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Melbourne's New East

What change in one Australian Chinese community says about the nation's future

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* Indicates names have been changed at the interviewee's request.
Details about some individuals in this narrative have been changed for privacy and other reasons.
Some interviews were conducted in Mandarin with the help of a translator.

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Introduction

Daisy Wang* is in her mid 30s. A decade ago, she returned to her native Beijing after obtaining a commerce degree in Melbourne. A few years later she married. Eric* had also spent time abroad, and now worked in the tech industry. Life in the frenetic capital of a rising China gradually took its toll. After five years together, the couple felt hemmed in and worn out.

"So as a couple we discussed immigration," says Wang. "We both had an international perspective. We both like globalisation."

They applied for skilled migrant entry to Australia. During their first year-and-a-half in Melbourne they lived in Glen Waverley. In November 2019 they took possession of their apartment in central Box Hill, an epicentre of Australia's roughly 1.2 million-strong ethnic Chinese community.

"I just know Box Hill is a very famous Chinese community and I have a Chinese stomach," Wang explains. "I don't feel Australian because I think your stomach decides your mind. I don't feel shame about that. I feel proud."

In January 2020, the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute published Australia's Chinese Lesson, a narrative that argued Australia's urgent need to engage with international students from China, whose revenue was the lifeblood of our higher education sector. Since then the world has changed dramatically.

This narrative trains the lens on Box Hill, and some other suburbs in Melbourne's east and south-east, to gain an insight into Australia's broader Chinese diaspora at a time of profound uncertainty from the coronavirus pandemic and mounting diplomatic tension with China.

Australia has shameful chapters in its history of Chinese migration, from the violent attacks during the 1850s gold rushes to the White Australia Policy that was in

place for much of last century. Even as the Asian migrant surge of the past 20 years has changed Australia's cultural complexion, Chinese-Australians remain under-represented in public life and institutions. But in the streets of Wang's Box Hill neighbourhood, we can sense an emerging pride.

Fifty years ago, central Box Hill was notable for a Dairy Queen and an old picture theatre. In the successive waves of migration from mainland China, suburbia gave way to gleaming high-rises, high-performing schools and an abundance of culinary options for Chinese stomachs, or, indeed, for anyone craving dumplings.

In the 2016 Census, nearly 43 per cent of Box Hill residents identified as having Chinese ancestry. Like the Wangs, more than 25 per cent were born in China, and roughly half arrived in the past decade. The suburb has one of the highest concentrations of Chinese-born residents in Australia: more than 12 times the national average and more than 10 times the state average.

This Narrative seeks to understand why Box Hill became an attractive destination for Chinese Australians and why it continues to provide a comfortable bridge from their arrival into the broader community.

The Chinese in Box Hill have thrived with a spirit of resourcefulness and self-reliance. Indeed, the more recent mainland Chinese arrivals upend the economic migrant stereotype of the postwar era. Many are educated and wealthy, and come for more complex reasons than the traditional hope of getting ahead.

Some find it easy to characterise Chinese Australians in a very singular fashion. They assume a common history to their arrival in Australia and a common intent. The Narrative intends to highlight the diversity within the Chinese Australian population both in their reasons for coming to this country, their plans for their future here and the range of contributions that they make to their communities and to society in general.

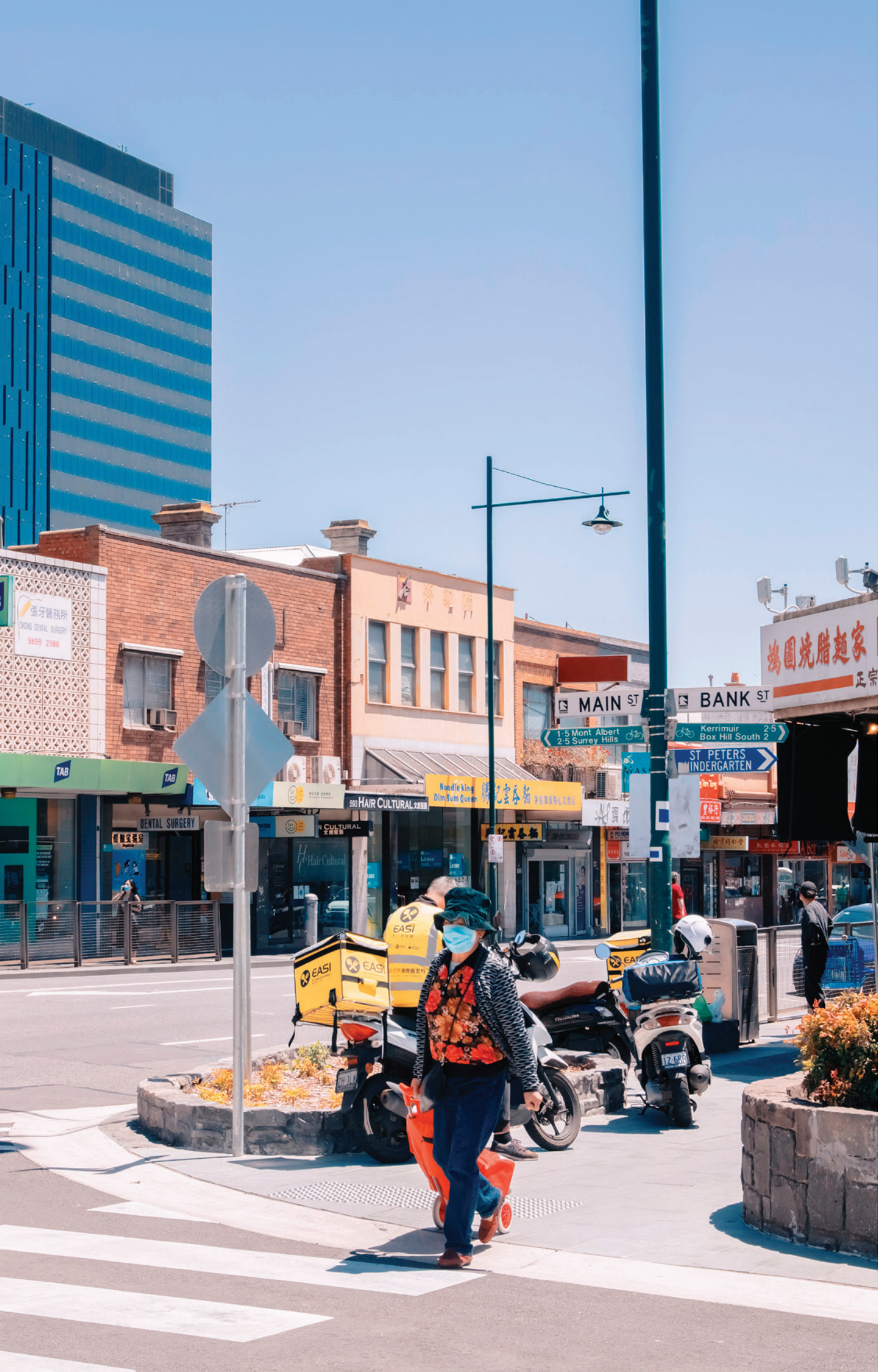
Mainland Chinese migrants have often faced tougher barriers to integration compared with other groups, including the more "Westernised" Chinese from places such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. Several people interviewed for this narrative made this point. One mainland migrant of nearly 20 years describes his community as "a closed circle, not really connected to the mainstream society. Chinese only play with Chinese."

The geographic concentration of migrants in suburbs such as Box Hill could arguably contribute to the perception of this circle, even as it gives newcomers a sense of safety. This is not a new theme in migrant settlement. The 'close circle' has been recognised for the value it created for the settlement of new arrivals. Plenty of other migrant populations banded together in Melbourne's suburbs, nurturing memories of the home country as their children grew up Australian.

Successful integration and its contribution to social cohesion, in the views of the broader Australian population, requires an effort by the new arrivals to understand their new country as well as an effort by the broader Australian community to welcome and understand the new arrivals. The personal stories in this Narrative highlight pathways and complexities that play out as individuals, families and communities find the opportunities to be happy and productive.

However, the coronavirus, and associated overt discrimination against members of the Chinese community, has the potential to create a threat to social cohesion. Like other countries, Australia shut its borders. In April, Prime Minister Scott Morrison advised temporary migrants, including international students, to go home. Diplomatic relations between Canberra and Beijing, already chilly amid an intense focus on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Australia, worsened. The shockwaves from such developments reverberate strongly in Box Hill, where investment and capital from China have fuelled a decade's growth, and ties with the mainland are strong.

In this narrative we explore the machinery of integration in Box Hill and its surrounds, from Council and migrant settlement services, to schools, urban spaces, and even media. Many Chinese migrants are consuming different news on different social media platforms from other Australians. We also study this because our communities are shaped online more than ever before. We draw on press reports and academic studies, but mostly on interviews: with Council staff, community leaders, businesspeople and a broad cross-section of ethnic Chinese who live and work in Box Hill. Most importantly we hear from a younger generation of Chinese-Australians, many of them keen to play a bigger role in shaping the nation's future.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The new arrivals: "I just feel freedom"

Anna Zhang, in her early 30s, is from Shenzhen, the mainland city bordering Hong Kong. In her early 20s, she spent time in London pursuing a master's in science. She came to Australia seven years ago to study early childhood development and bask in what she was sure would be "lovely sunshine". She saw how an ex-boyfriend had started a successful import-export business and this got her thinking. Not long afterwards, Zhang and an acquaintance established a disability support service in Box Hill. She lives alone in Glen Waverley.

"All my family is in China," she explains. "I see them once or twice a year. Sometimes they visit here, sometimes I visit them. I feel relaxed here. No one tells me what to do. Most of the time I just feel freedom."

One surprising feature from this decade's Chinese migration to Australia is a marked gender imbalance. Most new arrivals are women. In June 2018, males comprised 44.5 per cent of the migrant intake from China, and females 55.5 per cent. The median age of new arrivals was nearly 34, reflecting Australia's skills-based migration program.

What's behind this trend? The nascent academic research suggests Australia is seen as a desirable destination for young Chinese women wanting to escape social and familial pressures at home for a life of greater independence and personal choice.

The desire to break loose from China's strictures is also compelling some young families to come to Australia. Daisy Wang, from the Box Hill apartment complex, says she and Eric were simply "not happy" in Beijing. Eric's tech industry job was "quite stressful", as were expectations from family. "Because we decided not to have children," she explains, "we felt uncomfortable. The families kept intruding with questions, interfering. They didn't like how we spent our money on travel." In Melbourne, she says, Eric works alongside "Australians, Iranians, Iraqis, Russians," and was acclimatising to Australia's unbuttoned corporate culture: the office drinks on Fridays, the relaxed oversight of workers punching in and out, the fact no one

hassles him to do extra shifts when he's on leave. Wang herself decided against a "boring" career in business. She's dabbled in childcare and artistic pursuits, but is taking her time to figure out what to do next.

The freedom to run a business in Australia is appealing to Chinese migrants.

Alice Zhu*, 57, studies English in Box Hill at migrant settlement agency AMES. She left her home town near Shanghai eight years ago shortly after a divorce to join her daughter, a financial analyst, in Melbourne. In China, she and her husband ran a clothing business. Zhu quit her marriage and the business, fed up with petty corruption and nepotism.

"Australia is very fair. If you want to start a business, your business will be licensed. In China, if you want to do something you have to know someone, you have to have relatives in a strong position in government. Here, you don't have to compare yourself to others. You can live as you like."

The job market and style of education in Australia are attractions for Chinese migrants, too.

