mr. Kong Meng November 1888,
by Alfred Martin Ebsworth.

Image opposite page
112 - 114 Little Bourke Street.



Image above (left)
Liu Yoo Chit, Chen Leun Chit, Ling Chin Yee, Thang Ming Yi supporting holding Chinese Nationalist Party flags taken in the early 20th century by Burlington photographic studio, Melbourne.

Image above (right)
The KMT building as it is today.

Image opposite page
The remodelling of the facade of the Chinese Nationalist Club, 1922.





17. KMT BUILDING AND POLITICS 109 LITTLE BOURKE STREET

On the corner of Market Lane is the headquarters of the Melbourne Chinese Nationalist Party or the Kuo Min Tang (KMT). Downstairs is rented out for retail but the first and second floors, accessed from Market Lane, houses a reading room and the main office of the KMT. This branch of the KMT in Melbourne was established in 1914 only two years after Dr Sun Yatsen formed the first Chinese government and before the founding of the Communist Party. The aim of the Melbourne branch was to spread support for the KMT and the new Chinese Republic amongst overseas Chinese in Melbourne.

The KMT building and the one next door were originally constructed in 1904 by Cheok Hong Cheong. As we have already seen Cheong also built two Chinese churches in the street. Before the buildings were occupied by the KMT, Peter N. Hoong Nam ran his importing business there. Hoong Nam was a well-known Christian convert, a leading figure in Melbourne Chinese politics and commerce. Between 1921, and 1923 he was Vice-President of the Melbourne branch of the KMT and was no doubt instrumental in the selection of 109 Little Bourke Street as the Party's headquarters. In 1921 the KMT, employed Chicago architect Walter Burley Griffin, best known as the winner of the prize to design Canberra, to redesign the façade of 109 Little Bourke Street. The Party launched the building as its headquarters in the same year.

Much of Burley Griffin's original design has come off but a number of photographs taken in the early 1920s show the original design in all its modern glory. While based in Melbourne, Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion also worked on the University of Melbourne's Newman College, the Capitol Theatre and Café Australia as well as dozens of other projects. In the early 1920s the Griffin's sights turned to the design and development of the suburb of Castlecrag on the north shore of Sydney. The land and development was purchased and subdivided by the Greater Sydney Development Association established by the Griffins with the backing of Melbourne businessmen, politicians and personal associates. This included two Melbourne Chinese, Cheok Hong Cheong and Chin Wah Moon. These men also funded the construction of two display homes designed by the Griffins that were subsequently named after them — the Cheong House and the Moon House.

18. 'COME IN, COME IN': STAR STRUCK IN CHINATOWN

From the 1850s, the top end of Bourke Street has been a buzzing entertainment precinct with a large number of theatres clustered in the eastern section. An etching published in 1874 shows Chinese amongst the audience of a pantomime seated in the cheap seats up in the 'gods'. The stage doors of theatres such as the Theatre Royal, the Princes Theatre and Her Majesty's all backed into Little Bourke Street and into the heart of Chinatown. These doors were a point of contact between these two worlds.

A number of former residents of Melbourne's Chinatown remember playing at the backs of the theatres as children amidst the bustle of activity of staff and performers coming and going. Russell Moy recalls the showgirls at the back of Her Majesty's proudly showing him their costumes and the backstage area: *'they were very good to us really, they'd say "come in, come in"'*.

A photograph in the collection of another Chinatown family shows Joyce Tock and her friends, all dressed in their best Chinese silks, in the dressing room with actor, Bland Holt, who was still in costume and full make-up. Suey Land who grew up opposite the stage entrance of the Theatre Royal down near where the Target Centre is, developed a friendship with Maggie Moore. Maggie Moore was the wife of the well-known theatre owner J.C. Williamson as well as a popular lead actress. Suey Land remembers Maggie Moore giving her bunches of flowers and *'a little perambulator, so that I could wheel my little brother about in it'*.

The cheap eateries in Chinatown also made the area an attraction for nearby theatre performers. The Hong Kong Café, run by Raymond Lew-Boars parents on the corner of Celestial Avenue and Little Bourke Street, was particularly

popular with the theatre crowd. He remembers that when Chinese-American Anna May Wong, a famous international movie star of the silent movie era, visited Melbourne as part of a good will tour in 1939 he got to sit on her knee. During show week, performers from the sideshows also dropped by for a meal. Peeking through the private curtains in the restaurant, Raymond remembers seeing Jolly Nellie, the biggest woman in the world, sitting on three chairs and another performer, known as *'The Pinhead Chinaman'*. After Raymond's father died, his mother ran another small restaurant in Exhibition Street. There weren't many Chinese restaurants in that part of the street and Raymond remembers a lot of theatrical people visiting in the 1940s such as Stephanie Deste, Gilbert and Sullivan actor Bernard Manning, Max Oldacre and Gladys Moncrief.

For some Chinese Australians, their fascination with the theatre continued into their adult lives. In his late teens, Vance (Tung Gow) Chinn, the sixth son of the Chinn family who lived behind Her Majesty's Theatre, performed there in a number of musical comedies, in the 1920s and then again in the 1960s in Sydney. In the Chinn family's photographic collection are a number of photographs of him posed in Little Bourke Street wearing his costume.

SINCE THE 1850S,
THE TOP END OF
BOURKE STREET HAS
BEEN A BUZZING
ENTERTAINMENT
PRECINCT.



