

Chinese Heritage Association of Australia
10th Anniversary Celebration Dinner and Launch of
“Chinese Australian Women’s Stories”

Acknowledgment of country.

Acknowledgments:

Dr Geoff Lee MP, State Member for Parramatta

Robyn Kemmis, Deputy Lord Mayor of the City of Sydney

Jozefa Sobski, Chair of the Jessie Street National Women’s Library Board

Emeritus Professor Sybil Jack, Chair of the Editorial Committee for “Chinese Australian Women’s Stories”

Daphne Lowe Kelley, Immediate Past President of the Chinese Heritage Association of Australia

Cheryl Cumines, Current President of the Chinese Heritage Association of Australia.

Ten years is a significant milestone for the Chinese Heritage Association of Australia and I am glad to be able to celebrate it with you here tonight.

In those ten years the Association has created its own important stories, such as leading the ongoing campaign to preserve the La Perouse market gardens.

The Association also gives voice to the stories of many generations of Chinese Australians.

Those memories include the positive – the “opportunity and diversity” as Marilyn Pacitti says in *Chinese Australian Women’s Stories*; and the negative, as we remembered last year the 150th anniversary of the Lambing Flat riots.

It is important we keep alive the stories of the rich contributions successive generations of Chinese Australians have made in our country, and pass them on to non-Chinese Australians as well as more recent arrivals.

That is why I am very happy to officially launch *Chinese Australian Women’s Stories*.

I read this book from cover to cover. Embarrassingly it was on a plane, and several people would have seen me wiping my eyes at some of the moving stories of hardship and resilience in this book.

To each one of the authors: you are inspirational women.

I was struck by many of the recurring themes that drew your stories together:

Many of you took responsibility very early. You were working in shops and restaurants; caring for younger brothers and sisters; interpreting for your parents.

That early responsibility translated for all of you into a life of joyful public service; a contribution to your community which took that early experience of responsibility and, instead of leading you to resentment or any feelings of self-pity, translated into a commitment to helping others.

I thought the role of women was another fascinating theme. Many of the traditional Chinese mothers and grandmothers had circumscribed lives to some degree - one had bound feet; another was illiterate; many needed their children to translate; but it's plain that these women who wanted to teach their daughters to be demure, traditional Chinese girls had an incredible double life. They were pioneers; brave and tough. Fierce and hard working: that tension between the image of the quiet, obedient girl and the woman warrior left for years in China to raise her children, or travelling half way around the world to see the man she married after ten years apart is repeated in a number of the lives we hear about.

The role of education came up in each story too. Every one of the authors valued the educational opportunities she had, and each had continued to grow, learn and develop throughout her life. We see the important role of teachers: Joy Hopwood's experience of having a teacher who gave her the best advice ever: find something you love and do it well; and then Joy's desire to use her talents to be a role model- to tell the world that Australian faces are Asian too.

The stories of the mothers and grandmothers; the women who bore 8 children then died; Sheila Bruhn's story of internment in Changi and her motivation to nurse sick children because of the baby she wasn't able to save in Changi - these stories of depth and resilience were so moving.

Finally I want to say this to you - as the child of migrants I heard many stories like these, of hardship overcome and gratitude for the simple freedom of being able to work hard, support your family and educate your children.

I identified with the child who has to take on responsibility early - although I fortunately wasn't asked to choose a builder at age 15.

And I recognised those non-Chinese friends and neighbours who were welcoming and kind in an unfamiliar world - my own mum, home with young kids, with little English, made friends with Lil Fletcher at the bus stop. Lil used to look after us once a week so my mum could do the

grocery shopping in peace. Lil had no kids of her own, and mum would come home to find me dressed with the shoes on the wrong feet, but she was so grateful for the kindness. My mum was pretty much the only visitor Lil got as she lay dying, but my mum was her friend to the end.

I am grateful to the women who shared their stories for this book. I hope their children and grandchildren will understand the sacrifices that were made to give them a place in this beautiful country.

And I hope Australians from backgrounds other than Chinese will read this wonderful book and understand a little more about their Australian-Chinese friends and neighbours.

I would particularly like to pay tribute to Daphne Lowe Kelley who has stepped down after 10 years as President of the Chinese Heritage Association of Australia.

Daphne says in the book:

...voluntary community service has taken up a lot of my time and played a large role in my life. Why, where and how did this come to be? Does it have anything to do with my being from a poor immigrant family, the early responsibilities thrust on me as a child, principles instilled from family and community, education, environment, all combined with a dose of genetic predisposition?

Whatever the reason, Daphne, we are glad you took on the leadership roles you did.

Congratulations on reaching this landmark and I wish you every success into the future.