Sean Dong is a migration agent, with a master's in law, who runs a medium-sized practice in Melbourne's CBD. He says the motivations of Chinese migrants have changed from when he moved to Melbourne from Shandong province nearly 20 years ago aiming to finish school and graduate from a top Australian university.

"These days, a graduate from a 985 university (one of China's elite universities) would be much more competitive in the job market compared to most overseas graduates." In China, graduates from Australian universities are often considered "wealthy, complacent and second tier."

"Many Chinese don't even think a Western education is a head start any more – they think the opposite. Some international students go home and then come back because they just can't compete. The Chinese job market is brutal."

He reflects on China's breathtaking transformation.

When Elite Talks, a networking group Dong helped set up for young Asian-Australian migrants, co-hosted a conference with Chinese tech giant Alibaba, more than 3,000 attendees turned up across Sydney and Melbourne.

“Our parents lived through poverty Australians have never experienced. When I was young I was forced to eat.”

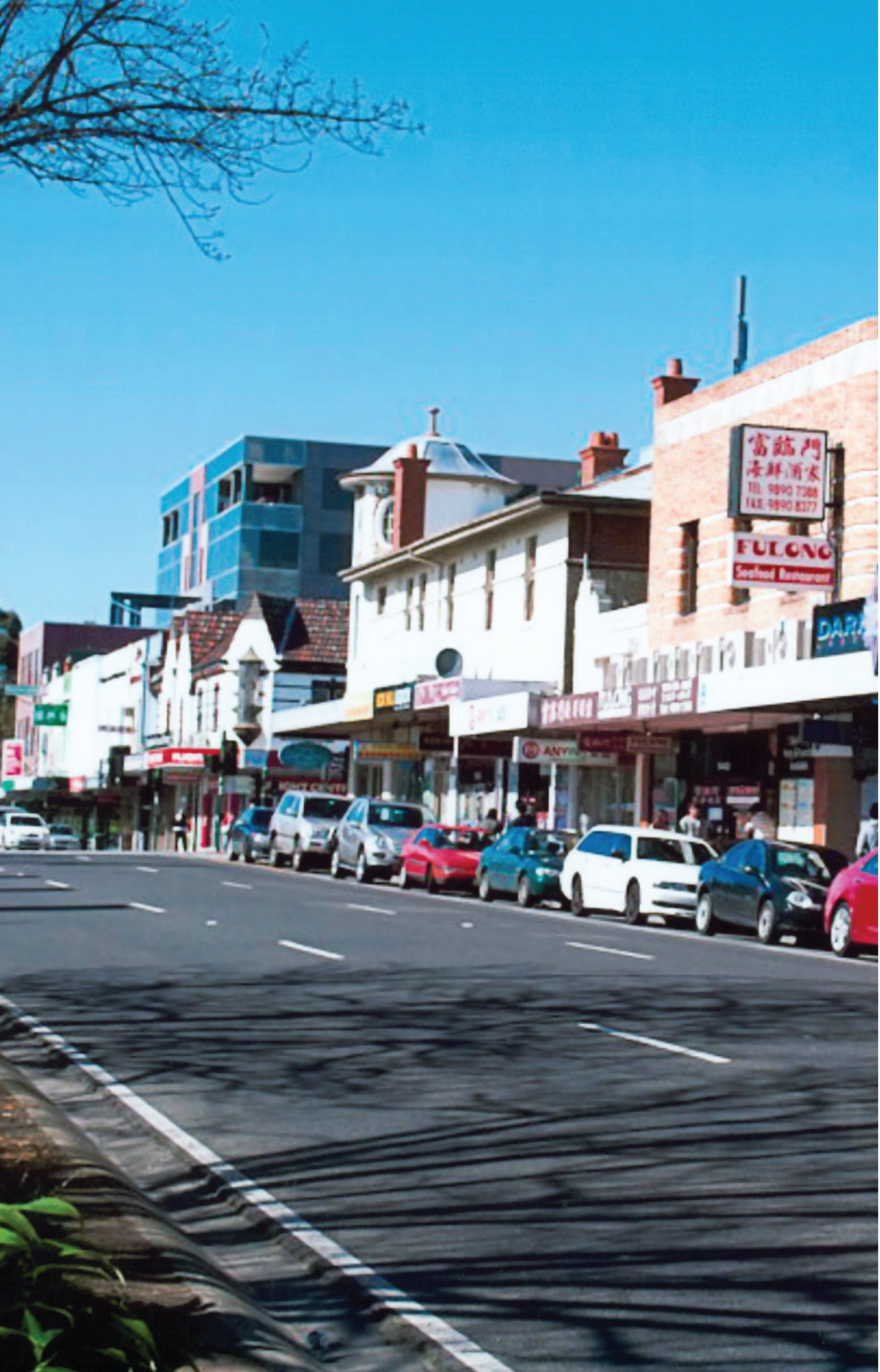
Dong’s parents joined him in Australia seven years ago. He lives with his wife and daughter on the Box Hill and Surrey Hills borderline. Across the road lives a young migrant family from China. Despite China’s advanced economy, Dong says many Chinese parents see the education system back home as problematic. “It’s still very old and not very human: they don’t teach critical thinking. And who likes to be brainwashed?”

Xu and Mei Guo, their son Pengyu, 7, and their daughter Lillian, 14, migrated from the north-eastern port city of Tianjin in 2016 through Australia’s Business Innovation and Investment Program. The couple run a business importing pesticides from China. But the “main reason” for leaving their home in Tianjin was Lillian’s education, says mother Mei Guo. “I hope my daughter can enjoy her school life. Not feel too much pressure.”

“There’s like a ranking system in China, where there’s ranks in class,” Lillian explains. “And you rate the whole school. I think it’s just pressurised the students into wanting to be much more better, and eventually it probably will lead to self-pity. And I think my mum and dad just … didn’t want my mental health or anything to get bad.”

In China, Xu explains, even he and Mei had started fearing Lillian’s teachers. “We always felt guilty, so when the teacher gave us a phone call, we always think something (is) wrong.”

Lillian attends an Anglican girls’ school in Melbourne’s south-east.


FULONG
Seafood Restaurant

Why Box Hill? (A bit of history)

Box Hill's Chinese flavour is "a prototype" of a new trend in migrant settlement, says Monash University Professor Andrew Markus, who leads annual surveys on social cohesion for the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. He notes the 2016 Census found the proportion of Australia's population born overseas was 28 per cent, the highest since the 19th century. But that figure has only edged up modestly since the 1970s. What has changed is that migrant communities in Melbourne, and especially Sydney, are becoming more geographically concentrated.

Migrants cluster for good reason: to better meet their needs.

The Box Hill residents who identify as having Chinese ancestry – nearly 5,000 from a total of just over 11,000 in 2016 – live in the Whitehorse municipality in the area bounded by Thames Street and Margaret Street to the north, Middleborough Road to the east, Canterbury Road to the south and Elgar Road to the west. This suburb skews younger than the state average, with a higher number of households comprising singles and couples without children. A high number of renters – 55 per cent against the state average of 29 per cent – signifies a large student population. Four years ago nearly half the population reported attending a tertiary institution.

Box Hill North and Box Hill South, while more suburban in character, also have significant Chinese populations.

In the neighbouring City of Monash, we find other large Chinese communities in suburbs such as Mount Waverley and Glen Waverley. In the latter, Chinese is the most common ancestry at 28 per cent, though only 16 per cent were born in China. In contrast to Box Hill, couples with children make up 53 per cent of households.

While recent migrants bolstered the Chinese character of Melbourne's east and south-eastern suburbs, the seeds were planted long before. Box Hill and similar suburbs evolved in the confluence of state and federal government policies, and political and economic shifts in China.

The era of the White Australia Policy

In the postwar years, Melbourne's ethnic Chinese community followed the wider urban trend of decamping to the suburbs from the inner city, specifically from the Little Bourke Street district, now known as Chinatown. The White Australia Policy restricting Asian immigration practically halved the proportion of China-born migrants from its relative highs in the 1860s. In 1966, only 1.6 per cent of Australians came from India and China combined. Chinese and other minority groups felt isolated and cornered in their city enclaves. The Chinatown Precinct Association, an organisation promoting Melbourne's Chinatown, told the *South China Morning Post* the Chinese flight to the suburbs was also a direct response to the White Australia Policy.

Even when the White Australia Policy was in force, some ethnic Chinese trickled in.

Ruth Lee was originally from China's mountainous southern province of Hunan. During China's civil war in the 1940s, her father, a general in the army of the governing Kuomintang, was captured by the Communists. Five-year-old Lee, her mother, their entourage of domestic servants and armed guards fled the mainland by boat, heading for Taiwan. Pirates attacked the vessel. Lee was bending down to pick up a ribbon when a bullet whizzed over her head. "If I didn't bend down the bullet would hit my head and I'd be gone," she says.

The pirates seized the vessel, and sent its occupants to the then Portuguese colony of Macau where they stayed for 10 years. Lee's musical talent attracted the attention of a radio-station mogul who got her into a coveted ladies' college in Hong Kong and, after high school, to Australia on a student visa. It was 1962.

"Someone had suggested I go to Australia to study law. I was bananas about Perry Mason. But we barely knew what Australia was in those days." (Lee did not end up studying law but is a long-time volunteer and entrepreneur in the Whitehorse municipality.)

Jieh-Yung Lo is Australian born, and the founding director of the Centre for Asian-Australian Leadership at the Australian National University. His parents and family arrived in the 1970s as Chinese-Vietnamese refugees. But his ancestral ties to Australia stretch back further. His maternal great-great-grandfather came to Victoria in the 1850s looking for gold – and found some. He returned to China with his riches and as family legend has it, an Irish-Australian wife. Hearing of a plot in

the village to ransom him for his fortune, he's thought to have returned to Australia for good.

"So I don't even know how I'd describe myself, 1.5, two generations, second generation Australian?" Lo wonders.

State planning policies were also key in encouraging new migrant settlement. As far back as 1954, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works decided on Box Hill as a site for growth and investment. Box Hill hospital opened two years later, and the Australian Taxation Office set up operations there in the 1980s.

Box Hill began to take on a Chinese character. In 1987 Robert Chong, who would become a leading multicultural adviser in Melbourne's east and a long-time Whitehorse councillor, established the Box Hill Senior Citizens Centre as a base for elderly Chinese across Melbourne (see profile: "Mr Box Hill").

Recent decades

The subsequent waves brought new arrivals with different intents.

Marie Chen* is a casual receptionist at a medical centre in Melbourne's east. Now in her early 50s, she left Guangzhou for Australia in 1990, following her then boyfriend – since husband – who was studying accounting in Melbourne.

Haoliang Sun was a professor in the Beijing Academy of Fine Arts in 1989 when government tanks mowed down student protestors in Tiananmen Square. He was horrified, and anxious about the future. His wife was in Australia with their young son, studying English. He joined them in 1991 and got a job teaching Chinese at Monash University. In the long aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre, the Hawke Government granted political asylum to about 17,000 Chinese. "I've always said, 'thank you Australia for letting me come,'" Sun says.

He was struck, though, by how his 10 year-old son was already struggling to write a letter to his grandfather back home. Together with other like-minded migrants, he set up the Xin Jin Shan Library and Chinese Language and Culture School in south-eastern Mount Waverley, a weekend school for mainland Chinese. "On the first day only six children came, including my son," he recalls. Within a year the school had 100 students.

By the 1996 Census, the Chinese population in Box Hill and its surrounds was already double the proportion in the Melbourne statistical region. Five years later, people with English ancestry still outnumbered those with Chinese ancestry, but only just: 27 per cent to 20 per cent.

