Introducing the "Chinese Australian History Collections Online"

Mei-fen Kuo and Tsebin Tchen°

Abstract:

This research note introduces a new and on-going website: the "Chinese Australian History Collections Online", which is related to a project that is preserving, digitalizing and interpreting the archives of the Chinese consuls-general, of the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia Inc, and of the Kuo Min Tang Society in the first half of the twentieth century. The paper includes an overview history of the Kuo Min Tang Society in Sydney and Melbourne, and of the Chinese consulate-general, as well as discussing the three major inventories of archival documents that comprise the archival collection.

Key Words:

Chinese–Australian history; the Chinese consul-general for Australia; Kuo Min Tang; Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia; White Australia Policy
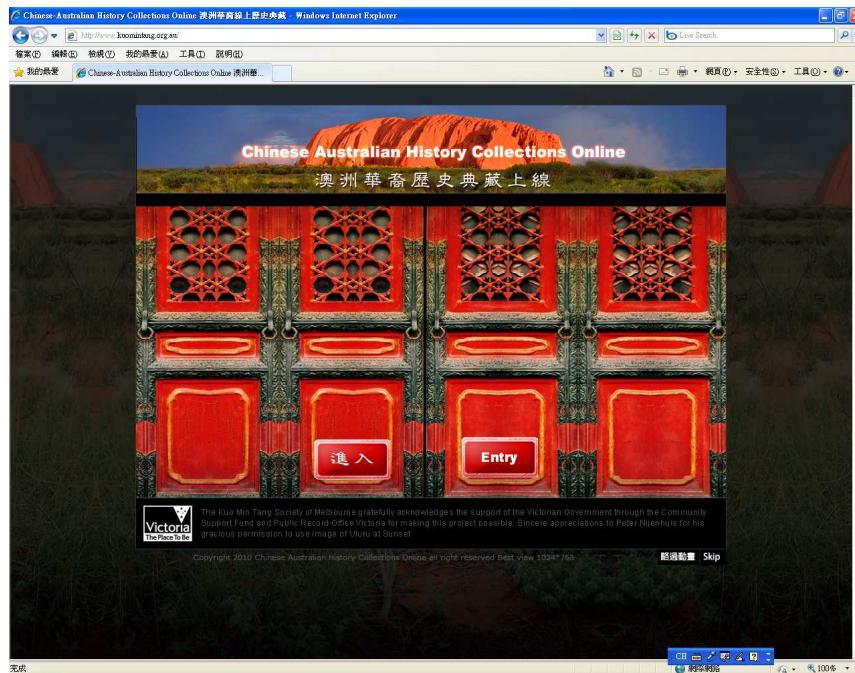

Figure 1. Welcome Page of the 'Chinese Australian History Collections Online'

Introduction

In association with the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia Inc of Sydney, the Kuo Min Tang Society of Melbourne—an incorporated not-for-profit community association with a history dating back to 1904 and an overseas affiliate of the Chinese Nationalist Party of the Republic of China on Taiwan—recently launched a resource website called "Chinese Australian History Collections Online" (http:///www/kuomintang.org.au). The

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site aims to provide and facilitate the access of academic and community researchers to historical documents that deal with the Chinese–Australian community in the first half of the twentieth century. Initially the collections available on the website refer to rare archival documents held in the custodianship of the two partner associations, documents which were previously not available for public access. It is hoped that the establishment of this public access website will encourage owners and custodians of other hitherto privately held historic materials to bring them to the public's notice.

The establishment of this website was supported by the Victorian Government through the Public Records Office of Victoria. The historical significance assessment of the collections available on the website was supported by the Australian Government through the National Library of Australia, and undertaken in association with the School of Social Sciences of La Trobe University.

The two partner associations intend that this website should be dedicated to Chinese–Australian historical research, and not be used for any other purposes.

