

## **The Peking Café in Sydney: consuming nationality and enterprising Chinese Australians in the early twentieth century**

Mei-fen Kuo, Dr., Research Fellow, School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland, Australia

By focusing on the case of Peking café in Sydney, this paper investigates the relationship among consumption, sociability and nationalism of the Chinese Australian community in the early twentieth century.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the local Chinese population began to relocate from rural to urban sites in Australia. Chinese Australians then changed from earlier occupational categories, such as miners and labourers, to become traders, storekeepers, cabinet makers, laundry and restaurant owners, generally in competition with other Australians taking part in the process of urbanization. Chinese Australian merchants also were pioneers of the department store trade in Hong Kong and Shanghai in the first decades of the early twentieth century. Such commercial activity raises two key questions. What were the causes and consequences of the development of Chinese Australian enterprises? How do we evaluate the history of Chinese Australian enterprises in the modern consumer culture?

The paper first examines the significant role of newspapers, magazines, advertisements, business catalogues and trade dictionaries which enabled Chinese Australians involved in the process of urbanization to acquire knowledge about various goods in the market. The print media also helped Chinese Australians to learn a different lifestyle from that to which they were accustomed. The case of the Peking café in Sydney is a pleasant example of how Chinese Australians learned to establish a new style of enterprise in their urban life. The idea of building a new Chinese dining enterprise originated from a Chinese Australian nationalist, Samuel Wong (Huang Lai-Wang). He was inspired by the Chinese restaurants in New York. Wong's idea of establishing a new world-class restaurant in Sydney received backing from the other fruit traders in Sydney and Melbourne. The Peking café was opened in 1919. The café was noted for its modern western-style service including female waitresses. In the subsequent years the Peking café became an important public place for social gatherings by the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuo Min Tang) and for welcoming banquets held in honour of visiting Chinese officials.

By analysing the connection between the Peking café and the Chinese nationalists, the final part of the paper will demonstrate that the consumer culture of Chinese diaspora community not only refers to the process of exchanging money for goods and services but also to the experience of ethnic identity formation and of community organisation.