Over the following decade, the Australian Government, keen to plug labour-force gaps during the mining boom, opened the door to skilled migrants. China's booming and aspirational middle class came in big numbers.

In the early 2000s, the Route 109 tram extended from its original terminus at Mont Albert along Whitehorse Road to Box Hill. The suburb was again earmarked as a metropolitan activity centre in the State Government's 35-year planning blueprint, Plan Melbourne. Relatives of earlier Chinese migrants came under Australia's family reunion stream.

Ying Cheng Zhong spent four years as an adolescent in Budapest, where her mother, Viola, ran a fabrics shop and father, Hanli, explored property development. In 1996 she returned with Hanli to Beijing where he managed a new business, a partnership with an Australian company producing crossbred lamb for export to China. Viola came to Australia to oversee the business' local arm and, Zhong says, to escape China's smog. In 2000, Hanli died. Two years later Zhong migrated to Australia, and Melbourne's east, to join her mother, by then married to an Australian. She took English-language classes, obtained qualifications in aged care, and began working in nursing homes.

Between 2006 and 2011 Box Hill's China-born population rose more than 700 to nearly 2000.

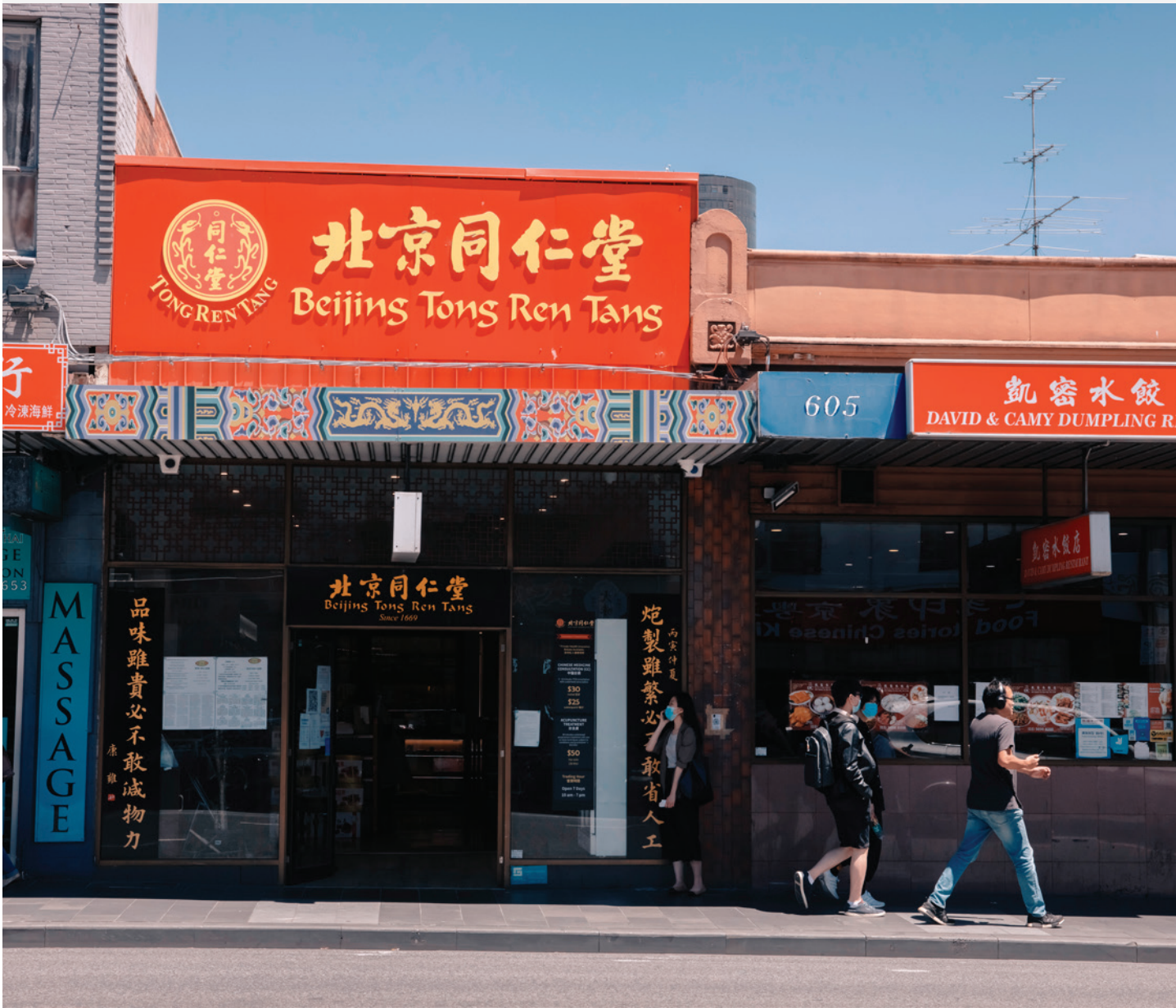
As Melbourne's newcomers merged with the established ethnic Chinese communities from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and the Chinese-Australian descendants from the 1850s gold rushes, a major cultural shift was underway.

Jieh-Yung Lo experienced the shift as a 12 year old, after his family moved from Footscray to Wantirna South in the late 1990s to support his father's work as a Cantonese opera teacher. Lo had been learning Cantonese and the traditional Chinese characters at a Saturday school in the Melbourne CBD, but when he moved to a Saturday school program run by the Victorian School of Languages in Glen Waverley, he encountered "this language called Mandarin and a writing form known

as Simplified Chinese characters." Then "all of a sudden" staff at his family's regular yum cha haunt in Chinatown, who for as long as he could remember wouldn't serve anyone who didn't speak Cantonese, likewise started speaking Mandarin.

"It used to infuriate my parents. Cantonese and Traditional Chinese characters is more ancient compared to Mandarin; Mandarin is more of a modern dialect and became more prominent when the Chinese Communist Party took over ... they introduced Simplified Chinese characters. My parents still find Simplified Chinese completely sickening to the eye in terms of artistic look, whereas Traditional Chinese looks more sophisticated because there's a story behind every character. Some traditional characters have 40 strokes."

In the 2001 Census, the proportion of residents in Box Hill and its surrounds who reported speaking Cantonese at home was slightly higher than those speaking Mandarin. By 2006, Mandarin speakers were just ahead of the Cantonese.



Within a decade they outnumbered them three-to-one.

In 2008, Lo was elected to the first of two terms as a Monash councillor. The Australian-Chinese community "felt connected" having someone of Chinese ancestry in local government, he said. More of them applied for council grants. They sought his advice on setting up organisations and governance procedures. During this time he noted the newer associations being set up by people with mainland Chinese connections were focused on business, investment and cultural exchange with China. Many were centred around mainland provinces and cities. Chinese migrants in Melbourne's east, Lo observed, were becoming less focused on building local networks or preserving cultural heritage in the diaspora. Their horizons were shifting.

Visitors to Box Hill now encountered red-lantern displays, gaming cafes and daigou stores for the personal shoppers sending milk formula or vitamins to buyers in China. Real estate and travel agents opened up. In the decade to 2016, the percentage of China-born residents in Box Hill more than doubled, broadly in step with the national trend.

One reason was federal government reforms that reorientated Australia's international education market away from the vocational sector and towards universities. The changes proved hugely popular with students from China. Over two decades, the number of Chinese international students in Australia roughly tripled.

Last year saw 677,240 Chinese-born people living in Australia, more than twice as many as 10 years earlier and, at nearly 3 per cent of the population, the second largest migrant community after migrants from the UK. About 40 per cent of the ethnic Chinese diaspora have come directly from the mainland. Of these, more than half arrived in Australia in the past eight years.

At the Box Hill-based Louise Multicultural Centre, a migrant support service, Ruth Lee, the mainlander who had fled by boat during the civil war, began welcoming newly arrived grandparents who had come to help with childminding. They would endure years of struggle with English.

The parents of Marie Chen, the medical receptionist, migrated and settled in Box Hill in 2013. The parents of migration lawyer Sean Dong likewise landed there; his father, Shandong, joined the ZhiYin Chinese Choir.

Anna Zhang and a business partner established the Box Hill-based disability support venture, Joys Love Care, catering to the Chinese community and operating mostly through word-of-mouth referrals. Zhang says her largest client group comprises teens and adults with autism. Most are bilingual but living with parents who don't speak English. "Because of the (Chinese) culture we don't have to say much; we understand each other. We Chinese can work all the time. Even late, at 11 or midnight, we can reply to our clients without any hesitation."

Box Hill became a magnet for Chinese further afield. From her home in Maribyrnong, Lo's aunt regularly catches a bus, tram and two trains to shop in Box Hill. The Guo family ordinarily travel to Box Hill several times a year from their home in Mount Waverley. Daughter Lillian studies at Haoliang Sun's Xin Jin Shan language school.

Zhong, the migrant who came after her father died, saw her relationships lead to years living abroad in Guangdong Province and California. In 2013 she returned to Melbourne divorced and traumatised from domestic violence. "He was violent and then left me in the hospital and got me on an immigration backlist," she explains. The 37 year old moved into a flat near the Box Hill Community Arts Centre with a Chinese international student and the student's mother. After a little searching, she found a Mandarin-speaking nutritionist and other staff at the local service, Carrington Health, which two years earlier had engaged Chinese volunteers for community outreach. She also found Mandarin speakers at local mental health service, WellWays. The stigma around mental health in the Chinese community is still palpable, Zhong says. She attends Mandarin church groups. Even there, she says, "some people look at you differently."

A little more than a kilometre from her place is The Chen hotel on Whitehorse Road. The hotel opened three years ago with a minimalist aesthetic and rooftop pool. It pays tribute to China-born abstract artist Zhong Chen, himself a Box Hill local, who describes his work as an exploration of "cultural identity, displacement, and alienation."

Box Hill has come stylishly of age.

BOX HILL COMMUNITY
ARTS CENTRE

PROFILE: "Mr Box Hill"

Malaysian-born Robert Chong is a veteran multicultural campaigner, Whitehorse councillor for nearly 20 years to 2016, a Member of the Order of Australia and an engaging raconteur. He played a key – if somewhat unwitting – role in Box Hill's genesis as a Chinese stronghold. In local government circles he has the moniker, "Mr Box Hill".

Chong arrived in Australia in 1962, studied Applied Chemistry at the School of Mines Ballarat and worked at Monsanto Chemicals. By the early 1970s he'd joined the Commonwealth Department of Air, predecessor to the Royal Australian Air Force and moved to Blackburn.

Ethnic Chinese migrants in Australia were very few; most were privately funded university students. Chong saw that many of these students, especially those enrolled in social work courses, were forced to return to their home countries for work experience to complete their degrees, as they struggled to find placements in Australia. "It was very distressing," he recalls.

He saw other distressing problems, too: isolated elderly Chinese, and Asian brides trapped in violent relationships. He wanted somewhere for migrants and seniors to meet, attend English language and tai chi lessons, access welfare services and jobs. While Box Hill "was a very Anglo place" in the 80s, the suburb was easily accessed by public transport.

Box Hill Council (as it then was) gave him a couple of tables as an "office" for Chinese volunteers. Some months later, the volunteers asked the Box Hill Senior Citizens Centre if Chinese seniors could use their premises for a couple of hours at a time. This took a few goes. "They kept saying, 'No, sorry, we're booked out.' And you'd look at the bookings and it was booked from 9 to 10am for three people, 10 to 11am for two people and so on." In other words, the Centre was seldom used.

"Then I took the opportunity to meet the committee members running the Centre, who were mostly World War II veterans. When they heard I was from the RAAF, they were quite happy to give me their hall a couple of hours a week." The Box Hill Chinese Senior Citizens Club was then formed in 1987.