Aim of the Website

Until very recently, the material legacy of Chinese–Australian experiences under the White Australia policy was confined to either family memoires or incidental records created by the occasional interested mainstream observer. The "Chinese question" entered Australian history because of prejudice toward Chinese immigrants within mainstream society. As the main 'Other' of external origin in White Australia, the Chinese community arguably became central to the construction of Australian national identity from the 1880s onward. Yet until recently it was rare in either academic research or in popular culture for the two contrasting elements of the Australian experience—that of the mainstream and of minorities—to be considered in juxtaposition. It is as though people believed that an adequate understanding of the history of Australian citizenship could be achieved without including the experiences and contributions of non-British communities. This was especially the case in regard to Australia's oldest community of Asian descent, the Chinese, although to a lesser but still common extent the story of every migrant community since Federation has met with a similar denial. As a result, modern Australia has seemingly, in a few generations, mysteriously managed to convert itself without too much effort, from a proudly parochial British nation—although the Irish could justifiably claim it should own up more to its Celtic roots—to one that has suddenly discovered itself to be triumphantly multicultural.

However, there are now welcome signs that the wider community is adopting a more inclusive view of its history. Especially pleasingly is the growing emphasis on the positive contributions that Australians with diverse ethnic backgrounds and experiences have made—and will continue to make—to the moulding of national identity. In this respect, as Professor John Fitzgerald has observed, Chinese–Australian history has not been as well served by historical archives and personal collections as the history of some other migrant communities in Australia.[1] An awareness of this absence of significant archival sources has prompted the two host organisations to open their own historic archives to the community by way of the "Chinese Australian History Collections Online" website. Its appearance represents an exponential increase in the resources available for research into the political and social history of the Chinese–Australian community. Secondary to this broad goal, the collection's other aim is to widen and enrich the Australian national story by drawing attention to its trans-national context and to the nascent multicultural reality of the pre-World War II period. By illuminating the impact of the White Australia policy on a significant minority group, the website seeks to benefit Australia generally, as the country responds to the legacy of that policy both in national political debates and in perceptions of Australia within the region, including China.

Hopefully, the establishment of this open access website will help the process of better understanding our communal past, not only by making new resources available to interested researchers, but also by encouraging and assisting other organisations or

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[1] John Fitzgerald: *Big White Lie* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).

individuals with similar resources to make them available through digital information sharing.
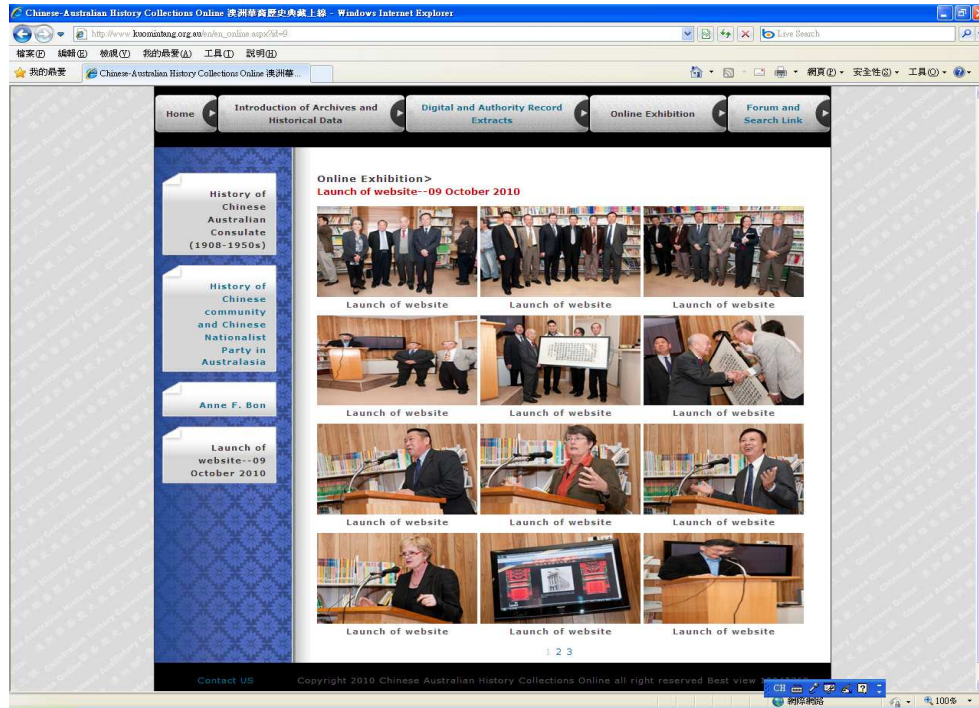

