

An Examination of Brisbane's Chinatown and Chinese Communities: A Summary of Professor David Ip's Presentation on 15th May, 2018

Invited by Associate Professor Chi-Kong Lai to deliver a public lecture on behalf of the Research Cluster for Chinese Entrepreneurial Studies at the University of Queensland, Professor David Ip shared his insights on the changes and evolution of Brisbane Chinatown as well as local Chinese communities with students, historians, and members of the general public. As a renowned expert of oversea Chinese communities, Professor Ip was the ideal person to give an informative talk on the experience of Chinese migrants in Brisbane, a topic that has often been underexplored.

Immersing himself in newly discovered archival sources, Professor Ip unearthed many interesting stories and anecdotes as to the factors behind the emerge of Fortitude Valley as Brisbane's Chinatown. As Africans were restricted from entering other suburbs due to strict segregation laws, Fortitude Valley, which was then scarcely populated, became an ideal venue to host American soldiers, many of whom were of African descent, during the height of the Second World War. As American soldiers found their movements restricted mostly around Fortitude Valley, this area of Brisbane experienced significant economic growth due to this infusion of population. While restaurants and entertainment venues emerged almost overnight, one thing was still missing for these American soldiers: Chinese food. To fulfil this demand, Chinese were brought in to satisfy this American culinary need. Thus began the rise of Fortitude Valley as Brisbane's Chinatown.

While changes at Fortitude Valley laid the foundation for the emergence of a Chinatown, the Chinese population in Brisbane remained small for most of the previous century. Indeed, in the 1980s, Professor Ip could only find two persons with the last name of 'Ip' in the local phonebook. As the 1980s approached its end, however, many Chinese of Hong Kong origin migrated to the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. Significant infusion of Chinese migrants into Brisbane occurred in the aftermath of Sino-British negotiations in 1984, the conclusion of which saw both sides signed the famous Joint Declaration stating that Hong Kong would be returned to China in 1997. Another wave of Chinese migrants from Hong Kong came to Australia in the 1990s, as the 1997 rendezvous with Beijing became imminent. Chinese immigrant from Taiwan also arrived in Australia in the 1980s due to concerns over the lack of public safety in the island, through in somewhat smaller number when compared to their Hong Kong counterparts. These two groups of Chinese migrants actually did not settle in Fortitude Valley, thereby resulting in the pluralisation of the Chinese subsociety in Brisbane, so much so that by the 1990s, there were two Chinese communities in Brisbane, which were populated by migrants from either Taiwan or Hong Kong.

These Chinese immigrants were often highly educated, with those of Hong Kong origin possessing professional backgrounds, while those who came from Taiwan could be classified as business migrants. Many of them therefore possessed the financial resources to obtain properties in Australia. Almost all of them, however, experienced hardship while attempting to integrate into their new homeland. Professionals lacking local qualifications were forced to become insurance salesmen and property agents. Some even had to serve as waiters to support their families. It was not unusual for them to return to Hong Kong to renew their

professional lives. Chinese immigrants from Taiwan similarly experienced professional hardships, as they were very initially unable to thrive in the local business world due to different cultural and business practices.

Chinese migrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong, however, possessed one advantage that their local Australian competitors lacked: connections with mainland China. It was this unique attribute that allowed many Hong Kong and Taiwan Chinese migrants to eventually emerge as successful merchants whose businesses were, in stark contrast to earlier generation of Chinese Australians who were grocery store or laundry mat owner, investors in import and export ventures. According to Professor Yip, it was these Chinese migrants' connections to mainland China that allowed them to build successful small to medium-sized firms specialising in the export of fruit products, which enabled Australia to gain an important foothold in the PRC market. This vital contribution made by Chinese migrants to the Australian economy has only been recently explored by David Yip and his colleagues. Just as important was how overseas Chinese migrants in Australia facilitated the global rise of China, as they brought investment, technical knowhows, contacts, business information and management skills that were badly needed when the PRC was going through its economic transformation process. Unlike other developing nation-states, the economic transformations of which were highly dependent upon foreign direct investment that heavily involved international corporation, the global emergence of the PRC was facilitated by small and medium-sized businesses operated by members of the Chinese diaspora, of which Australian migrants represented a significant contingent.

The offspring of migrants who came to Australia in the 1980s and 1990s was labelled by Professor Yip as members of the 'One and Half Generation', so called because they were viewed as outsiders by native-born Australians or their compatriots in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or mainland Chinese, even if they had been permanently settled in Australia for years, so much so that they would always be seen as either 'half Australians' or 'half Chinese'. To their critics, members of the One and Half Generation therefore always had one foot in a community while always appearing to be halfway ready to depart for another. Using the analytical framework of 'transnationalism', which focused on how internet, the availability of fast transatlantic flight and cheap international calls facilitated the ease of travel as well as communication in an increasingly interconnected world, Professor Yip highlighted how members of the One and Half Generation actually felt increasingly isolated, as the capability to travel between their adopted homeland and actual homeland constantly reminded them that they belonged to neither.

The rise of the One and Half Generation and the pluralisation of Chinese communities in Brisbane raised an important question: What should be the purpose Chinatown in the 21st century? Indeed, should Fortitude Valley still be seen as the focal point of Chinese culture in Brisbane when other urban centres such as Sunnybank currently have as many, if not more, Chinese inhabitants? Should scholars see Fortitude Valley simply a relic of the past, one the primary utility of which is the demonstration of Brisbane's multiculturalism?

Whatever the purpose of Chinatown, one thing is certain: Brisbane's Chinese communities are constantly evolving. Currently, many Taiwanese migrants are

complementing resettlement in Taiwan, as the island possesses a superior healthcare system. Among the Hong Kong Chinese community, the imperative to return to the city in the 1990s and the early 2000s was driven mostly by a desire for financial gains, though after the umbrella movement of 2014, many are now reconsidering their decision to remain in Hong Kong. The transformation of Brisbane's and Australia's Chinese communities is further complicated by the arrival of mainland Chinese, who, unlike migrants of previous decades who were often determined to assimilate into local communities, are much more assertive and willing to point out the alleged flaws of their adopted home.

These new Chinese migrants, who are in many ways the products of China's global rise, as they are wealthier and more confident than their compatriots who came to Australia during the previous decades, could be the focus of new academic endeavours. Whatever the results of these new studies, their investigators owed a great intellectual debt to Professor David Yip, whose works have shed light on how Chinese migrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong altered not only Australia, but China as well.