

CAV IN THE 21ST CENTURY: RATIONALE AND ROLE IN MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA

As CAV approaches its third decade of existence, it is timely to reflect and review our progress, and look to the future. I will share with you my insights in the maturing of CAV - the whys and wherefores of the CAV, and highlight some significant events. It will be a trip down memory lane and I hope that these insights will bring a greater sense of understanding amongst the younger and newer members.

1. The Journey Begins

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tse said that “*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*”. The founding of the CAV was a journey that started in 1982 and the first step was taken by a group of energetic 30 somethings and 40 somethings who felt that there was a need to have an association to meet the needs of the budding Chinese- Australian community who have made Australia their home. Like any migrant group, there was a need to network with people from the same background. On the one hand there was a desire to preserve the language and culture and nurture a sense of identity and belonging. On the other, there was a need to integrate into the Australian society, and put roots into the new home land. The need to maintain a sense of pride in their heritage is a common migrant experience, regardless of their ethnic origin. There have been a whole series of papers on the phenomenon of the Overseas Chinese (*Hua Chiao*) and the (*Luodeshengan*) experience.

Right from the beginning we were clear that The Chinese Association of Victoria should be built up on a strong foundation. The group of founding fathers and mothers shared a common vision, and came from all walks of life including lawyers, academics, doctors, engineers, teachers and administrators. The strength of the Association is underpinned by several very sound principles. Specifically, the Association should represent all Chinese in Australia – as fragmentation by dialects would make a minority group even less effectual (Hence the choice of the name *The Chinese Association of Victoria*) be non-political, so that we can be inclusive in supporting members of whatever political persuasion (The emphasis is to support a democratic system) be non-religious so that we can respect members whatever their religious or philosophical beliefs (The emphasis is to support shared values)

It was vitally important that in adopting Australia as our new homeland, our loyalty to Australian is paramount. Hence, we are Chinese Australians i.e. Australians of Chinese origin.

2. The Early Years

In the first phase of our development we focused our energies on starting Chinese language classes for the children, and some of the parents managed to attend conversational mandarin classes as well. Apart from learning the language, we wanted the children to appreciate some of the values of the Chinese culture, in particular filial piety and upholding the Chinese tradition of respecting the elders – a very good virtue to encourage, in the light of our greying community.

Those were the days when we operated out of rented premises on Sundays, at the Nunawading High School. We crammed all the activities - Chinese cultural dancing, tai chi, lion dance into that one day of the week. In practical terms it meant that we had to set up and then pack everything away on every occasion.

The Annual Food Fairs were the event that all the communities looked forward to – the exotic food, the shows and cultural demonstrations were highlights. Attendance was in the thousands. It was the key event that drew in the other communities. An indirect spin-off was the demonstration to the wider community of the organization skills of the Association. Food Fair day was a major challenge for the organizers - we had to put everything up, tents and all, very early on the chosen Sunday morning, wait for the crowds to come, then pack everything away at the end of the day. We became pretty good at fund-raising. Apart from the food fair, the annual raffle draw was an all-out effort by the CAV members to sell tickets that raised some \$10,000 each time. Those who did not have the time to spare supported through donations in kind and in money. There were lots of smaller fund-raising drives as well. It was hard work, but it was fun, and a great community effort. In the process, there evolved many personal friendships and social networks.

2. Why CAV

The CAV means different things to different people as it fulfills multiple roles. Whether the initial impetus was Chinese language classes, tai-chi lessons, table-tennis or the wide range of recreational activities, the Association fulfilled a valuable social role. Whilst all these educational, cultural, social and sports activities are an integral part of the Association, they represent only one aspect of what CAV is about.

CAV has another important role which may not be readily apparent to some members. This is to look after the broader and longer term interests of its members in Australia, namely to help members integrate successfully into the Australian society and to represent them on social issues which may affect them and the Chinese community at large. The Association has to take a broad perspective of the evolving local socio-political environment, and to identify and deal with relevant major public issues. It has to continue to build up its contacts with other community organizations and to liaise with government departments to ensure that we have an open channel of communication with policy-makers. It is essential to lay the groundwork now, so that we are able to make our voices heard when major issues arise. The importance of this role is sometimes overlooked as Australia has been relatively harmonious in recent years. Yet it is a vital role, if the Chinese community is to do its part to help preserve this harmony.

As a nation of immigrants, the ethnic composition of the Australian population is changing with each successive wave of immigration. In the last decade, the Chinese community has grown substantially and become a very “visible” minority. Although the numbers are very small relative to the total population, Asian immigration is an issue that is of concern to some sectors of the Australian population. Australia has been a tolerant country – a credit to the nation’s enlightened leadership. However, Australia is not immune to developments in other parts of the world. The “Pauline Hanson Please Explain” episode has been a worrying development as it reflects an underlying current. It is imperative that we take positive action to prevent ethnic matters from becoming major issues.

In a multi-racial democratic society like Australia, we cannot be complacent. Many of us come from a background where the emphasis is on hard work, success, and to keep your head down. We have not been encouraged to be politically aware, so it is a hard call for the pre-baby boomer generation. It is hoped that our life experience has enabled us to recognize that we have a vital role in this arena.