The Centre offered lunch for the seniors' club, but Chong knew the Chinese would baulk at Anglo food. "I said, 'Don't give me lunch, give me the money instead.' The money per person was enough for a Chinese take-away roast pork or chicken from the one restaurant in Box Hill."

Chong says word spread about the roast pork lunch, drawing Chinese from distant suburbs. When another Chinese take-away opened in Box Hill, the group divided lunch orders between the two kitchens. A third take-away opened. Then more Chinese grocers and other businesses started opening.

More Chinese seniors came to Box Hill to access services from the Centre and meet with friends. Chong, now president of the Communities' Council of Ethnic Issues (Eastern Region), formed the Chinese Community Social Services Centre, which, as it grew more established, provided placements for the international students pursuing social work degrees.

Shortly after Chong's election as Whitehorse councillor in 1997, the municipality oversaw the refurbishment of Carrington Road, the mall and plaza in central Box Hill.

"I always wanted a business centre (there)," Chong recalls. "Not a Chinese centre, but a multicultural centre. We built the enhanced mall to attract more businesses, diverse businesses." Chong's thinking was influenced by events in his native Malaysia where the relatively well-off Chinese minority was targeted in sectarian violence; Chinese shops and homes were intermittently vandalised. He feared a similar scenario in Box Hill should its epicentre become conspicuously Chinese. "I thought, just say these louts want to burn Chinatown. Well if there's other (non-Chinese) businesses there, they may be reluctant to do that."

Ultimately, market forces shaped Box Hill with little regard for Chong's "multicultural" vision. The Council had built sheltered facilities for coffee shops in the Mall and businesses attracted many customers. However, they were sold later for a good profit. "I remember a Lebanese couple ran a coffee and sandwich shop, but then Chinese businessmen came and made them an offer, and they sold the business," Chong chuckles.

As migration from the mainland gathered pace this century, Chong and local businesses persuaded the Bank of China to open a branch in the suburb. But before the scheduled opening in 2011, the Bank threatened to shift premises because of a council rubbish bin planted near the entrance; this was bad Feng Shui, "not conducive to good business." "At first the Bank Manager said 'no' because you can't have a rubbish bin in front of the shop. But Council said the bins are positioned in such a way to catch public transport arrivals and wouldn't be moved."

Chong warned the Council's chief executive, "Either we can have the Bank or we can have the rubbish bin."

Council moved the bin and Box Hill got the Bank.

High-rise city

The high-rise cluster near Box Hill railway station is the most striking testament to the suburb's recent transformation. An influx of migrants and capital from China has recast central Box Hill as an Asian city, bringing tremendous benefits and some inevitable backlash. For much of the past decade, Box Hill's annual average population growth has outstripped that of Melbourne's established suburbs. Chinese migration was a major factor driving the increase.

Let's imagine an aerial view of the City of Whitehorse. Between 2006 and 2019, its population increased by an estimated 30,000 to almost 179,000. About 10,000 of those newcomers arrived in the last four years. Zoom in on Box Hill the suburb: it's absorbed roughly 5000 people in those four years.

Now zoom in on the suburb's CBD, the precinct that takes in the transport hub, the central shopping complex, Box Hill and Epworth hospitals, and the Box Hill Institute. These streets alone accommodated more than 2000 arrivals in the decade to 2016. As the area is a designated activity centre under the state planning scheme, building height limits are relaxed. So as its population grew bigger, Box Hill grew taller.

Three years ago the 36-storey twin Whitehorse Towers soared above the rest. Now that distinction belongs to the Sky One apartment building, a shimmering gold-clad 122-metres on Station Street. Sky One is a teaser for Sky Village, a $450 million residential and entertainment complex the developer is, spruiking as Melbourne's "new Chinatown" (see profile: Jeff Xu).

When the architects of another luxury mixed-use tower under construction in Whitehorse Road describe the building's tree-like design as a "symbolic reference" to the orchards of Box Hill's past, the allusion has an ironic ring. The orchards are indeed long gone, and even the suburban lawn is under pressure as five-storey apartment blocks appear in the streets branching off from Box Hill's centre.

Developers, China-backed and local, have made hay, selling to Chinese migrants and investors, and a smattering of Australian empty-nesters and young professionals.

The Box Hill of recent years saw a Greek-Australian petrol magnate sell a BP petrol station to a China-backed developer for $23 million. “Biggest servo deal for the decade,” boasted the magnate’s real estate agent. A 1004 m^2 parking lot in Prospect Street went for $8.25 million and is likely to sprout an office block. More than 2790 apartments, five new hotels and high-rise offices have been built in the past decade. Box Hill’s CBD is vibrant and humming. More than 3000 new jobs have been created in the education and health sectors alone in the 10 years to 2016.

To fully celebrate the upside, let’s pause here for a time and dwell on the magnificent views from the skyscrapers, as well as the public assets given a fresh lease of life: the libraries packed with international students; the gardens adjacent to Box Hill and Epworth hospitals where groups of seniors practise tai chi; the stampede to the local high school. The use of local sporting venues will continue to increase as Whitehorse City Council accommodates the growing demand for indoor facilities for table tennis, badminton and martial arts such as qi gong.

Box Hill’s growth spurt has also brought development concerns. All residents of Box Hill, regardless of heritage, worry about streets increasingly cast in shadow, wind tunnels, towers overlooking homes and more traffic. Authorities grapple with meeting the growing demand for healthcare, schools and transport – in 2015, the underground railway and bus interchange heaved with more than 6 million passengers. Councillors also worry about maintaining a sense of community amid the development: when people go outside will there be enough pocket parks and public spaces to encourage mingling? So Council began quietly purchasing private properties with public space potential.

Box Hill’s prosperity and harmony hinge on finding answers to these problems. However, we might categorise these problems as generic, typical of many Australian suburbs grappling with population growth and higher density. What makes Box Hill different is that these urban shifts are linked to Chinese immigration.

Steven Zheng, of the Asian Business Association of Whitehorse, was eight when his family moved to Australia. He sums up this century's migrations from the mainland and how the Australian public views them: "People would look at someone like me and think, 'Oh, they come from a poor village.' Then they looked at the Chinese who came after me and thought, 'Oh gee, they've worked hard, they've done well for themselves.' Then they looked at the next group and said, 'Where the f**k did they get their money from!'"

Sardonic, perhaps, but Zheng's is not an inaccurate sketch of China's economic evolution that has the rest of the world gasping in admiration, and increasing trepidation. Unprecedented economic growth and urbanisation has seen the People's Republic produce the world's second-highest number of billionaires after the US. But China's newly rich, whether of billionaire rank or lower, confront a problem unthinkable to their ancestors in the famine of the Great Leap Forward and the ravages of the Cultural Revolution: what to do with the riches? All land is ultimately owned by the state; residential properties are commonly leased out for 70 years. Australia was increasingly seen as a haven for Chinese investors to park their wealth; as a haven for the Chinese diaspora, Box Hill was a logical destination.

Australian policy settings

Australia's foreign investment policy directs overseas investors away from existing housing and encourages them to buy new properties instead. Temporary residents, such as students, can buy one existing property to live in. A small number of Chinese investors might be buying properties with little intention of living in them or even renting them out. Tax reform group Prosper Victoria monitors water usage data from meters to estimate the number of vacant properties being "hoarded" by investors. Last April, for the first time in 10 years, the group found that during 2017 Box Hill and Box Hill South had Greater Melbourne's highest rate of vacant or under-utilised commercial and residential properties – in the case of the latter, up to 15 per cent. The report suggested the vacant properties in Box Hill, and other eastern suburbs, were being held by families hoping to attain permanent residency and perhaps also as part of an investment portfolio. The Victorian Government in 2017 introduced a tax on homes in inner and middle Melbourne vacant for more than six months a year, although the tax has been waived during Covid. It is not uncommon to see references in the media to Box Hill's "ghost towers".

Three years ago, the *Leader* reported on elite investors "being flown in to Australia" for multi-million-dollar transcontinental real estate shopping expeditions, which in Victoria also featured touring the Great Ocean Road and yum cha at Box Hill.

Nick Peden of real estate firm Savills Australia says his firm has handled about $650 million worth of commercial property transactions for mainland Chinese buyers in Box Hill over the past five years, with an average 20 deals a year. His clients ask, "So is this my land forever if I don't want to sell?" Peden says, "There is amazement. Typically, the head person will come and have a look at the property; they may have a person on the ground to look after the project or lease. Then the head person will go back to China and let his offsiders handle it. They're predominantly interested in residential developments or hotels. They don't really understand the office market as well as the locals."

Another factor should be acknowledged in explaining Box Hill's boom: Australia actively courts high net wealth Chinese migrants. A sub-stream of the Business Innovation and Investment Program introduced in 2012 offers a path to permanent residency for people prepared to invest here. One example is the Significant Investor category. Significant Investors must invest $5 million into complying funds for four years to be able to stay permanently and only need to be physically in Australia for 40 days a year during that period.

As at February 2020, 2338 primary visas had been granted to Significant Investors, 90 per cent from China. While the number of people is modest, the collective investment is $11.6 billion. But Zheng from the Asian Business Association of Whitehorse notes that, in the first three years of the visa, around 500 significant investors headed to Melbourne, and many naturally gravitated towards Box Hill. “A lot of property, a lot of jobs and construction here was due to this visa. We (in the Chinese community) had a saying: ‘Why are people buying homes in Canterbury rather than Toorak? Because it’s closer to Box Hill.’”

Back in 2015 the Australian Government tweaked the visa rules to steer significant investment away from real estate schemes and into venture capital. Real estate investment from China generally has declined steeply from its mid-decade high of $31.9 billion to $6.1 billion in 2018-19, its lowest level in six years. This is thanks to a combination of regulatory changes in Australia that effectively increased real estate prices for all foreign buyers and a clampdown on capital flows out of China. For much of the decade China was the biggest source country for offshore real estate investment; it now holds fifth position, with the US first.

Foreign real estate investment is politically sensitive in Australia, as it is elsewhere, and the Australian Government has responded to rising populist sentiment with tighter restrictions. Yet even at the peak of the “Chinese property shopping spree”, perception rarely squared with reality. Chinese investors comprised a small part of the national property market in which domestic tax and policy settings played a far bigger role in driving up property prices.

Unconscious racism plays a role too. Peden from Savills estimates about half the ethnic Chinese buyers in the residential property market are permanent residents. This is in contrast to the commercial property market, where offshore buyers dominate. “Yes, property prices went up,” says Zheng, about Box Hill’s investor frenzy. “But the property game is still controlled by the old money establishment in Melbourne. The boom benefited old landlords, but the Chinese got the blame.”

Some in local government find themselves having to point out to a resentful minority of residents that many of those developing, and dwelling in, Box Hill's high-rises are in fact Australian. The suburb's annual Chinese New Year festivities typically attract around 200,000 visitors. Plenty of locals, from all backgrounds, express pride in Box Hill CBD's restaurant scene and its Asian-cool vibe, even if the odd shopfront with no English signage causes occasional unease.

The effects of COVID-19 on Box Hill

Robert Chong – "Mr Box Hill" – had feared a distinctly Chinese CBD would leave traders vulnerable to racist attacks. He could not have anticipated their vulnerability from a pandemic originating in China.

While the Australian Government closed Australia's borders to mainland China on 1 February, it would be more than a month before Victorians experienced their first lockdown. But the Chinese community was already shunning the Chinese parts of Melbourne, fearing they might encounter recent arrivals from Wuhan where a tragedy was unfolding. Victorians would later acknowledge their foresight. Rumours were also circulating on WeChat about infected patients walking free from Box Hill hospital.

