

Asian-Australian Voices

A four part seminar series examining the role of Asian communities in contemporary Australian culture.

Seminar 4: Mapping the Chinese-Australian Landscape – Places of Work, Leisure, Worship

Panel: Helen Fong (Chair), Howard Choy, Keep Fong OAM, Ann Toy, Tom Dion

Helen Fong: Tonight we are going to be looking at places important to the understanding of the Chinese community. The speakers on our panel will reveal tonight the significance of different places from their personal experience in order to highlight a strong history of Chinese participation in Australian life.

Many of the Chinese arriving in Australia pre-war began immigrating around 1818, mostly from South China. Many were sojourners, men who plan to make their fortune here and then return to China to be reunited with their families. Some however, did not return. In 1901, the new Federation passed an immigration restriction act, which came to be known as the White Australia policy. The Chinese who came after 1901 could not do work that would compete with Europeans. Consequently, they worked in market stalls and laundries regardless of their skill or talent. This Act inadvertently affected Chinese associations with specific locations.

The White Australia policy was gradually eased and finally abandoned in 1972. After this time, Chinese started coming from other places, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam and North China. They brought with them a greater diversity of attitudes, values, and practices to Australia.

Some of the post-war arrivals have led to a rejuvenation of traditional practices. Renewed interest in Chinese temples being one example. Chinese living in Cherrybrook, Cabramatta, Flemington, Ashfield, Eastwood, Chatswood are now creating meaningful places and significant sites of the future. Tonight's panel discussion provides an important context to understanding the dynamic nature of the Chinese community.

Howard Choy was born in China, arriving in Australia in 1960. In addition to practicing architecture, Howard is a Feng Shui consultant and teacher. He founded the Feng Shui College of Sydney and his clients include the Darling Harbour Authority, the Chung Wah Society, CPK Jakarta and many others overseas. He has also published widely including monthly columns for Better Homes and Gardens and three books on Feng Shui and Qicong.

Howard Choy: Tonight I'm going to talk about the three sites of significance from a Feng Shui perspective. The first two are sites of worship. The Goh Yu temple in Alexandria built around the 1900's. The other is the Sze Yup temple in Glebe. The third site is Sydney's Chinatown, which has always been of special personal significance.

I'd like to use the two joss houses as examples of how Chinese immigrants adopt practices from the old world into the new. Feng Shui is seen to facilitate a sense of continuity with their homelands, but since Feng Shui is very complex it is possible to interpret the theories in different ways. For instance, the ideal Feng Shui model is to locate a building slightly on a raised ground facing the sun and protected from the back, like sitting on a comfy armchair. In the Northern Hemisphere the most desirable and auspicious direction is located to the south, however in Australia it is the opposite direction.

The Goh Yu temple faces to the south, following the old Chinese traditions. The founders believed that that is it was done in China, so that is how it will be done in Australia. On the other hand, the joss house in Glebe was built according to the principle of good sighting and was directed north. Consequently, the Chinese community believes that the Sze Yup temple in Glebe is more lucky. And poor Goh Yu temple got burnt down and needed to be completely rebuilt. The practice of Feng Shui reveals that Chinese culture needs to be considered in such a way that is adaptable to new environments and yet still be true to overriding principles.