

EDDIE LIU (Ted Wen Liu) OBE JP

Interviewed by Diana Giese, 31 August 1999, in Brisbane for the Chinese Australian Oral History Partnership

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Born in Hong Kong in 1922, Mr Liu came by himself to Australia in 1937, and attended Christian Brothers College, East Melbourne. From 1942-45, in Queensland, he was Secretary of the Chinese Seamen's Union catering to seamen and others marooned in Australia by World War II. He stayed on in Brisbane to become a wholesale fruit and vegetable supplier to hotels, cafes and institutions such as the Mater Hospital. From 1959-73, he ran the restaurant and kiosk at the Centenary Pool in Gregory Terrace. He has managed businesses including shops and service stations, herbalists, tourism to China and public relations.

Mr Liu was foundation Secretary of the Chinese Club of Queensland, begun in the early 1950s, a post he continues to hold to this day. He has guided and encouraged much of the Brisbane Chinese community's cultural and philanthropic work for nearly half a century. Known as 'the Father of Chinatown', in the 1980s he was instrumental in getting underway this \$1.6 million development. He also helped in the restoration of the historic Breakfast Creek Temple. He was consultant to the Ching Chung Taoist Association of Hong Kong's \$3.5 million complex at Deagon, including aged homes, a Chinese temple and a Chinese garden. With other prominent businesspeople, in 1987 he was appointed Honorary Ambassador for the City of Brisbane, to promote economic development and investment in the city, and to act as its spokesman interstate and overseas.

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3 Although now spokesman for Chinese community, couldn't speak English when came to Australia: went to Catholic school in Melbourne; a dozen other Chinese students in school; many other uncles and cousins in Melbourne, in supermarkets and working as vegetable merchants: 'we all came from one village'; in Victoria Market; 'the new generation doesn't like this kind of business': they are professionals, university-educated

8 World War II: went back to Hong Kong to see family, at age 19; left there 24 hours before War started on ship to Philippines, then via New Guinea to Brisbane; helped by friend in Church of England to get on boat, last to leave Hong Kong; on trip, 'everybody crying –only me'; many evacuees from Shanghai on board; arrived in Manila in middle of Japanese bombing; couldn't send letters or cables, so 'nobody knows where you are'; couldn't make contact with mother throughout War; she died of starvation in Hong Kong; didn't find this out until afterwards; 'you're lucky to be alive'

- 13 Back in Australia, called on to join AIF,** ‘but ‘I wasn’t keen to go to War’; was sent by Manpower to Brisbane to work on American Chinese Small Ships Division project; 2000 Chinese, many seamen, marooned in Australia, from captains to ordinary sailors; China on side of Allies, so Australia relaxed its immigration policies: first condition that they had to live in a camp at Bulimba and construct landing barges for the Americans, and second that had to go home after the War; in fact keen to go back to find their families
- 17 He worked as Principal Clerk in project:** asked to leave to help form Chinese Seamen’s Union, doing all paperwork; tried to match assigned work to what they’d done before, such as cooks in Mess hall; paid by Americans in dollars and free cigarettes: ‘the Americans look after the Chinese people very well’; union formed at general meeting, and his name put forward even though ‘they don’t even know me’; worked from office in Queen St
- 21 Started own business after the War:** in early ‘50s, brought brother out from Hong Kong; went into fruit and vegetable wholesaling because had no capital to buy a business; ‘I created this business myself’; simply went and asked for business, hotel, restaurants and shipping: ‘pinched other people’s business’; supplied migrant hostels, post office institute, all the airlines; ‘I supplied everyone. I nearly controlled the whole city’; bought from agents in markets, and it was competitive, but ‘it’s a free country. Anybody can do what they want to do’; job involved too much travel across town, so offered business to a friend; ‘either people like you or don’t like you...you can give for nothing, and they still don’t like to talk to you’
- 27 Centennial Pool built 1959 to commemorate Queensland’s centenary:** he tendered to run kiosk and restaurant for lump sum of \$15,000 per year; Ray White offered him business in Kenmore, where people were growing pawpaws and pineapples; mixed business of corner store and petrol pump on footpath; offered it on basis that if it didn’t make money, seller would take it back; again, ‘knew nothing about it’; got friend from Rockhampton to help him run it; when people came back from town and the markets, they bought several boxes of groceries from him: ‘we looked after customers –that’s most important’
- 32 Acquired vegetable farm near the Oasis, to look after old Chinese single men, with ‘no job, nowhere to go’;** then some returned to China to die, so ‘I had to sell the farm ‘; also bought nursery, although ‘I don’t know one flower from another’, and another 4-acre vegetable farm
- 33 ‘If you’re careful, you may lose your money, but you don’t lose a lot of money’;** need to check it every day; bought news run for friend to subsidise veterinary studies at university: now worth ‘heaps of money’ as doctor on south coast; sold business
- 38 Discussion of interactions between Chinese groups in Brisbane:** 2000 Taiwanese in Sunnybank, also many New Guinea Chinese