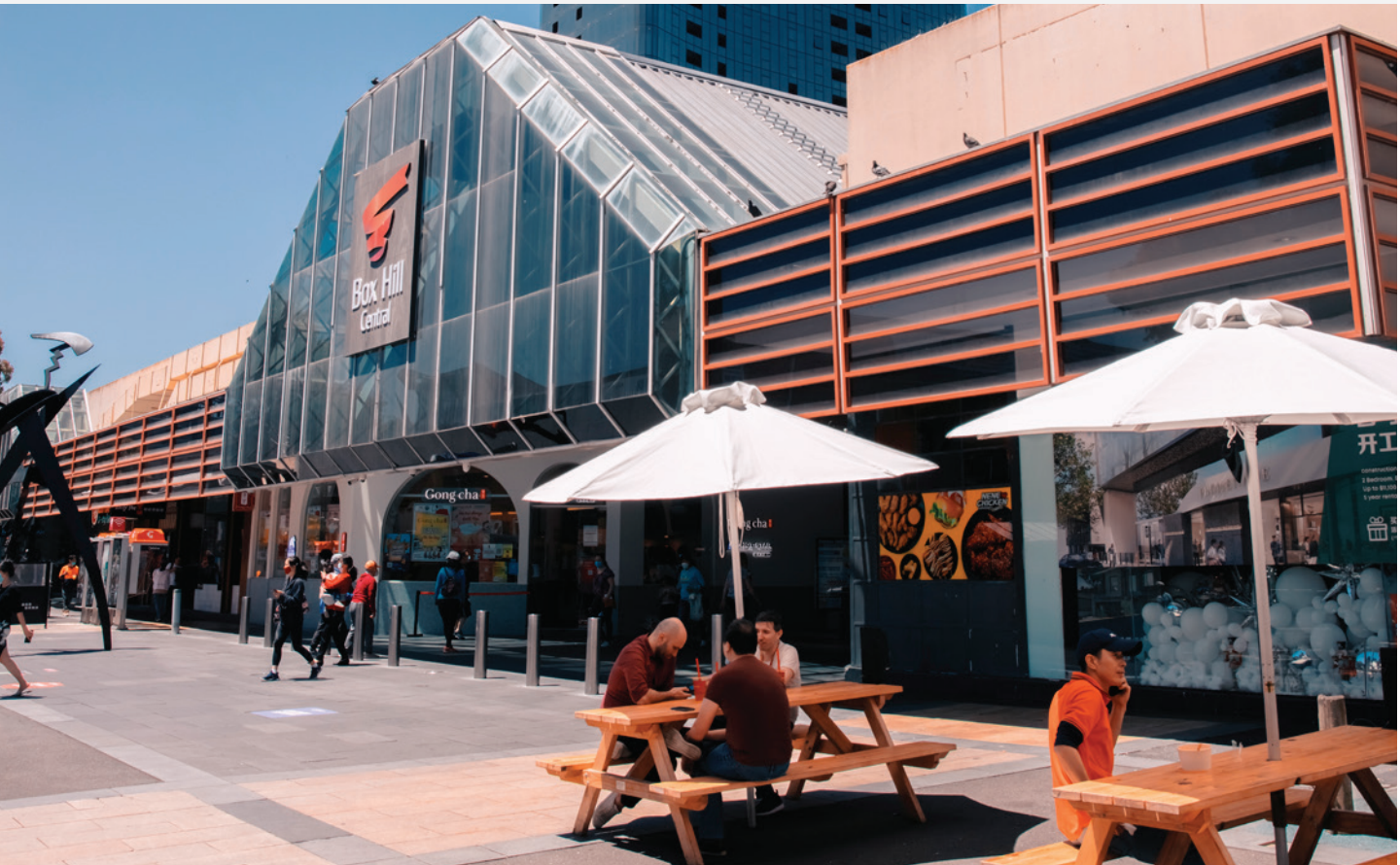
Then Victorian Health Minister Jenny Mikakos urged people to keep eating at Chinese restaurants. Federal MP Gladys Liu brought Scott Morrison to Box Hill to shake hands with local traders. A Chinese business leader pleaded with his community to take off their masks, book yum cha in Box Hill and "stop fuelling fear".

In Box Hill Central, patronage dived. The Asian Business Association of Whitehorse appealed for help to Whitehorse Council's newly appointed chief executive Simon McMillan. "It's not often that the Asian business community reaches out to the Council," McMillan says. In the intervening weeks before the pandemic's spread became apparent, Council tried to coax shoppers back to Box Hill's restaurant district with free parking on Saturdays and pop-up activities in malls. Council sought to combat the WeChat rumours by disseminating appropriate information, in the same way it has tackled other hot-button neighbourhood issues from hard-rubbish collection to pet care and abandoned supermarket trolleys.

“Box Hill seems to have taken the hardest hit to trade in the early days of the pandemic because there’s such a concentration of customers and traders with similar overseas experience of pandemics,” McMillan says. “We prize the vibrant Chinese and east Asian character of Box Hill Central, but more diversity of businesses may build a more economically resilient precinct in future.”

In just a few months, the pandemic shifted the heady dynamic that’s defined Box Hill for most of the decade. Though some of the heat had already gone out of the local property market, Melbourne’s prolonged lockdown stilled the cranes. More significantly, the borders are shut to migrants, and the reverberations are being felt more strongly in Box Hill than in many other suburbs. In May, a $683 million revamp was unveiled for three blocks between Main Street and Carrington Road, envisaging a precinct for 6,000 workers, with a 48-storey skyscraper and Spanish Steps-inspired amphitheatre. It is admittedly a long-term project, but amid a radical shift in how we live and work, the plan has the ring of a time gone.

Box Hill’s population was forecast to grow to nearly 29,000 by 2040. COVID-19 has cast uncertainty around this projection and many others.



PROFILE: Jeff Xu

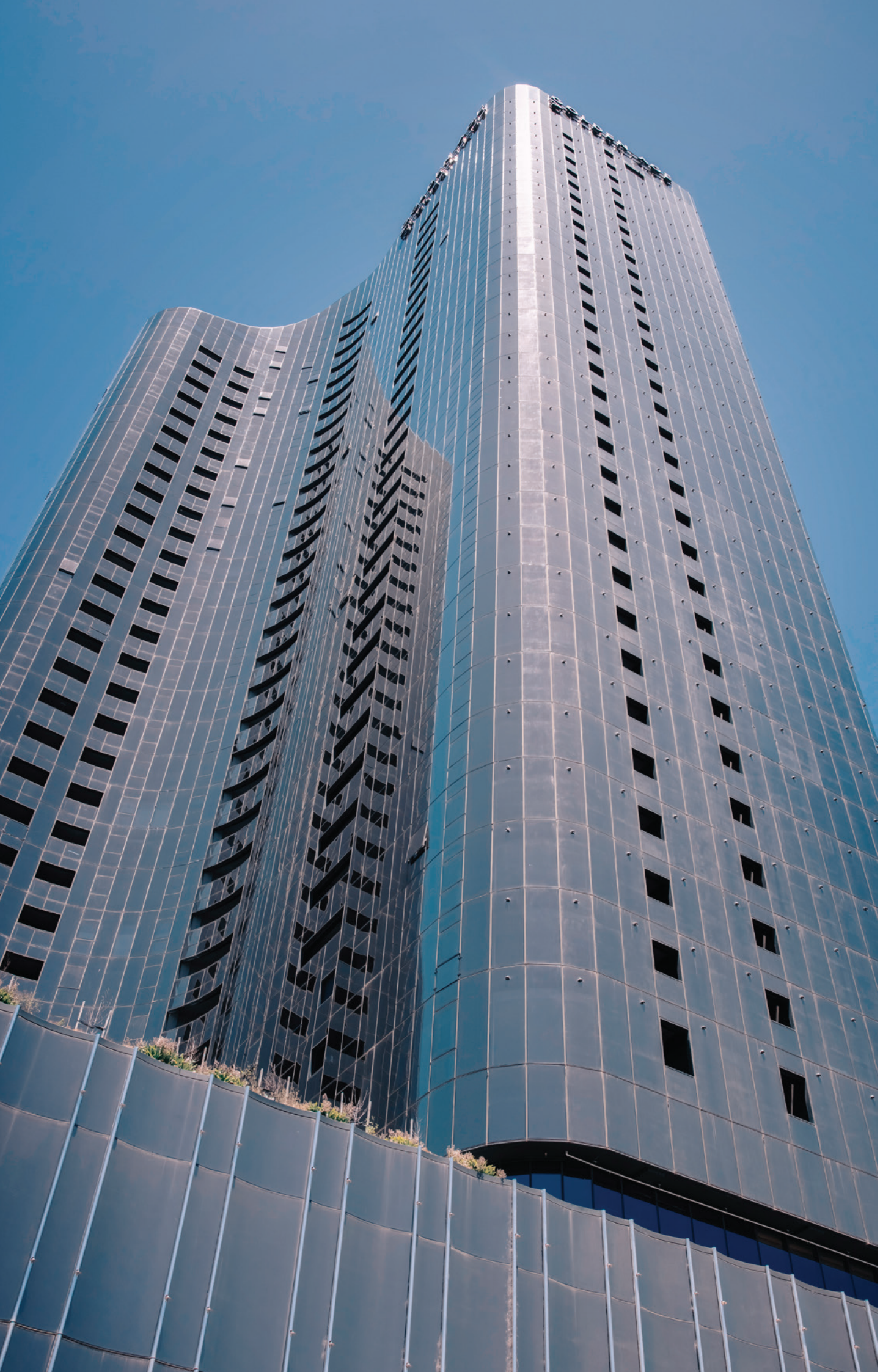
The man behind Sky One, the famously fast-talking Jeff Xu, is one of a new generation of Asian property developers who changed the skyline in Box Hill, and beyond.

Xu hails from China's Jiangsu Province, from Wuxi, which he jokingly described to *The Age* as "a very small city with a population of 7 million people." He came to Australia in 1998 with ambitions to expand his family's restaurant, Dahu Peking Duck. He achieved this easily. In 2006 he established property development company Golden Age Group, and started with a four-storey student apartment block in Melbourne's east. Within a decade, his high-profile developments included one of Melbourne's tallest residential buildings, Victoria One, and one of the world's slimmest, Collins House.

In 2015 Xu was reportedly spending a third of his time in China and studying for an MBA in finance. As Australian banks cut back lending to apartment buyers, Golden Age set up a mortgage fund to support its developments.

Xu's much-hyped "new Chinatown", Sky Village, will reportedly feature two 18-storey towers, a child-care centre, a Chinese-language school, Chinese and Western medicine clinics, and a hawker hall. It will be a celebration of Melbourne's multiculturalism, Xu says. Golden Age says Sky Village "forges a path in a time of its own, where the golden past is transported through to a glorious future; a place where East meets West." The spin notwithstanding, Xu's plans tally with a global trend. In Los Angeles, New York and other cities, the established inner-city Chinatown is likewise under challenge from suburban upstarts.

In July, in the midst of the Covid pandemic, a spokeswoman for Golden Age said the Sky Village project was "in hibernation" and "a little while away from launching."



How to be Australian?

Anna Zhang, the disability support provider, expresses an alienation familiar to generations of migrants who left their homeland as adults. “All my friends come from China,” she says. “There is a cultural barrier when I talk with the locals, with the Aussie. They can communicate fluently with each other. They studied at the same primary school. It’s just ‘blah, blah, blah.’”

