



Tasmania's International Wall Of Friendship
The Story Of The Chinese Stone
As told by Katie Young

1984, the Year of the Rat, was significant in that it marked the beginning of the sixty-year Chinese calendar cycle. It was even more notable for the Chinese community in Tasmania, with their celebrations including the donation of the first stone for Tasmania's International Wall of Friendship.

Early in 1984, I still clearly remember, around the late summer season, a man whom I had never heard from before rang me at my home in Churchill Avenue, Sandy Bay. Introducing himself as Basil Rait, he asked if I could possibly meet him to discuss a matter face-to-face.

It sounded quite important, and to ensure that we did not miss each other, I offered to pick him up from his home the following day, a Saturday. Basil was living at 65 Warwick Street, Hobart, in a house built in the early 1800's, reflecting his devotion to Tasmania's history, as I was to discover.

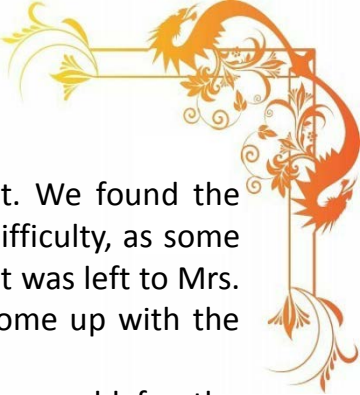

As we lunched at the Wrest Point Casino, Basil told me that my name had been given to him to contact about a particular project of his. He said he had discussed the matter with many other contacts, but months had come and gone, yet he was still in square one.

Basil then detailed the project and what he would like me to arrange - the donation by the Chinese community of a block of stone of a particular size inscribed with a message in both Chinese and English languages. He explained his intention to collect a similar stone from every ethnic community in Tasmania, and when enough had been obtained, a site would be identified to construct what he referred to as "an international memorial wall". He named two potential sites, either in the grounds of Parliament House or the courtyard of the Australian Government building in Collins Street, Hobart.

"How many stones have you collected so far?" I asked. "None" Basil replied, "but I hope yours will be the first - to sort of kick-start the project". He virtually pleaded with me to break the deadlock as he added " I have spoken to a few of your countrymen during the past year, but without response."

The concept greatly appealed to me, so I asked him for the measurements of the stone and the exact inscription he wanted on it, and assured him that I would follow the matter up with my community. Consequently, I took the proposal to the next monthly meeting of the Chinese Community Association of Tasmania, of which I was Vice-President at the time.

There was a consensus that we should endeavour to contribute a stone, and I was given the task to make sure this would happen.



A small committee was formed to carry out the assignment. We found the translation of the message to go on the stone was not without difficulty, as some of the specified English words had no exact Chinese counterpart. It was left to Mrs. Angela Dixon, a senior member of the Chinese community, to come up with the eventual translation which the full committee approved.

We selected black marble for the stone, and decided to use gold for the inscription. Mr Yi Yin Kwong, a well-regarded calligrapher in Hobart, was requested to write the chosen Chinese version, also to add both the Chinese and western calendar year.

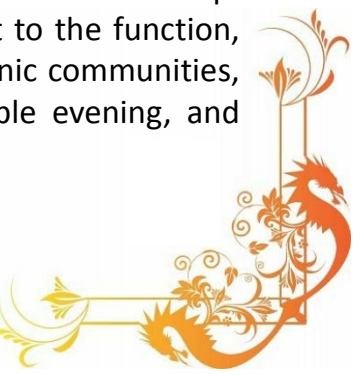
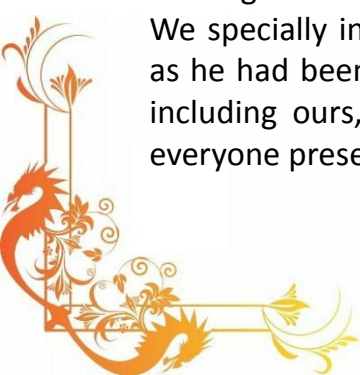
The Dragon was chosen as an emblem to complement the inscription. It is well-known that all Chinese are descendants of the Dragon, and all Chinese who live overseas identify themselves as the seeds of the Dragon.



It was further agreed that a special cloth cover should be made for the stone. One of our senior citizens, Mrs. Pei Gui Young, was an expert in embroidery. I asked for her help, providing her with the Chinese wording to appear on the stone as well as a design incorporating a wall and a boomerang. I took the design from a badge originally created for use by the Australia-China Friendship Society, the wall signifying the Great Wall of China, and the boomerang being a readily identifiable Australian emblem. Together they symbolise friendship between the two nations, and it was thus an ideal design to associate with the International Wall of Friendship.