We do need to be pro-active and play our part to help mould a truly equal opportunity society for all Australian citizens. The integration process requires a lot of effort and time. It also requires the goodwill and cooperation of all the other communities. Within the local Chinese community, CAV, with its talented membership and network, can play an effective role in the Australian environment. This is critical for the future of our children and our children's children. There is a Chinese proverb that says: "*One generation plants the trees: another gets the shade.*" We do want to have the shade, but more importantly, we also want our children to have equal opportunity in finding their place in the Australian sun.

The Association has obviously served its members well, and over the years it has built up an impressive record of achievements and emerged as a highly respected community organization. It has to continue to develop programs that will provide a focal point for members to establish their own network of contacts, whether these be special interest groups such as business, youth or young professionals. It can provide support and referral network for members and their families who may require professional help and serve as a link to other community and government bodies.

3. CAV and Multiculturalism

One area that has been a source of confusion for many new migrants is the concept of multiculturalism. The Australian population today is a microcosm of the world with people from some 140 countries. Set against this cultural diversity, the Chinese community makes up a small part of the Australian population, less than 5%. The socio-economic profile of the Chinese community is broadly similar to the Australian-born indicating that they have adjusted and integrated well into the Australian way of life. In fact, studies have shown that in comparison to the Australian-born, Chinese-Australians are better educated, more highly skilled, and earn higher salaries. Their youth, skills and productivity have major contributions to make to the nation. However, such facts are not generally appreciated by the wider community.

In the late 1980's at the height of the frantic public debate arising from Blainey's anti-immigration stance, it became very obvious that the mums and dads in the streets did not know very much about Asian migrants. For example, there was little or no understanding that the generic term Asian encompassed a group of diverse nationalities such as Vietnamese, Indonesians and Chinese. There was a lack of awareness that the immigration policy admitted migrants with specific skills, in contrast to refugees who were admitted under the humanitarian program and had very different needs.

In 1998, CAV issued an official statement on Multiculturalism which emphasized that ***“As Australian citizens we abide by the institutions and principles that are basic to Australian society, in particular, parliamentary democracy, rule of law, freedom of the individual, a common education system, and English as our national language. Multiculturalism is about loyalty to one legal system, one national language, and one common education system. Multiculturalism is based on the recognition that cultural diversity does not threaten social cohesion, rather it is the basis for a harmonious and equitable society”***.

Australia is not a melting pot, but a mosaic where every culture and racial group is respected and we can all share in the best of the best. We are part and parcel of the fabric of Australian identity – and contribute to the making of a vibrant multicultural, multitalented and progressive nation. As Chinese Australians, we are proud of our Chinese heritage and more importantly, we are first and foremost Australians.

4. Community Work and Benefactors

Those who have been active in community work have a greater awareness of the life cycle of give and take. All of us have reaped the benefit of the sacrifices made by previous generations for the advancement of society. It goes beyond the sacrifices made by the family, rather it extends to the advancement of the society that we are part of it. There will come a point in life when we can recognize that we are doing OK, and we should be able to do our little bit, to give back to society, so that others may benefit. So the wheel turns around.

It has been very heartening when we get the support of benefactors who share the same vision. We were very privileged to have received the support of the late Mr. K.K. Cheung, when he surveyed the diverse field of associations, and chose to sponsor the CAV cultural program for many years. We have been the beneficiaries of another Chinese tradition – where the well-wisher presents to the Association gifts that they would have received to celebrate auspicious occasions, such as full moon dinner or significant birthday celebrations. Others have chosen to donate directly or anonymously. That has been the measure of the support from the members.

5. Looking Ahead

The achievements did not come easy, and CAV has been very fortunate to have had a string of dedicated leaders who were prepared to work hard, often making personal sacrifices for the good of the Association. They have shown great strength of character in guiding the Association in a balanced and responsible manner, with the wisdom to manage objectively for the greater good, sometimes at the cost of incurring the unhappiness of minority dissenting views. The fact that we have been able to rise above personal differences for the common good, is an indication of the democratic stature of the Association.

Many years ago at the beginning, we managed to persuade some 140 members to put down a \$1000 each so that we could purchase a block of land. Once we purchased the land, we devoted our energies to raise funds so that we can build our Centre. The government of the day was impressed enough to provide us with a grant, we managed to

get bank loan, and the rest, is history. Today we have a beautiful Centre and classroom complex, including the best community hall for ballroom dancing!

For more than two decades we have concentrated our energies in raising funds so that we can establish the Association.

Now that we have paid off the bank overdraft we can concentrate our efforts on making the Centre more dynamic in its programs for its members and the wider community

When we embarked on our journey of a thousand miles many years ago, we had no road map of what lay ahead. We faced the challenges in true Chinese spirit, with hard work, pragmatism, and a determination to succeed. The way has been paved, and the foundations laid for a highway to the future. The challenge is to take the Association to the next level so that CAV continues to be relevant to migrants and Australian-born Chinese and the future generations.

By Chooi Hon Ho

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