Figure 2. Website Page Showing Website Launch on 9 October 2010

Contents of the Website
The most important materials on the website are the inventories of the archival collections of two organizations. They fall under three main rubrics, which are each introduced and discussed below.[2]

Inventory of Historic Chinese Consulate Archival Collections
In 2008, members of the management of the Kuo Min Tang Society of Melbourne found themselves pondering what to do with a large collection of archival materials recovered from deep storage during the renovation of the Society's historic premises in Melbourne's Chinatown. Although the existence of this collection was known in the past, the Society had always considered itself without either the resources or the skills required to properly examine the content, and so had always fallen back on the position of dutifully ensuring that these materials of antiquity should remain undisturbed and secure. On this occasion, however, the Society decided to consult the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe University which had developed a centre of excellence in Chinese–Australian history under its previous head, Professor John Fitzgerald, and had also recently completed an historical significance assessment of the archival holdings of the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia Inc of Sydney. The Society was encouraged to seek, and successfully obtained funding support from the National

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[2] In this article, Chinese personal names and place names are spelt using the Wade-Giles system where the individuals or places are so rendered in English in the archival materials. However, the modern pinyin system may be used if the names are only mentioned in Chinese and a translation has to be made for identification purposes.

Library of Australia to carry out a significance assessment on these archival materials. That process confirmed their importance.

The bulk of these materials is made up of the correspondence files of the Chinese consulate-general in Melbourne from 1909 until its closure in 1932, a total of thirty-three years.

The Qing imperial Chinese government reached a formal agreement with the Australian government in 1908, after negotiations over a number of years and at the considerable reluctance of Australia, to locate an office of consul-general (a consulate-general) in Melbourne as China's consular and diplomatic representative in Australia. The consulate-general was established the following year, in 1909, when the first consul-general, Liang Lan-hsun, arrived in Melbourne.

Liang served from February 1909 to November 1910. Two more imperial government appointees followed him: Tong Ying-tong from November 1910 to May 1911, and Hwang Yung-liang from June 1911 to June 1913. During the latter's tenure, in October 1911, the Wuhan Revolution toppled the Qing Empire and in January 1912 China formally became a republic, albeit one very much of the old rather than new order.

The Chinese community initially had high hopes that forceful diplomatic and consular representations on their behalf by the Chinese government would improve the situation of Chinese residents in Australia. They were to be disappointed. All three imperial consuls-general were uniformly unsuccessful in their efforts to persuade Australia to relax its restrictions on Chinese immigrants. The parlous state of the government they represented could not have been helpful to their cause, and none lasted more than two years in office.

Figure 3. Website Page Showing Inventory of Chinese Consul General

The brief tenures and poor performance of successive imperial consuls-general created new opportunities for Chinese nationalists to promote anti-Manchu attitudes and generate sympathy for Chinese revolutionaries linked to Sun Yat-sen's movement. After the Chinese Republican government was established in 1912, the political situation in China was in some tumult, as was reflected in Australia's Chinese community, and a confusing network of existing and new associations emerged to contest dominance. The Kuo Min Tang—the Chinese Nationalist Party, functioning through its affiliated community societies such as the Melbourne Kuo Min Tang Society—was finally successful and went on to dominate community social alliances and patterns of leadership in Melbourne and Sydney, and in Australia generally.[3]