From this, Mrs. Young prepared a black velvet cloth, slightly larger than the stone itself, with the required wording and design beautifully embroidered in gold and red silk. It was obvious that it would really give the presentation a great impact.

Preparation of the marble by a local stonemason was to take longer than we expected. I must have met Basil dozens of times before May arrived, when at last I was able to tell him that the stone was almost complete. It was obvious that he had given much thought as to how the presentation should take place. As soon as I told him the news, he declared with great excitement, "It is the very first one. It must be presented at Parliament House. Every ethnic group and all the dignitaries must be invited. It will set an example". He expressed his confidence that many more stones would now follow, and I could feel the intensity of his pleasure and relief that at long last the very first stone was indeed here.

The Chinese Association arranged a special dinner at the Fortuna Restaurant in North Hobart to provide members of the Chinese community with an exclusive viewing of the stone before it was formally handed over for the Wall of Friendship. We specially invited Mr. Karle Underwood and his wife Margaret to the function, as he had been deeply involved with Basil in encouraging all ethnic communities, including ours, to participate in the project. It was a memorable evening, and everyone present was deeply impressed with the finished stone.





In 1981, the governments of Tasmania and Fujian Province in China had signed an agreement to establish a sister-state relationship between the two states, a relationship aimed at contributing towards friendly relations and to pave the way for cultural exchanges and increased trade possibilities. As one of the invited guests, I had the pleasure of acting as interpreter for the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Hon. Brian Miller. I remember being given a badge at the time by the then Governor of Fujian, who had come to Tasmania with a group of his Ministers and officials to formalize the agreement.

It was therefore appropriate in July 1984, as a prelude to the historical Chinese involvement in the presentation of the very first stone for the Wall of Friendship, that the Tasmanian branch of the Australia-China Friendship Society should stage a week-long exhibition about Fujian at Hobart's Centrepont. The exhibition featured products from Fujian, a photographic display, plus a continuous video screening of life in the Province. The sister-state relationship was further enhanced the same month, when the Premier of Tasmania, Hon. Robin Gray, made an official visit to Fujian.

The official presentation of the stone took place on Friday, 27 July 1984. It was an outstanding success, taking place, as Basil had insisted, at Parliament House, the Government having agreed to host a special reception for the event.

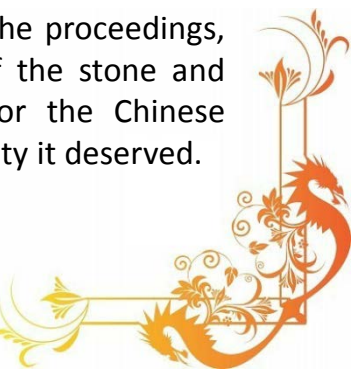
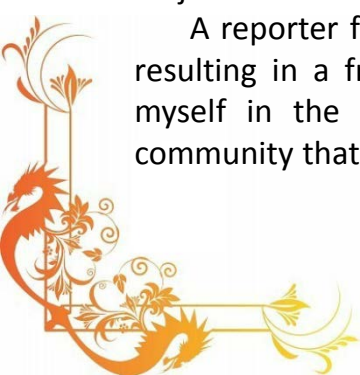
Tasmania's Chinese community was well-represented amongst the close to 200 guests who crowded into the reception room. In addition, the President of the Chinese Fellowship in Victoria, Mr. Yeo Gim Wah and other Chinese community leaders travelled from Melbourne especially for the function. They were joined by several politicians, various other dignitaries, together with prominent members of numerous other ethnic communities, many wearing colourful national dress of their country of origin.

