

Community history, Chinese

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Community leaders

Stephen Law (b. 1932)

From 1984, after a long career in social work, Mr Law became Deputy Director of Social Welfare for the Hong Kong government, developing policies for services for the elderly, the disabled, youth and families, and working in areas such as child care and social security, and with offenders. He also helped develop voluntary organisations in the colony. With his wife Mary-Anne, whose family has a long history in Australia, he came here to settle in 1989. In 1994, he became Vice-President of the large and active Cherrybrook Chinese Community Association.

(From summary of interview with Diana Giese, ORAL TRC, 2003, *Chinese Australian Oral History Partnership/ Post-War Chinese Australians*, National Library of Australia:)

He was born into a family whose father, ‘an old-fashioned master of the house and head of the family’, ran a Chinese wine business, but was also a scholar who insisted that his children learn about Chinese history and literature. During World War II, Stephen Law witnessed the ‘air raids, fighting, bombing, killing, brutalities’ of the Japanese occupation. He remembers when he was eight years old running out to see the burnt body of a shot-down pilot. He saw poor children living on the streets, and many bodies, and witnessed beatings by Japanese soldiers. The family was fortunate enough not to suffer starvation like so many others, since they could eat the rice from which the wine was made. These experiences gave him ‘a feeling for war, for poverty, for starvation...a genuine feeling for the underprivileged, people who suffer’.

He attended a traditional Chinese primary school and studied Japanese for two years; it was compulsory. After the War, he ‘consciously forgot it’. It was only later in the 1960s when he was studying in London with Japanese

students that he came to feel that they were ‘no different from everybody else’. Behind closed doors, his teachers encouraged Chinese nationalism. From 1946, lessons were conducted in Cantonese. Then he changed to a grammar school run along English lines, where English was the language of instruction.

In 1950, his first government job was with street children in the Kowloon Walled City. Like a ‘big brother’, he helped them get a meal a day, basic 3Rs, physical exercise, and ‘the occasional festival or whole-day picnic’. In 1958-59, free universal primary education, for seven years, was begun in Hong Kong. Refugees coming to the colony from China were living in ‘village-type wooden huts’ which he visited to see what the families, working hard as labourers, needed. He didn’t count his hours: ‘whenever you’re needed, you’re with them’. There was a network of similar groups throughout Hong Kong. Today when he returns to the area, children he knew who are now grandparents organise dinners for him. Some of the girls married up into the middle class, and some became teachers and solicitors.

In 1960, he moved to London to study community development at the University of London with other British colonial administrators.

Community development as he was studying it was ‘a movement and process to help colonies become independent’. He looked at factors affecting human development in community groups, visiting 35 organisations in England and Scotland, and was ‘well received’ as ‘an official visiting the mother country’. ‘London was an eye-opener... a centre of world politics and power.’ He was surprised to see white people there in menial jobs. In his first trip away from Hong Kong he was able to see ‘the potential of things...how things can work’. ‘When you come back, you seem to become a new person,’ mind broadened and abilities sharpened.

In developing new welfare programs for Hong Kong, his primary function was as ‘an enabler’, identifying leaders and providing support and assistance. Since there was no social security in Hong Kong he became part of providing feeding centres and family services. The dilemma of community development, he feels, is that you need to keep on monitoring

and helping people and groups. From the 1970s, his work became policy-directed rather than just dealing with problems, and in 1972, the social security system began, with cash payments replacing food rations.

In 1965 he went to McGill University in Canada to do a Master's degree, and on his return began to develop comprehensive policies for community service throughout the colony. With local participation, a network of community centres, including those for children and youth, were set up. Voluntary organisations were funded by the government. He got the policies approved, set up programs and trained people...In 1982, he was able to convince the government to increase payments by 25 per cent across the board: 'the biggest joy I had'...

On retirement, he and his wife moved to Australia, where her family, the Louies, had connections over some 90 years in Queensland. Her brother had studied at the University of Sydney, settled and worked for Qantas. They left Hong Kong for 'more space', and because of uncertainty over what would happen during the 1997 handover to China. Most of his colleagues migrated to Canada; all earned 'extra points' because of their social work qualifications...

In 1988, a group with Malaysian and Singaporean backgrounds started the Cherrybrook Chinese Community Association. Its aims are to conserve customs, food, clothing and festival celebrations. It runs both Mandarin and Cantonese classes. Parents are keen to preserve traditional value systems and young people to learn about Chinese traditions. Common values were identified between Chinese and Australian cultures: family, respect for individuals, respect for property and law, respect for achievement. Chinese, he says, are practical rather than religious and 'can adjust well' to survive anywhere...

'People join the Association because of its friendship groups, for Seniors and Women, who organise outings, cooking classes, dances, dinners and the annual Ball.' Leaders are identified in each group and 'learn by doing'.

Rotation of leaders is important, to get more people involved and a different network of contacts. The local Community Centre, restaurants and parks are used as venues and the annual Lantern Night is a ‘cross-community’ event attracting people from other Cherrybrook backgrounds such as Sri Lankan and Korean. [In 2003] out of 56,000 people then in Hornsby, less than 10,000 were Chinese, but the Association had by then attracted 1900 family members...

Stephen Law has attended university courses in Western philosophy, and is interested in the differences between them and Oriental cultures...He studied in a Jesuit school, and his wife and children are also Catholics.
‘When you are retired you spend more time giving thought to life, to people...With Buddhism you search for enlightenment from within, while in Christianity you rely and depend on, talk to and believe in something superior...You release your burden so you feel you get comfort.’

‘Love your neighbour. If you look after your neighbour, you know how to deal with other people, and then it’s a very peaceful world.’

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Link

Cherrybrook Chinese Community Association

<http://www.ccca.asn.au/>