This situation would have been particularly difficult for Hwang Yung-liang, the last imperial consul-general. In 1913 he resigned and went back to China. The acting consul-general who briefly replaced him was a local man, William Ah Ket. A second-generation Chinese–Australian who had grown up in Wangaratta (country Victoria), he had been admitted to practice law in the Supreme Court of Victoria where he was for three decades the only Chinese lawyer. Yet William Ah Ket, who led a remarkable life as a successful lawyer and campaigner for Chinese rights, is practically unknown amongst the Chinese community of today. This is a historical oddity that this website and the interest it may generate will hopefully correct. William Ah Ket served as honorary consul-general until the first republican consul-general—Tseng Tsung-kien—arrived in Melbourne in late 1913. Tseng Tsung-kien served from November 1913 to August 1917, without, it appears, much notable effect. When he left, William Ah Ket once again became acting consul-general until the new appointee, Quei Tze-king, arrived in Australia.

Quei Tze-king remained consul-general for China in Australia for eleven years, from December 1917 to 1928, a record that remains unbroken today. He appears to have represented his nation well, fostering goodwill with many elements of his host community as well as with his diplomatic and consular colleagues. He was one of the founders of the Melbourne Consular and Trade Commissioners' Association in 1923, established in order to promote Australia's international trade. He also achieved the distinction of being the first and only Chinese dean of the diplomatic and consular corps in Australia, a record that incidentally can never be broken since the diplomatic and consular corps became separate entities when the Commonwealth government relocated to Canberra and made the new capital the only place to host the diplomatic corp.

While his attempts to promote the China–Australia relationship by increasing commercial, cultural, and educational exchanges were impressive, Quei Tze-king was considerably less successful in reducing the political tensions within the Chinese community that arose from the different political sympathies of various groups within it. Indeed, there is some evidence that Consul-General Quei might have himself caused some of these tensions by his actions. A significant proportion of the contemporary Chinese community in Australia was in favour of more radical forms of political reform than the minimalist republicanism adopted by the then Beijing government. As official spokesman of the Chinese government, Consul-General Quei was enthusiastic both in trying through his own efforts to restrict the influence of these advocates in the community, and in making representations to the Australian government to suppress their activities. Understandably, the consul-general made enemies among these more radical reformers, especially those who supported Dr Sun Yat-sen's nationalist revolutionary government based in the city of Canton, now Guangdong. Ultimately, after 1927 when that government defeated the warlord armies who supported the Beijing government and took power in China, Quei's position became untenable. His long tenure came to an end in 1928, and he left Melbourne in April of that year.

The new consul-general, Sung Far-tsan, arrived in Melbourne late in 1928 to take up his post. For unknown reasons, he decided that Sydney was a more

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[3] For a detailed analysis of the origin and evolution of the Australasian Kuo Min Tang, see Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*. A comprehensive narrative of the Kuo Min Tang's historic role in the Chinese–Australian community appears in in Mei-fen Kuo, "Making Chinese Australia" (Ph D dissertation, La Trobe University, 2008).

appropriate location for the consulate-general. His decision might have been prompted by the start of government relocation from Melbourne to Canberra, where parliament opened in 1927: Sydney was much closer to the new capital than Melbourne. Sydney's Chinese community was also, then as now, substantially larger than that of Melbourne. Furthermore, the Sydney branch of the Chinese Nationalist Party had finally, after years of occasionally bitter disputes with the Melbourne branch, persuaded the central executive of the national organisation to designate it as the Australasian headquarters branch. It would have made good political sense for the new consul-general to wish to be closer to the ascendant branch of the government's ruling party. Whatever the reason behind it, the move occurred in October 1929.

However, this was not yet the end for Melbourne; a lesser consular office was established there, perhaps as a sort of consolation prize. Selwyn Hong Nam (also known as Selwyn Woo), a second-generation Chinese–Australian and a leading member of Melbourne's Chinese community, was appointed acting consul. No money was allocated to the office, however, and Selwyn Hong Nam was left very much to his own devices and to whatever support he could generate from the local community, especially the Kuo Min Tang Society, of which both Selwyn and his father Peter Ng Hong Nam were leading members. However, it seems Selwyn might not have been up to the task, because in April 1930, Hong Li, deputy consul-general, was sent from Sydney to Melbourne to take over. Pao Chun-hao replaced him in March 1931, and served until September 1932, when official Chinese representation in Melbourne finally ceased.