What of the individuals who live and work around Box Hill’s CBD?

Shortly after Lucy Yang* arrived from Shanghai, an acquaintance invited her along to a Baptist Church in Melbourne’s east. She became a regular. In China, churches operate discreetly under the wary eye of Communist authorities, “but in Australia, church culture is part of Western culture,” Yang reflects. It is why the idea of church attendance appealed to her. “A lot of Chinese who come here don’t know how to be part of society.”

Her church attendance does not appear emblematic of a wider trend: the percentage of China-born residents in Box Hill claiming Christian beliefs fell about 3 per cent between 2011 and 2016, to only 9 per cent. Overwhelmingly, Chinese migrants in Australia say that have no religion.

Ying Cheng Zhong shakes her head when asked if she feels part of Australian society. “I don’t feel like the Australian Government tries hard enough … Australians stick with Australians, Indians stick with Indians, Chinese stick with Chinese.” The gloomy assessment is at odds with her own experience. While Zhong’s mental health problems diminish her work capacity, she gives back to both the Chinese and broader community far more than she collects through a disability support pension. Her pre-pandemic diary was crammed with volunteering commitments and community activities. On Monday nights she and two girlfriends from Box Hill would catch a train to the city to hear a Mandarin-speaking pastor from the Bible Study Fellowship address a meeting of about 200 faithful. (She became a Christian after

some friends introduced her to a Taiwanese congregation in Melbourne's east.) The rest of the week was variously filled with volunteering at a food bank, at Chinese Peer Connection – a gambling-support hotline – and at the Northcote Baptist Church where she helped out with a music program for Mandarin-speaking families.

After more than five decades in Australia, Ruth Lee says her long CV attests to the head start she enjoyed from her schooling in Hong Kong. Armed with a certificate in commerce from the old Swinburne tech, she managed Tasmania's Lake Pedder Chalet back when it accommodated workers at the hydro-electric power station. She was a long-time volunteer at the Melbourne Visitor Centre at Federation Square and for more than a decade at the Louise Multicultural Centre.

She has also helped bring Box Hill's Chinese retailers into the Whitehorse Business Group. The Group's chair Kathryn Collier says that seven or eight years ago the group had virtually no Chinese businesses in its membership, and very few entering its 20-year-running business awards. The organisation had tried, and failed, to reach out to Chinese traders.

Lee translated the Group's pamphlets into Mandarin and distributed them door to door in the suburban CBD. She also helped recruit Chinese international students from Deakin University and the Box Hill Institute for internships with the group. Some mainland Chinese "feel they're not welcome and feel isolated as a group," Lee says. "But that's the older generation. The younger people know how to be Australian."

It is a sentiment with which medical receptionist Marie Chen, whose parents migrated in 2013, largely agrees. She says her parents belonged to China's "managerial class". Aged in their 60s and 70s, they bought an apartment in Box Hill where they could do their grocery shopping without needing to speak English. After 2017, her father's health deteriorated. He suffered from Parkinson's disease and had broken his leg from a fall. She was able to find him a Mandarin-speaking social worker, but he required more targeted help. Back in China he could more easily access an aged pension and treatments, such as acupuncture. Last year Chen's parents returned to their native Guangzhou. Yet she suspects their decision was about more than her father's medical and financial needs. Her parents subscribed to the idiom "falling leaves return to the roots," meaning expatriate Chinese elderly will naturally return "to the land that nourished them". "And my dad believes the Communist Party is God," she laughs.

A few years ago, a Facebook page cropped up inviting people to "Spot the Aussie" in Box Hill. It was roundly condemned and removed. Anna Zhang has encountered racism and discrimination in Australia, like most of our interviewees. When asked if she has, Zhang swiftly relates an anecdote – in this case, an incident on a city-bound tram four years ago when she was an international student. A ticket inspector accused her of cheating with a lower fare – international students not being entitled to concession fares – which she insisted was an innocent mistake. He demanded to see her passport and threatened to take her to the police station. The details are less important than the bitterness in Zhang's voice as she recalls the incident. "All I felt was hot; I was crying. There was no support from other passengers."

"I think my status is quite low in Australia. Australia always says everything is fair, everyone is the same. But it's not: just like America."

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Disparate online worlds

In 2020 it seems almost quaint to explore social cohesion within the borders of a municipality. Chinese migrants inhabit a separate online world from most other Australians. They read different news sources on different social media platforms, such as WeChat. Facebook, Twitter and the like are banned in China. There are growing calls from academics and community leaders, such as Lo, for government, philanthropic and civil society organisations to help create more diversity in Chinese-language media and online platforms.

Ethnic Chinese media in Australia used to be diverse, giving voice to Cantonese-speaking communities from several Asian countries. It is now overwhelmingly owned or controlled by the Chinese state or its affiliates. As sources told *The Sydney Morning Herald* four years ago, the pressure from Beijing "can come in the form of an admonishing phone call, blocking reporters from a public event, via directives for mainland-linked businesses to pull advertising, or even direct investment from Chinese government bodies."

Among the few publications independent of Beijing is *The Epoch Times*, affiliated with the US-based Falun Gong new religious movement, and *Vision China Times*.

More than a billion people around the globe use WeChat, China's most popular social media app. WeChat accounts registered in China are subject to state censorship; news stories and online chats are monitored or blocked if the CCP deems them politically sensitive. There are an estimated 2.5 million WeChat users in Australia, although the figure includes businesses, service providers and politicians interacting with Chinese audiences. In the WeChat bubble, a new generation of migrants can carry a version of home, with its particular world view, in their pockets.

Ying Cheng Zhong does not own a television. She gets most of her news from WeChat. She describes the news as a mixture of local China-based reporting and news from Chinese government and other organisations. Sometimes her friends from church circulate stories. Or an acquaintance "high-connected in China" occasionally shares news "similar to the BBC." Like most of our interviewees, she

expresses cynicism about both Chinese and Western media. The news reporting in China "is like brainwashing," she scoffs. She likewise dismisses foreign coverage of her homeland as "rubbish, the reporters wouldn't know anything."

Daisy Wang also gets her news mostly on WeChat. A few times she's watched Australian TV news coverage of the Hong Kong protests. "But I don't totally believe it. It's only what the Australian Government wants to show us. Since their (reporters') views are often influenced by a certain political stance and the reality may be much more complicated, we cannot just believe in everything we watch in the news. And the Chinese government also just wants to tell us what they want us to believe."

Sean Dong, the migration agent, thinks China-born migrants will struggle to integrate if we cannot breach the digital divide. "The first thing we need to break is the Chinese information Great Wall," he says. He reads Western media and Google News, but says most mainland Chinese in Australia are reading media from China. He thinks the immediate priority should be educating Chinese about Western values, and later, educating the West about China, explaining how historical narratives such as China's "century of humiliation" prey on the nation's psyche.

Dong believes civic groups should invest in creating Facebook content for the Chinese diaspora, but warns the posts should not be "hostile to China" because "Chinese will not only see that as an attack on the Chinese government, but also the Chinese people. I feel that arrogance is a barrier. Western society needs to let go of its arrogance and prejudice which provokes most Chinese people."

"Western media often tell Chinese people what is good and what is bad, which sounds to Chinese like they don't know what's best for themselves. But Chinese society is changing so fast … Chinese people believe they can decide what's best for them. Yes there's (state) propaganda at work but only at a certain level. But many people in Shanghai will say, 'We live a better life, we are comfortable, we don't care about all this democracy as much as the Westerners.' I can confidently say most Chinese people see prosperity as more important than freedom in their value system."

In August, Acting Immigration Minister Alan Tudge implied that better English would make migrants less vulnerable to manipulation by foreign entities seeking to undermine Australia's social cohesion. "Malign information or propaganda can be spread through multicultural media, including foreign language media controlled or funded by state players," he said.

English lessons

As we've seen earlier, the parents of Marie Chen settled in Box Hill partly because they wouldn't need to speak English. Census data suggests mainland Chinese struggle with English more than most other migrant groups. A report published in 2018, *English Proficiency in Australia, 1981 to 2016*, by demographers Peter McDonald, Helen Moyle and Jeromey Temple, found the population that reported not speaking English well in the 2016 Census "is dominated by those speaking Chinese languages at home." Moreover, unlike other language groups, the concentrations of Chinese speakers who do not speak English well include many "high-value, real-estate areas" such as Box Hill, Doncaster and Glen Waverley in Melbourne's east.

Almost a quarter of a million Chinese speakers in Australia did not speak English well in 2016. Even allowing that some migrants might be inclined to underestimate their grasp of English for cultural reasons, the Census revealed some key demographic groups faring worse than others. One such group is Chinese migrants aged 45 to 64, which includes many grandparents recently arrived to assist with childminding.

In August 2020, Acting Immigration Minister Alan Tudge announced changes to the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) under which most migrants had access to 510 hours of free language tuition. He said the cap on class hours would be lifted and the five-year time limit for accessing the scheme scrapped. Without English language skills, Tudge said, migrants were "less likely to get a job, less likely to integrate, and less likely to participate in our democracy."

Will greater access to English-language tuition get more Chinese-Australians speaking better English? The experiences of people helping teach English to Chinese migrants – especially those middle-aged and older – are illuminating.

From its centre in Prospect Street, Box Hill, migrant settlement agency AMES Australia runs federal and state-funded English-language and vocational training programs. The agency ran the AMEP program until 2017, through which it had thousands of referrals of mainland Chinese migrants. This narrator spoke with AMES chief executive Cath Scarth, Teresita Romero, the agency's senior manager of community education services, and bilingual support worker Mandy Cai. All say that

learning English is harder for Mandarin speakers than for speakers of Latin-based languages, such as Spanish and French. However, while mainlanders struggle with speaking, they often have a sound grasp of grammar and written English.

As for the over 50s, not all are economically secure, Romero stresses. “Most of our clients tell us that they sold their apartments in Beijing and Shanghai to help their children buy properties in Melbourne. They have no Centrelink. And if relationships with children don’t go well, they have to stay with friends and family back in China. Sometimes there are bad incidents. Sometimes the children don’t give them an allowance.” Such people might be looking to re-enter the workforce, “but sometimes even the $10 registration fee under Skills First (a state government-funded pre-accredited program) can be too much.”

Since April, AMES has encountered about 300 Cantonese or Mandarin speakers, mostly 45 and older, who have lost their jobs and need better English to get a new one. But they are a tiny proportion of the 11,000 new jobseekers referred to AMES during the pandemic.

As for “the grandparents” – the retirees who’ve joined adult children and grandchildren in Australia – they’re “often older,” Scarth explains, “and with a motivation that is quite difficult sometimes to tap into.” They frequently demand to be taught by a bilingual teacher, even deserting classes taught by non-bilingual teachers for those run or supported by Mandy Cai. (Cai migrated to Australia with her husband 20 years ago when their daughter was six; they feared that if they came any later she “wouldn’t pick up the native pronunciation.”)

Scarth describes this insistence on bilingual teachers as “the biggest” challenge in teaching what we can loosely call the Chinese “grandparents”. “For me it’s interesting because other groups are quite negative about having a bilingual teacher because they want to learn English. Particularly some of our newly arrived refugee Arabic speakers; they are so motivated to learn English because they want to get a job, they want to open a business, they are highly aspirational.”