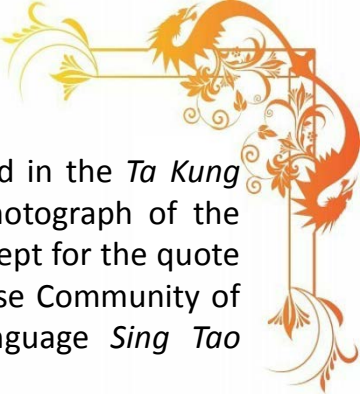
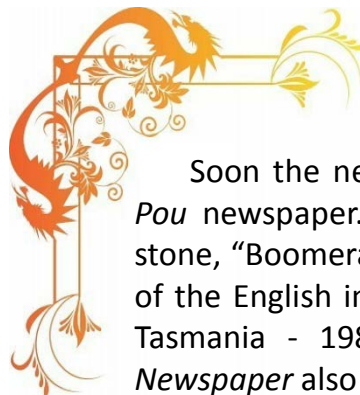
As guests arrived and entered the reception area, each was given a distinctive badge on behalf of the Chinese Community Association of Tasmania. Depicting a stylised wall and a boomerang, the design on the badge matched that on the embroidered cloth covering the nearby stone. It would provide a lasting memento for all who had come to witness the event.

I had the privilege of making a short speech on behalf of the Association before presenting the stone to Mr. John Cleary, the Minister for Ethnic Affairs. There were audible gasps of excitement from the audience as the cloth was lifted to reveal the stone, the gold lettering gleaming under the lights of the chandeliers.

In acknowledging the gift, Mr. Cleary expressed his delight that one of the major Asian nations was the first to become involved in the project.

A reporter from the *Mercury* newspaper was there to cover the proceedings, resulting in a front page article complete with a photograph of the stone and myself in the next morning's edition. It was very pleasing for the Chinese community that this important occurrence had received the publicity it deserved.





Soon the news reached China, where the event was recorded in the *Ta Kung Pou* newspaper. In a fairly lengthy article accompanied by a photograph of the stone, “Boomerang” stands out as the only non-Chinese word, except for the quote of the English inscription on the stone - “Presented by the Chinese Community of Tasmania - 1984”. The internationally distributed Chinese language *Sing Tao Newspaper* also printed an extensive account of the occasion.

The publicity would subsequently extend virtually world-wide with the appearance of an article in the *Australian Foreign Affairs Record (Volume 58, number 6)* a monthly journal published and distributed by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. Again there was a photograph, this time showing Basil with me admiring the Chinese stone on exhibition at the ANZ Bank’s branch at 103 Macquarie Street, Hobart.

On the Monday after the presentation, Basil had arranged with the State Manager of the ANZ Banking Group, Mr. Noel Frost, for the Chinese stone to be moved to the Bank. Here, in another ceremony, Minister John Cleary unveiled the stone as it went on display to the general public until it would be wanted for use in building the Wall of Friendship.

To thank him for his role, Mr. Cleary was presented with an album of photographs taken at the presentation of the stone at Parliament House. The album was signed by leading members of the Chinese community.

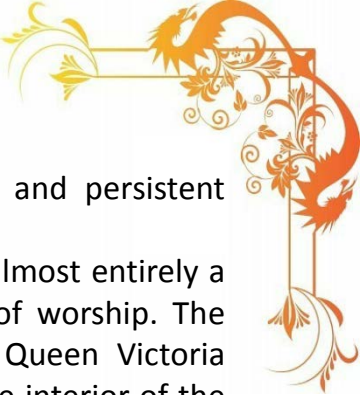
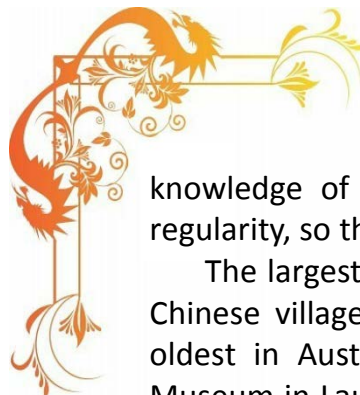
To complete our contribution to the Wall of Friendship, we presented the Chinese flag on 25 November 1984. As Vice-Chairman of the Australia-China Fellowship Society and the Chinese Community Association, I had the privilege of presenting the flag at the ANZ Bank, where it went on immediate public display alongside the stone.

As my mind turns back to those days, it was indeed generous that the Association was prepared to fund the entire cost of acquiring the Chinese stone. It was particularly encouraging that the committee gave me a free hand to ensure our participation in such a worthwhile project. We all had full-time jobs, yet we willingly gave up our scarce free time because we realized that we were part and parcel of Australia, a land with people of diverse cultures and languages who live in harmony and goodwill.

The International Wall of Friendship serves to remind our children, and their children, and all generations that follow, the need to integrate into our great multicultural society, and yet sustain our own culture and diversities in languages and traditions. The International Wall of Friendship unites the ethnic communities in Tasmania. We are indeed one big happy family.