The consulate inventories include 110 sets of material comprising around 23,500 discrete documents. A large proportion of them are official state-to-state papers written in both English and Chinese. Other materials include personnel records, accounts, drafts of reports to, and instructions from, the Chinese government, applications for certifications of exemption, letters of exemption confirmation for Chinese merchants and students, petitions from the Chinese–Australian community, and other correspondence from the community. The collection of the correspondence files of the Chinese consulate-general in Melbourne (at that time the principal diplomatic representative for China in Australia) from 1908 to 1929 is of some historical significance, as this was the time when the Australian Commonwealth was in its infancy, and when three regimes held government in succession in China: the Imperial Qing Dynasty, the early Republic, and the Nationalist Republic.

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Figure 4. The Archives of the Chinese Consul General, Melbourne
Source: author's image, 2009

Finally, it is worth noting that there is also a smaller and less comprehensive

collection of correspondence files of the then Chinese consular office in Melbourne from 1930 to 1951, after the consulate-general had relocated to Sydney in 1929. It includes fifty-four sets of materials comprising around 6,500 discrete documents.

Inventory of Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia Inc (Sydney) Collections
The Chinese republican movement started much later in Sydney than it did in Melbourne. Comparatively speaking, the Sydney Chinese community was more a stronghold of the monarchist "Emperor Protection Society," started by the former imperial tutor Kang Youwei and his disciple Liang Qichao, following the failure of the "Hundred Days Reform" in 1898. This situation persisted for sometime even after the overthrow of the imperial government, so it was not until 1914 that the first discernable move occurred toward establishing a public organ of republican sympathy in Sydney's Chinese community.

In that year an alliance of leading Chinese citizens representing quite diverse interests came together to publish the "Chinese Republican News" (*Guomin Yuebao*). Notable participants included George Bew (of the Wing On Company), Wong Yu-kong, the Reverend John Young Wai (grandfather of the 1996 Australian of the Year Professor John Yu, AC), and James Chuey (Grand Master of the Chinese Masonic Society). In the following year the group became the Chinese Revolutionary League, based at 43 Smith Street, Surrey Hills; and a year later it renamed itself the Chinese Nationalist League. In 1920 the League finally adopted the Chinese name *Kuomintang* (KMT) and the English name of "Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia," by which it is better known outside the Chinese community. It became the main branch of the KMT in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands.

Throughout the twentieth century the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia was a major Chinese community organisation in Sydney. It also played a key role in maintaining community solidarity during the years of the Sino–Japanese war which finally merged into the Pacific War after the destruction of Pearl Harbour. The KMT building at 75 Ultimo Road, Haymarket, which was acquired in 1921, was the centre of social and cultural activities for the Chinese community—the site for dances, dinners, social gatherings and the screening of Chinese movies. It also was, and still is, the home of one of Sydney's main Chinese language schools, the Yu Mei School.

After 1972, when the Australian government shifted diplomatic recognition from the nationalist Republic of China to the communist People's Republic of China, the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia inevitably lost some of its influence in the community. In response, it curtailed many of its activities to concentrate on providing for the social and welfare needs of its members, and the still substantial part of the community that looked to it for leadership and support. In the 1980s, with the influx of a large number of ethnically Chinese refugees from Indochina, and with Taiwan and Southeast Asia becoming a growing source of migrants who were wary of the threats posed by communist regimes, the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia again became an important player in the Sydney Chinese community. At about this time, the organisation's leadership also came to realise that there was another important community role open to it, that of helping the Chinese community to define its place in the Australia nation.

Over the years, because of its pre-eminent position in the Kuomintang organisation in Australia and the South Pacific, the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia's Sydney office collected and preserved a large number of records, documents, publications, photographs, and artefacts of historical significance not only to the Chinese community but also to the Australian nation as a whole. These archival collections have won several grants for significance assessment, including a NSW Small Heritage Grant in 2005 and one from the National Library of Australia in 2006.