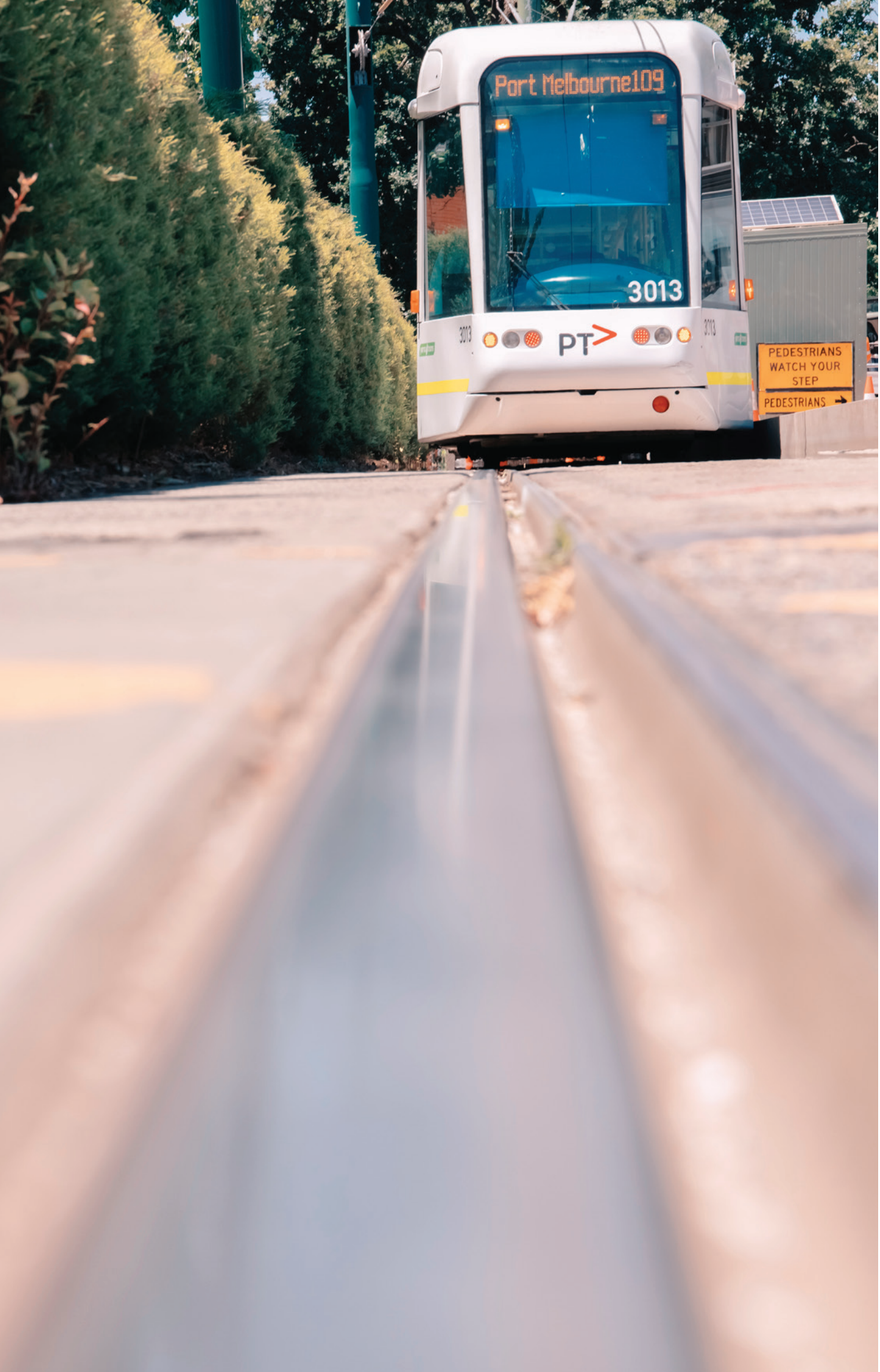
By contrast, the Chinese grandparents, often isolated during the week, are “very much coming for social connection.” Learning how to decipher a utility bill or negotiate the grocery shopping is simply a bonus. In its program, AMES saw about 300, mostly Chinese, learners fill 12 English-language classes on Saturdays. Romero managed the program in 2016-17. As public transport was free for seniors, and the school close to Box Hill station, they came from across Melbourne: Essendon,

Werribee, Pakenham, Point Cook. They brought snacks in plastic containers and shared the food with classmates. “They insisted that the class go from 9am to 1pm – and that it has to be no later than 1,” Romero recalls. “At first I didn’t understand why they didn’t want the class to go any longer. And then I realised it’s because at Box Hill market, on top of the station, at 1pm the ‘dollar-dollar’ starts; you can get bags of vegetables for a dollar. And then they go to yum cha.”

AMES also found it had to structure the year’s timetable around its students’ frequent travels to China: the Chinese New Year holiday in January, the Dragon Boat Festival in June, and the autumn festival in October. By November some clients are already leaving for a two-month stint in China.

Most of AMES’ “grandparents” used up their AMEP tuition and went on to a general English-language program.

Before the pandemic, AMES had about 100 mainland Chinese students, Romero says. Since classes shifted online in February, only about 20 remain.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The library

All year round, libraries in Whitehorse and adjoining Manningham municipality run programs in Mandarin. Mandarin-speakers gather monthly in Box Hill for a book circle. Box Hill library has also run Chinese-language information sessions on pet care and hosted expert talks on raising bilingual children. A Victorian Government grant supported a program for carers in the Chinese community. Meanwhile, new migrants and native English-speakers interacted in twice-weekly conversation circles. Many of these events continued via Zoom during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns.

In March 2019, the libraries drew nearly 500 attendees to the fortnight-long Chinese Reading and Writing Festival. The Chen hotel hosted interstate authors; Deakin University and the Chinese Writers Festival (CWF) were among the sponsors. The CWF also helped publicise the event and provided programming advice. Whitehorse Manningham Libraries cultural and linguistic diversity manager, Jenny Mitchell, recalls "They (the CWF) advised me to make the opening event at night and to choose a venue that could accommodate over 80 people. At the launch we had a Chinese dragon dance, which was very dramatic. The open-mic and poetry sessions were a real eye-opener for me. It was like a performance: people came dressed in folk costume and played music."

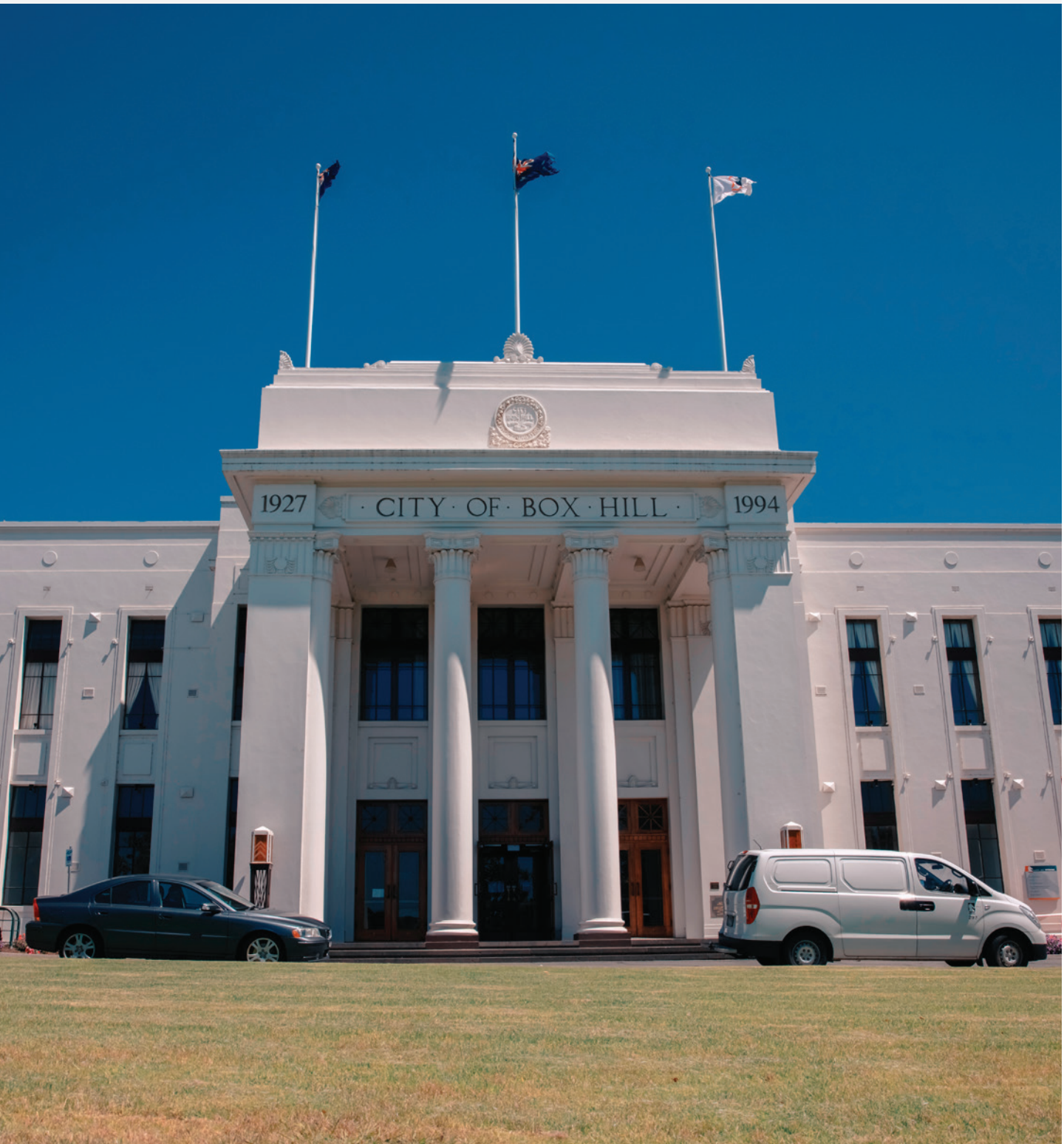
Most of the 19 events were in English. Manga-style graphic artist Queenie Chan and celebrity chef Elizabeth Chong attracted large audiences. Other sessions were in Mandarin, including a Chinese poetry reading salon, a discussion on global Chinese-language reading trends and a Chinese essay workshop.

The festival was in part a response to data showing that, while the library attracted many Chinese students as a place to study and meet, older Chinese were less engaged. Feedback after the event revealed roughly half the attendees had never been to a library event before. Older Chinese migrants, Mitchell says, "are sometimes considered a hard-to-reach community because of the language barrier, and libraries can feel daunting because they're all about words and language."

She said, "There was a small amount of feedback from the community asking why the library was holding events in Chinese, and claiming that this was excluding

them." But "as the majority of the library's range of programs are in English, it is important that the library also provides programs that recognise the diverse nature of our community."

A culturally-diverse audience also attends the library's regular English story times. Twice a month, Box Hill and Doncaster libraries hosted Mandarin story time for under-fives to which "we tend to get three generations coming," says Whitehorse Manningham Libraries chief executive, Sally Both.



Next gen: raising the "ABCs"

"I think there may be some problems in families with children that we call 'ABCs', Australian-born Chinese," says Haoliang Sun, founder of Xin Jin Shan school. "Their connection with their parents, and especially with their grandparents is so difficult. It's not only language, it's culture and the values are different. For example, the parents always push the kids to study and study, learn and learn. But the kids in school are getting a totally different education than their parents got. The teachers say they have to do more activities; their parents just want them to sit at their desks and learn more."

Young mums

When Brenda*, a maternal and child health nurse at Whitehorse Council, visits Chinese families with newborns she takes a pair of over-shoes. She puts them on at the doorstep as a sign of respect and to foster trust.