For me, it was great to have had the opportunity to play a significant role in a project which in 1984 might have seemed far-fetched. But Basil Rait was a man of vision!

Looking back on Chinese settlement in Tasmania, some arrived as early as the 1830s. However, the strongest influx was in the 1870’s, with considerable numbers attracted by the discovery of tin in the north-east. The Chinese had a better



knowledge of the work and showed much more cooperation and persistent regularity, so their labour was preferred and their numbers grew.

The largest settlement was at Weldborough, which became almost entirely a Chinese village, complete with a Joss House, a Chinese place of worship. The oldest in Australia, the Joss House can now be seen at the Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston, where it was removed intact in 1934. The interior of the historic structure is a mass of brightly coloured banners, red flags, silken scrolls, beautiful wood carvings of richly-robed Oriental warriors, armoured guards on horses, and plaques bearing texts in the Chinese ideography.

Another reminder of early Chinese settlement is Chung Gon Crescent, which runs off Gee Street in South Launceston. It was named after James Chung Gon, once a worker in the tin fields.

The 1881 census recorded 874 Chinese-born in Tasmania, a figure increasing to over a thousand during the next decade, a period when tin-mining activity was at its greatest. The numbers began to decline as the mines were worked out, many having made their fortunes and gone home to China. Australia's restrictive immigration laws contributed to the decline, and by 1891 the number had dropped to 939. It is of interest that only eight were female.

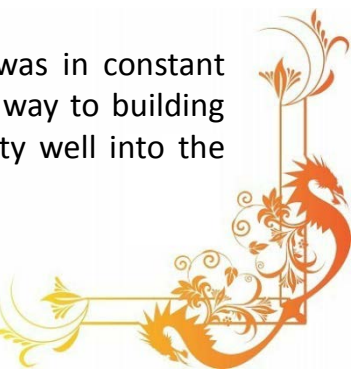
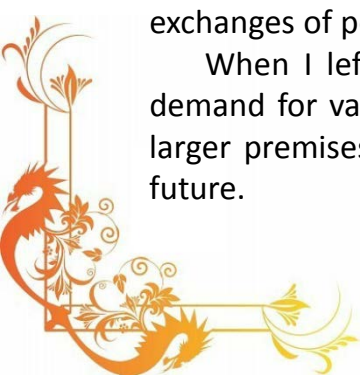
The decline continued to 484 in 1901, to 362 in 1911, and down to 234 in 1921. Today, however, the overall Chinese community is substantially larger after taking into account mixed marriages and numerous progeny born in Australia, with the 1991 census revealing that 1,783 residents of Tasmania were either born in China or descended therefrom. This ranked the Chinese well-up in terms of size amongst the more than eighty ethnic communities forming Tasmania's population.

When I first came to Tasmania in 1969, I was immediately involved with the Chinese Community Association, which had been formally set up in the early 1960's. We worked hard to establish our first Club House, located in Albert Road, Moonah. With our limited numbers, we did the best we could to promote Chinese culture and tradition, as well as friendship between China and Australia.

The Association often held combined functions with the Tasmania Branch of the Australia-China Friendship Society. When the Antarctic Base was transferred to Hobart, we received many visiting scientists from China who stopped in Hobart for training prior to leaving for the Antarctic base, and then on their return to Hobart for debriefing after their expeditions.

We were greatly pleased when the Conservatorium of Music at the University of Tasmania opened its doors to students from China, which was followed by exchanges of postgraduate students with universities in China.

When I left Tasmania for Sydney in 1988, the Association was in constant demand for various pastoral and welfare work, and well on the way to building larger premises in North Hobart to serve the Chinese community well into the future.



Postscript: The Wall of Friendship was built in October 1992. Since then, circumstances have not allowed me to see the Chinese stone in place amongst those contributed by other ethnic communities. I intend to visit the structure at the earliest opportunity, and am looking forward to sharing at first-hand the pride and joy of all members of the Chinese community who presented the very first stone to commence this outstanding development.

It pleased me to hear that the Chinese Community Association was invited to open the programme to celebrate the second anniversary of the Wall of Friendship's construction. President Mr. Peter Chung, willingly accepted the invitation, and he and other members of the Association provided the audience of several hundred people with an enjoyable performance of the Chinese lion dance, an enduring and colourful aspect of Chinese culture.

And now, 20 years since it was built -

**The International Wall of Friendship
at Commonwealth Government Centre, 188 Collins Street, Hobart**



The Chinese Stone