40 Building up the Chinese Club of Queensland, whose foundation Secretary he was; Club started by Tommy Young in 1953; ‘went all over Brisbane to look for Chinese to come to a meeting’; 50-60 people met upstairs from Eastern Café in Elizabeth St; ‘they got me in as Secretary and ever since I’m still here’; his son Franklin now a paid worker for the Club; now has turnover on poker machines, bar, KENO, TAB, after 2 years, 3 months, of \$4 million, and one of the biggest businesses in [Fortitude] Valley; in early years, got donations to buy 4 acres of land at Auchenflower, for \$400; offered \$200 to Melbourne owner; Council at first wouldn’t let them build; in 1974 flood, ‘water one inch from ceiling’, walls cracked, foundations moved; had borrowed money from bank to buy material; then had working bees with picnics every weekend; all voluntary workers except the bricklayer; had fund-raising barbecues and other functions to pay rates and insurance; built hall, two tennis courts; done with a lot of goodwill and community effort

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- 1 Discussion of advertising in annual Club magazine, printed in Hong Kong for last 40 years, for half the price of Australian printing;** how they raise money for leukemia research, the Mater and Children’s Hospitals; ‘I know more people in Hong Kong than people who live in Hong Kong’
- 2 Relationship between his Club and other Queensland associations, such as the Cathay Club founded by people from Papua New Guinea:** ‘a lot of New Guinea people also join our Club’; some of Chinese Club’s life members in Melbourne, Sydney, Darwin, Hong Kong; 2500 Australians of other backgrounds are social members, with no voting rights; sometimes buy tables for other clubs’ fund-raisers, but no collaboration on joint functions: ‘we can do better ourselves...our books are full of sponsorship’; forthcoming dinner at Crest Hotel to celebrate 50th anniversary of People’s Republic; used to have Dragon Balls, and now celebrate Chinese New Year, Moon Festival; Chinese Club 47th Birthday Dinner coming up
- 7 ‘The newspapers, every time something happens, they ring me up’:** he he has been asked to comment on whether Mr Howard should have responded to Pauline Hanson; Hanson was put next to him on the last seat on a plane; he greeted her: ‘If you look at the paper, when you make a statement in Parliament, I’m the first one attacking you’; she asked him: ‘Do you feel I say something wrong?’; he told her not to mention ‘Asian’ migrants; their discussion of immigration policy: ‘Arthur Calwell, every time he come up to Brisbane, he come to my house’; met him through Archbishop Duhig; Hanson told him her life story, divorced twice; he told her: ‘Pauline, look like I go to Hong Kong and find you a husband’; their discussion of small parties; the appeal of One Nation: ‘people sick of the parties...don’t do too much for people...hitting people’s pockets’; ‘to be a politician in Australia, you don’t have to know anything’
- 18 Restoration of Breakfast Creek Temple:** began with letter from City Council, because all trustees of property dead, and last one to die had no children; Albion Park

race course wanted land for a car park; had been Chinese community land since 1886; over many years, ‘nobody there, nobody cared’; vandalised; big gong stolen; full of rats; people complained; he went to Taiwanese Honorary Consul to do something about it; then went to Deputy Premier to fix up ownership issues; Bill passed to give it back to Chinese community; borrowed money and started to do it up as Chinese Club project: ‘when it’s Club-organised, that means me’; fixed it up with new altar, imported figures; now ‘every weekend, full of people’; Buddhist monk as caretaker

24 Other Club activities: they bury those who don’t have enough money for funerals; also help with police, immigration, family issues: ‘sort their problems out’; but ‘can’t do impossible. I do possible’; he won’t lend money, but does give it

25 ‘Father of Chinatown’: regeneration of Chinatown came at time there was a Labor Lord Mayor; needed \$1.2 million; Atkinson came in when had about \$500,000; approached Premier Bjelke-Petersen, but knocked back by Cabinet; then went on his own to see Joh, who said, ‘Leave it to me. I fix it up. So he fixed it up’; Brisbane’s is ‘the only Chinatown in the world built by government money’; currently, business is bad for 33 Chinatown restaurants, Italian to Chinese, which are ‘cutting each others’ throats’; herbalist is however doing well, also supermarkets and roast duck shop; will be a shake-out in restaurants; man who used to make Mr Liu’s shirts in Hong Kong came to Brisbane and started a restaurant; he didn’t visit, saying, ‘I can cook better than you’

30 Future activities of Club: hopes to build retirement village units for renting or buying and small cottages; ‘you’ve got to have something to occupy your mind’; still goes to Hong Kong three times a year, to see friends and do business; Club intends to finance and run as a business Aged Home joint venture with religious group in Hong Kong; they checked out *feng shui*; charged them \$1 a year; bought premises cheaply four years ago; to pay for it, sold former Club site for \$1.2 million: ‘every time we move, we make money’

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