At this initial visit, Brenda gauges how strictly the mother adheres to the traditional Chinese practice of confinement after childbirth. The custom dictates mothers spend the first month after childbirth resting at home. After the home visit, Brenda usually schedules another consultation a week later, this time at the Council's health centre. If the family practises strict confinement, then it's likely the father or grandparents will take the baby to this consultation, which means Brenda misses a chance to assess the mother's health and progress. Sometimes Brenda and her colleagues get around the issue by pushing the second consultation back a couple of weeks to after the confinement period so the mother can attend the centre. The pandemic gave mothers the opportunity to "attend" the second check-up through telehealth.

Council also facilitates a Mandarin-speaking mothers group to provide peer support for new parents grappling with cultural, family or visa issues that would not be common in a more mainstream group. For others, a regular local group is more useful.

Grandmothers

Grandmothers are often considered the central child-rearing figure in Chinese tradition. As we've indicated, there are many multi-generational households in Whitehorse where Chinese grandparents are primary carers while parents work. Grandparents who usually live in China may come and stay in Australia for many months, or they may take grandchildren to China for long periods to help working parents. This means some Chinese-Australian children are enriched by immersion in their Chinese culture, but start early childhood education with Mandarin as a first language and limited English.

The Department of Education last year began providing information in simplified Chinese through a maternal and child health app. The app provides streamlined access to interpreters and translated messages about the importance of kindergarten and other information about early childhood services in Victoria. Council employs Mandarin-speaking nurses in the Maternal and Child Health service, and all three Council-run childcare centres have multiple Mandarin speakers.

Some children may be dropped off and picked up at kindergarten or day care by grandparents who don't speak any English. Nevertheless staff use other forms of communication to make sure grandparents feel welcome and included. Occasionally "hard conversations" take place: such as reassuring carers that playing in a sandpit is as critical to a child's educational development as reciting the alphabet in the classroom.

Ruth Lee, the volunteer and businesswoman who arrived in Australia in 1962, brings a veteran's perspective to the impact of migration on Chinese family conventions. She ended up divorcing the father of her children – a Melbourne man of Chinese background – "because his parents were so controlling I couldn't put up with it."

Lee regularly hears about conflict between couples about grandparents' child-rearing philosophies. "The grandparents grew up in China; their way of doing things is very different to in Australia. Of course they try to learn, but it's not easy. It's so strict in China. I remember when I was looking after my grandchildren, I was so strict. The way they eat things, they can't eat by hand, they can't be yelling at each other; basic things like that. But even now my eldest grandson, he's 15, he totally respects me. He says to everyone, 'You'd better do what grandma says.' A few years ago at the school they

asked the students to write a portrait about their favourite person. And he wrote about me. I thought, 'Gee whiz, I can't believe it.' Even now in his bedroom, he's got my photo there."

Parental philosophies

At Box Hill High School almost 30 per cent of students were born in China. Figures from the Real Estate Institute of Victoria show the median price for properties with more than two bedrooms in the school zone was $112,500 more last year than for those bordering the zone. Buying into the zone for Glen Waverley Secondary College added a staggering $380,000 to the median price tag.

Inflated house prices around high-performing public schools is a statewide trend and not confined to suburbs with large concentrations of Chinese or Asian residents. And as far as problems go, this is a good one to have for what it suggests about the future prospects of Chinese-Australians growing up in these suburbs.

But education is a point of cultural tension both within the Chinese-Australian community and between the community and the mainstream, according to some observers. As Chinese-Australian students progress through school, parental philosophies around education and childhood are a common source of intergenerational tension.

Haoliang Sun tells of a memorable meeting with a principal at a primary school in Glen Waverley. "I wanted to set up an after-school Chinese program. And the principal said, 'Can you set up a program for the parents?', and I said, 'No problem, you want us to teach them English, we can teach them English.' And the principal said, 'No, we want you to teach them how to live in Australia, how to connect with the school.' Because … kids were complaining about parents forcing them to study."

As the experience of the Guo family shows, many parents migrate precisely to escape China's education system. But Sydney researcher Christina Ho, author of *Aspiration and Anxiety – Asian Migrants and Australian Schooling*, explains many Asian parents are nonetheless shocked to encounter in Australia widespread opposition to standardised testing and a system squeamish about ranking. Fearing schools here are too relaxed, some parents engage tutors for their children.

Ho says Asian parents also fear the "bamboo ceiling" will disadvantage their

children in the education and job market. Given the discrimination against Asians in Australia, some migrant parents believe only white middle-class families have the luxury to let their children play after school. She says these sort of attitudes help explain the disproportionate number of students from Chinese and other Asian and non-English-speaking backgrounds in selective schools. We might suggest a similar dynamic applies to top-performing non-selective schools, such as Box Hill High and Glen Waverley Secondary College.

Ho has warned a "white flight" from selective schools is entrenching ethnic segregation in Australia's education system. She does not criticise Asian parents for being strategic, but she is critical of neo-liberal education policies in which "everyone is tucking themselves away in little bubbles where people are just like them."

In other ways, the influx of Chinese students into Australian schools is changing the educational mainstream. Tutoring is gaining popularity outside Asian communities. Mandarin last year became the most-studied language among state school students.

During Jieh-Yung Lo's time on the Monash City Council, Sun approached him for advice on setting up a bilingual Chinese day school so that the next generation would have a firm grasp on both their ancestral language and culture, as well as the Australian ethos. Lo liked the idea. Land supply being tight in metropolitan Melbourne, the idea stalled. But it has not died.

The Muslim and Jewish communities have their own schools, despite their relatively small numbers, Lo points out. He sees the Jewish day schools as a case study in how instilling a strong sense of cultural identity in young people from minority communities can help, rather than hinder, integration.

The notion that another school "bubble," as Ho puts it, might bring greater social cohesion is somewhat counterintuitive. But the time has surely come to at least explore the idea.

Conclusion

To the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, social cohesion is the outcome of how members of a society work together in a diverse society. In particular the realisation of Dick Stanley's definition, "the willingness of members of society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper".

The Chinese Australian community in Melbourne's east has been an important part of Victoria's prosperity. All communities, new or established, find ways to build a life that incorporates their aspirations for career and family within the comfort of their religion or culture and maintain their identity. Navigating the settling in or welcoming of others requires flexibility, understanding and patience.

This Narrative was written to provide a series of windows into the diversity of a community that to some may appear monocultural and isolated. Instead what we found is a community as involved in supporting their neighbourhood as they are in articulating their pride in Australia.

Our understanding of different neighbourhoods is vital in seeing our diversity as a core strength of Australian society. It is time to recognise that Australia's diversity continues to contribute to a successful and productive society.

Epilogue: Life beyond COVID-19

Migration agent Sean Dong is producing a documentary with the working title 'Elite Legacy'. Aimed at a Chinese audience, the film explores how Jewish-Australians preserve their cultural heritage.

Since Valentine's Day 2018 Ying Cheng Zhong, who migrated after her father's death, has been engaged to Jason Cao, a security guard at a Shanghai bank. Cao's cousin had introduced them. He was planning to come to Australia this Christmas. She's hoping that once Cao arrives, her step father might wrangle him some shifts at the nursery where he works part time. The couple will also look for a place to rent – but through a real estate agent and not through Chinese community networks where leases tend to be short term. Meanwhile, coronavirus stopped Zhong's normally frenetic schedule of church and volunteering activities. "I feel bored," she said in September.

Marie Chen, the medical receptionist, visited her returned parents in China at the start of the year. Like many Chinese-Australians who went home for Chinese New Year, her stay was prolonged, in this instance by two months, under China's coronavirus lockdown. It was during these long weeks of being "stuck" in China that Chen sensed a shift in how others saw her, and in how she saw herself. Locals pulled her up for being "like a Westerner": for drinking cold water rather than hot, eating vegetables raw, speaking "too abruptly". She thinks about her young adult children – both professionals who live with her at home – watching the Australian Open. They were openly rooting for the Australian tennis players and not the Chinese, "and I was horrified," she laughs. "But I don't think I belong to China anymore."

Despite Box Hill's superior Chinese food, Daisy Wang and husband Eric had been thinking of moving north for better weather. They had also planned on visiting family in China over Christmas. Covid-19 got in the way of all this. But Wang's been channelling her professed globalism into learning about various cultural histories, "which helps me to reflect deep behind what I saw and what I'm going to see in my tours and avoid misunderstanding from my previous stereotypes and ignorance."

As for the Guo family, one of their close friends in the neighbourhood was shaken after a stranger hurled racist abuse at them in the street. “But I think it’s temporary,” Mei says. “After the pandemic everything will be better.” “It’s natural,” Xu adds – even in China, he says, residents from Hubei province were stigmatised before the coronavirus was brought under control.

In April, Lillian and two friends started translating manga comics from Chinese to English. Their group has since expanded to more than 400 members and published online translations from Japanese and Korean comics, too. “We got, like, 100K views if you add them up,” she says.

Back in China she gave up piano lessons because she felt too much pressure from her teacher and schoolwork left little time. But since coming to Australia she’s rediscovered her love for the instrument. “The teachers always give her very positive feedback, so she has confidence again,” Mei explains. “Also, before Lillian came here she couldn’t speak in front of people, she was always very shy,” Xu says. “But now she changed.”

Lillian is also applying herself to cultivating an Australian identity. Eating Vegemite, for instance, and urging her sceptical parents to do the same.

“I’m still trying to understand more because I still feel like I’m a bit not that good in what’s the pop culture right now,” she reflects. “I think the people here are very open-minded. So if you need something you can always find someone to share your thoughts. You don’t get stuck in a fixed mindset.”

Recommendations

1. Don't romanticize or stereotype

It can be easy to romanticise the migrant experience, feeling a need to protect and put a positive spin on the actions of all individuals, and just as easy to stereotype particular cultures to stoke fear, discrimination or concerns that some groups of migrants are unlikely or unwilling to integrate. Both require balanced leadership at all levels and across all facets of communities to support understanding of both the new arrivals and the receiving community.

2. The role of local government is vital

The success of integration is influenced by the local leadership and decision making. The engagement of representatives on Council, In local business associations and in the leadership of community organisations.

3. Flexibility in service providers

Providers of community services are known for their understanding of their customers and the trust that they build over time. Often their ability to build flexibility into service delivery is key to strengthening and maintaining that trust. Funders, whether government or otherwise, need to allow that flexibility to be built into contracts so that they can evolve with the changing demographics and needs of the population.

4. The role of community leaders and influencers

The Narrative featured a number of individuals who have a vision for their community. They are able to visualise a way of life and can influence others and create pathways to help all residents take pride as it is realised.

5. Neighbours and neighbourliness/ community players

Individuals as neighbours play a significant role in understanding those around them and building trust as new arrivals settle and integrate into Australia. Encouraging, supporting and explaining can best be done by those that have trodden the same path. Local governments, community service providers, Council members, business associations and now social media apps all have a role to play in facilitating neighbourliness.

6. Caught between a rock and a hard place

There is a danger that Chinese-Australians could be caught in the interactions between Beijing and Canberra. Australia's long-term economic and strategic interests and its use of soft-diplomacy will require the active engagement of Chinese Australians.

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About the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute exists as a bridge between academic insight and public thought, undertaking research to help Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous and cohesive nation, particularly where this relates to the transition of migrants into Australian society.

In doing so, the Institute links thought to action to ensure informed debate drives the agenda, and empowers the critical thinking that will help drive Australia's social cohesion forward.

The Applied Research Centre forms a key part of the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, translating research and resources relevant to social cohesion into practical insights.

Through twice-yearly narratives, events, learning programs and considered explanations of research, the Applied Research Centre provides tools, information and innovations that empower individuals and organisations to strengthen cohesion in their communities.

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