



BLOODING A LION IN LITTLE BOURKE STREET :
THE CREATION, NEGOTIATION AND MAINTENANCE OF
CHINESE ETHNIC IDENTITY IN MELBOURNE

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THESIS SUMMARY AND SYNOPSIS

The main concern of this thesis is the creation, negotiation and maintenance of Chinese ethnic identity in Melbourne. I have broadly divided the Chinese into three reference groups ; the Old Migrants, the Present Migrants and the Australian born Chinese or ABC. The first three chapters are devoted to the historical experiences of these three groups with particular emphasis on the Australian Immigration policies whose pervasive effects are clearly discernible in domestic relations - Chinese family structure and relationship between generations - in social, religious and ritual activities, in residential arrangement, in occupational distributions, in Chinese and English language usage and in the activities of ethnic organisations.

The unfavourable stereotyping of Old Migrants in colonial Australia has filtered down to the present era. As I show, the Chinese community has sought for some time to maintain an image of 'respectability' and to avoid increasing an awareness of their presence among the wider Australian public. The controversial establishment of a 'Chinatown' in Melbourne in 1975 drew unwanted attention to the Chinese community. In addition, the presence of large numbers of highly visible Indo-Chinese refugees in the early 1980's, have revived fears among the Australian *has* public, of an 'Asian invasion'. These two events, increased Chinese apprehensions about their 'visibility' as 'Asians' in Australian society. They reacted by dissociating themselves, in part, from the Chinatown project and by attempting to distance themselves from the Vietnamese community.

In my final chapter I treat the occasion of Chinese New Year among the Melbourne Chinese community as a social situation which illuminates in an effective way, the disparate elements that go into the construction of a complex and normally opaque social order.

I argue that Chinese ethnic identity is constructed in terms of what the Chinese perceive to be the Australian mainstream values and lifestyle. I argue further that the Chinese have persisted in maintaining a high degree of 'invisibility' over an extended period of time despite what would appear to be quite radical changes in government policy. Thus, although the White Australia Policy with its hard line assimilation theories has given way to the supposed liberality of multiculturalism, Chinese behaviour has remained unchanged.

My analysis of ethnicity has been informed by the arguments of Barth, Mitchell, Epstein, Hannerz and Parkin. Each has proposed a somewhat different definition of ethnicity. I conclude by arguing that the critical issue for the anthropologist is not how ethnicity should or should not be defined but how social situations are so structured and constrained that a particular ethnic identity is negotiated.

DECLARATION

(a) This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

(b) I consent to the thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if applicable, if accepted for the award of the degree.

Chooi Cheng Yeen

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis concerns the creation, negotiation and maintenance of Chinese ethnic identity in Melbourne. I relate this process of the formation of an ethnic identity to the historical experiences which Chinese migrants have undergone both in their former countries of residence and upon their entry into Australia. I also focus on the various official Government Acts and policies which affect the 'integration' of the Chinese immigrants into Australian society. I argue that the consequences of these official policies are clearly discernible in the domestic relations - Chinese family structure and relationship between generations - in social, religious and ritual activities, in residential arrangement, in occupational distributions, in Chinese and English language usage and in the activities of ethnic organisations.

I conclude that despite the changes in policy from that of assimilation to present day multiculturalism, Chinese construct their ethnic identity as if the policy has remained one of assimilation. I further explore the actual realities of 'multiculturalism' when translated into day to day living.

Throughout my analysis I have drawn on the major works of Barth (1969), Mitchell (1956, 1959, 1966, 1974), Cohen (1969), Epstein (1978), Hannerz (1969) and Parkin (1969). I present ethnicity as involving five factors.

Firstly there is the group identification which emphasizes past origins such as 'common ancestral origin' or 'common cultural heritage'. Secondly, ethnic identity is based on some conception of cultural, social or physical distinctiveness. Third, an ethnic group can be perceived as a component unit in a broader system of social relations. Fourth, the situational use of ethnicity means that different meanings are ascribed to ethnic categories in different social situations and for different individuals on different occasions. Finally, the labels which are used for ethnic categories are emblematic in that these labels have symbolic meaning.

I argue that there are varying constraints on the extent of negotiability of an ethnic identity, depending upon the structure of the situation. Some situations have fewer constraints and are therefore open to negotiation, while other situations are not. ~~Thus~~, I conclude that the critical issue to be explored in Anthropology^A is not^A which is the correct definition of ethnicity per se, but the nature and type of constraints which operate in social situations to create, negotiate and maintain a particular construction of ethnic identity.

My method of investigation was that of a participant observer. Due to the kindness and generosity of certain Chinese families in Melbourne, I was fortunate in having the opportunity to observe Chinese family life at first hand, in the ten months of my stay, from 1983 to 1984.

For the first six months of fieldwork I also participated in many ritual and social activities organised by Chinese organisations. Inevitably, special friends emerged who made great efforts to advance my research. I was given access to ritual activities and documents of organisations, which were normally unavailable to the general public.

While I was able to gain access to the Chinese community, to the ethnic Chinese Vietnamese community and even to the Russian Chinese community in the Dandenong Ranges, I was unable to make much headway with the ethnic Vietnamese. I attribute this to the lack of time available, the language difficulties and the natural wariness of the ethnic Vietnamese towards 'outsiders'.

I have used Census figures and media information to back up certain generalizations based on ^{participant} empirical observations. I have also retained the anonymity of my informants but have retained genuine organisation and place names.

CHINESE IMMIGRATION

Tune - "Dickie Birds"

You doubtless read the papers,
 And as men of observation,
 Of course you watch the progress
 Of Chinese immigration -
 For thousands of those pigtail chaps
 In Adelaide are landing;
 And why they let such numbers come
 Exceeds my understanding.

On Emerald Hill it now appears
 A Joss House they've erected;
 And they've got an ugly idol there -
 It's just what I expected;
 And they offer nice young chickens
 Unto this wooden log;
 And sometimes with a sucking pig
 They go the entire hog.

Now some of you, perhaps may laugh,
 But 'tis my firm opinion.
 This colony someday will be
 Under Chinese dominion.
 They'll upset the Australian Government
 The place will be their own;
 And an Emperor with a long pigtail
 Will sit upon the throne.

Melbourne will be the seat of power,
 And then 'tis my impression,
 Of the stations up the country
 They'll quickly take possession.

The squatters will be used as slaves,
 By the Celestial nation;
 And growing tea or rice will be
 Their only compensation.

The mandarins will seize for wives
 The fair Australian girls;
 And from Melbourne to the diggings
 They'll cut a lot of canals.
 And for fear the coves of New South Wales
 Should pay a hostile call;
 Between this colony and that
 No doubt they'll build a wall.

The customs of their country
 Of course will then prevail;
 And every English slave will have
 To wear a long pigtail.
 We'll all of us be fed on rice,
 As true as I'm a sinner;
 And stead of spoons we'll have to use
 Those chopsticks for our dinner.

This picture, perhaps, is overdrawn;
 But, however, who can say,
 That all these things will not take place,
 If we let them have their way.
 If it comes to pass, these English songs
 Away I'll quick be flinging,
 And learn their language, and come out
 In Chinese comic singing.

Chas. R. Thatcher, 1857