Images - clockwise from top left
Vance (Tung Gow) Chinn dressed as a soldier
behind Her Majesty's Theatre, ca 1920s - 1930s.

Members of the Chinn family, 1903.

Vance (Tung Gow) Chinn dressed as a
manservant behind Her Majesty's Theatre,
Melbourne, ca 1920s - 1930s.

Chinese dancing group in hula skirts in Chung
Wah Society meeting rooms, c1936-37.

Anna May Wong, a Chinese-American movie
star who visited Melbourne in the 1930s.



19. DIGGING UP THE PAST

As you walk into Cohen Place there is a multi-storey building with serviced apartments on your left. In the 19th century, this site was home to a number of Chinese and Irish families who lived here in small houses. In 1924 the area was cleared and a large theatrical workshop built on it. When the workshop was demolished, an archaeological dig uncovered around 10,000 artefacts that dated from the 1840s through to the 1920s. Inside the foyer of the building you can view a small display of some of them.

As you look at the display and particularly the children's toys, you may wish to think about the Chin Tong family, who despite adversity, made happy homes around Australia. From the 1890s Chin Tong and his wife, Sue Hoe and their five children, lived in a small house on this site. After Chin Tong's death in 1912, Sue Hoe and her young family returned to China. Life was clearly difficult in China. Tragedy struck. Sue Hoe passed away, followed shortly afterwards by two of her children. Alice, Ethel and their brother Kay Sing were now orphaned. Their ties with Australia, however, remained and over the next few years all returned to Australia to marry or for business.

Alice, the eldest child, returned in 1916 to marry into the prominent O'Hoy family of Bendigo in what was probably an arranged, but happy, marriage. A few years later Ethel also returned and lived with her sister in Bendigo. While there she met and married William Moy, a Chinese miner from Tasmania. After living in Melbourne for a short period they moved to Geraldton, Western Australia where they settled and raised their family. Kay Sing, the youngest brother was trained as a Chinese herbalist and spent much of his life travelling between Melbourne and China where his wife and children lived. After many years, when she was in her 50s or 60s, his wife was finally permitted entry into Australia.

20. MAKING CHINESE-AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES

The grand 'Facing Heaven' arch opens the way into Cohen Place and the Chinese Museum. The Museum is the cultural heart of Chinatown and home to its dragons and displays that tell the story of Chinese life in Australia from the early days of the gold rushes through to the present day. The Museum is actively involved in Chinese New Year, mid-autumn Lantern festival and Kite festival celebrations across Melbourne. They offer programs that teach school students about Chinese history and culture and provides space to a range of Chinese community groups from Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners to Chinese artists.

The five-storey building was purchased from Her Majesty's Theatre by the State government in 1985 to be used for a Museum of Chinese Australian History (known as the Chinese Museum). The theatre used the building as a warehouse for their stage props. The building dates back to the 1890s when it was built by the Cohen brothers who were prominent Jewish furniture retailers in Melbourne. It was used as a warehouse for stock, much of which was Chinese made. Their retail store was conveniently at 113 Lonsdale Street which backs onto Cohen Place. For a time it operated as a furniture factory which employed Chinese furniture makers. Descendants of the Cohen

brothers still have a fondness for preserved ginger which they attribute to the friendships that developed between the family and their Chinese employees and neighbours.

Even before the Museum was established in Cohen Place, it was an important social centre for Chinese Australians that dates back to the 1920s to 1960s. The Munster Arms, a large building that faced onto Little Bourke Street, used to occupy most of what is now Cohen Place or Chinatown square. This was home to the Chinn family, their wholesale business and eventually becoming the clubrooms of the Young Chinese League. Ma Mon Chinn, his wife Lula Kow Yonn and their family of seven sons and four daughters, moved to Melbourne from Tasmania. When they grew up, five of the Chinn brothers also ran a wholesale fruit and vegetable business and ripened bananas there. Frank Chinn, who was particularly community minded, was one of the founding members of the Young Chinese League which had their clubrooms in the Chinn home.

The League was established in 1932 as a non-political organisation whose aim was to bring people of Chinese descent together, to meet and share social, cultural and sporting activities. They held regular dances and picnics

but a key event in their social calendar was the Annual Debutante's Ball. This ball ran annually from 1938 through to 1982 with the last ball held in 1988. The Debs were trained by Alma Quon, who also had her own all girl dance band in the 1930s and 40s called Alma Quon and the Joy Belles.

The League also had enthusiastic sports players. For many decades they had their own Australian Rules Football team that played against local teams and business houses, in or near to Melbourne. For a short period champion boxer, Ben Martin, helped train those who were interested to box. A few bouts were held at the Melbourne Stadium. Social games of tennis were played from the 1940s and in February 1951 they held their first tennis tournament. Other sports events held on a regular basis included 10-pin bowling, basketball, netball, table tennis and golf. Golf has been a recent addition, with the first Golf Championship held in 1986. Like so many other Chinese-Australian businesses, societies and families, the Young Chinese League has been an enduring Chinese-Australian institution that remains active today. Annual tennis and golf competitions are still held and a number of successful reunions have been held.



APPENDIX A — SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY: SOURCES FOR HISTORY AND STORIES

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City of Melbourne's image gallery

Hive Creative

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STORIES FROM THE HEART OF MELBOURNE



THE VIBRANT HISTORY OF MELBOURNE'S
ITALIAN, CHINESE AND GREEK CULTURAL PRECINCTS