The archival collection consists of official and unofficial records and publications collected by the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia over its institutional life, from 1915 to the present. The purpose of the collection is to preserve, display, and make available for interpretation the most substantial historical record available of Chinese–Australian life and times in the twentieth century. The archived collection extends for 11.8 linear meters of administrative records and publications relating to branches

throughout Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands. It includes over four hundred sets of materials containing around 10,000 discrete documents, including party membership lists, completed membership application forms, financial records, correspondence and notices, minutes of meetings and conventions, list of donors to various causes, magazine subscriptions lists, newspaper clippings, and internal and external publications (in addition to photograph and artefact collections).

Figure 5. Museum of the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia (Sydney)
Source: author's image, 2009

The archival collection is highly representative not only of the history of the Kuomintang but of the social, cultural, political, and organisational activities of Chinese–Australian communities as a whole during the twentieth century. It thus has exceptional interpretative potential for Australian historical research. The material relating to Chinese communities throughout New Zealand and the Pacific also makes the collection of international significance as well.

Inventory of Kuo Min Tang Society of Melbourne Collections
The Kuo Min Tang Society of Melbourne was originally established in 1904 by a group of leading Chinese citizens there (amongst them Albert Honan and Wong Shi Geen), under the name of the Chinese Empire Reform Association. It was reorganised and took its present name in 1915.

The original name of the Society was interesting, given the direction it subsequently took as the leading advocate in Australia for revolutionary action to overthrow the Qing imperial government. The choice of name probably reflected the cautiousness of the founders, who were, as a rule, successful business people. The Chinese name of the Society, the *Xinminqizhihui* (新民啓智會), meaning a "new society for [helping Chinese] people to gain knowledge" or, perhaps more prosaically, a "society of new people with knowledge", was revealing of the intent of its founders: as knowledge, especially new knowledge, almost always implies a challenge to the old order.[4] In any case, from its formation until 1921, the Society shared the same

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[4] In the same vein, the Revive China Society (興中會) formed in Honolulu in 1894 by Dr Sun Yat-sen, China's leading revolutionary figure, was also mild sounding but in fact subversive, as the term "中華"— for China— implicitly excluded the ruling Manchus.

premises—189 Russell Street—with a locally published Chinese-language newspaper, the "Chinese Times," which was the leading republican voice in Australia's Chinese community, so its political sympathy was clear.

The first decade of the twentieth century was a tumultuous time for China, the end of which saw the replacement of imperial China by a republic. During this time, the Empire Reform Society, or *Xinminqizhihui*, undoubtedly maintained close links with similar organisations in other Overseas Chinese communities such as the Revive China Society. In 1915[5], the Society reformed itself as the *Kuo Min Tang* Society of Melbourne, and formally affiliated with the Chinese Nationalist Party as one of its Australasian branches. This action indicates how far the Society had departed from its conservative origin because it was an extremely poor move politically at the time: in China Sun Yat-sen had long since been supplanted by the military adventurer Yuan Shih-kai, who was about to proclaim himself the new emperor. Nevertheless, it is consistent with the way the Society always saw itself as a community organisation working to achieve the greater good of the larger community.

In 1921, after relocating to new premises in Little Bourke Street, the Society sought formal registration with the Melbourne City Council in order to claim a legitimate political and civic role. It never achieved this official recognition until 1939, even though by the late 1920s the Society had 500 members, including most of the leading business and community figures in Melbourne's Chinese community. After the Nationalist Party took power in China in 1927, for a time its Australian branches, especially the Kuo Min Tang Society of Melbourne, combined a political and even quasi-governmental role: its relationship with the Chinese consulate-general came to resemble a kind of partnership.

Unlike other, more traditional, Chinese community organisations, *Xinminqizhihui* was open to all people of Chinese heritage, without the usual, restricted membership requirements of clan, religion, occupation, native-place, or sworn brotherhood affiliation. Exceptionally, there was also no gender exclusion. While no record remains of the purpose and intent of the founders of the Society, oral tradition passed down amongst its members, and supported by examples of its newsletters of the 1920s and 1930s, indicates that the founders had aimed to promote awareness of civil and political rights amongst Melbourne's Chinese community, with an emphasis on replacing or modifying traditional Chinese community views and behaviours with modern and democratic ideas and values. Thus it may be said to be the first Chinese community group in Australia to represent modern values.

Historically, the Society was arguably the most important community organisation formed in and by the Chinese community in Australia during the age of White Australia. As the first Chinese–Australian community organisation to be set up without the restricted membership that characterised traditional Chinese community organisations, the Society was the first modern Melbourne Chinese institution, as already noted. It was also an important agent in the construction of a modern Chinese identity in the context of White Australia. Together with—indeed sometimes in opposition to—the Chinese consulate-general that officially represented China, the Society also played a major role in linking the Australian–Chinese community to the affairs of China during that nation's turbulent transition from dynastic empire to modern nation state. From its inception, under enormous pressure from both foreign invasive forces and internal dissent, the fragile Chinese Republic (1912–45) naturally turned to the large diasporic Chinese population which had overwhelmingly supported the republican movement for support in its state and nation building efforts. By and large, it may be said that until the ideological differences in Chinese politics descended into the bloody civil wars of 1946–49, the diasporic community never failed to respond to calls for help from the homeland. The Australian–Chinese community was no exception, providing generous aid on many occasions and for a range of purposes. The Society's key role in these mobilising efforts is indicated in archival materials held in its custodianship, and also well documented elsewhere.

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[5] In 1905 Sun Yat-sen amalgamated the Revive China Society with a number of other republican organisations to form the Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmenghui* 同盟會), which was renamed the Nationalist Party (the *Kuomintang*) in 1912.

From 1949 and through the early Cold War years, the Society continued to be an influential organisation within Melbourne's Chinese community. It continued to perform a prominent cultural function within the community through such activities as a weekly movie show, a monthly news magazine, community dinners on special days, and Chinese opera shows. The changes in Australian society at the end of the Vietnam conflicts coincided with the ageing of the Society's membership, and contributed to a graduate curtailing of the Society's activities. Nevertheless, today the Society retains the belief that, due to its historic significance as a contributor to the development of the Chinese community of Australia, it still has an important role to play as custodian of that historic memory, something which it considers will provide wise guidance for future directions. It will thus continue as one of the many sources of modern Australia's diverse multiculturalism.

The archival collections of the Society, including membership records, meeting records, and financial receipts, are smaller than the other two collections. Nevertheless, they are important as they illuminate the development of the local Kuomintang from 1920s to the 1940s. Through the documents we can glimpse how the Society's work helping to mobilise support for China refashioned the way in which Chinese communities situated themselves in relation to the broader Australian society.

Current Projects of the Website for 2010 to 2013

The website's content currently includes the three major inventories of the archival collections, and materials from an already growing number of smaller private collections kindly made available by individuals and families from the Chinese–Australian community. It is anticipated that this content will grow substantially over time, through further participation by individual custodians of additional historical materials; and by the outcomes of the two following important projects.

The first of these is an ARC Linkage Project entitled "Unlocking Australia's Chinese Archive: The Political Organisation and Social Experience of the Chinese Australian Community, 1909–1939". The Kuo Min Tang Society of Melbourne and the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia Inc are partner organisations in this project, with La Trobe University acting as host organisation. The project sees the two custodial organisations working with Professor Judith Brett, Dr James Leibold, and Dr Mei-fen Kuo of La Trobe University to research the political and social history of the Chinese in Australia during the inter-war years. The project aims to explore how the identity of this diasporic community was shaped by relations with its host society, with a rapidly transforming Chinese Republic, and with the wider regional Chinese diaspora.

The second project involves international cooperation with the Institute of Modern History at the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. As part of this collaboration, key documents from these archives will be digitalised and made available for public access, through this website and other approved venues, in 2012.