

## **Mrs PHYLLIS WANG**

**Interviewed by Diana Giese on 18 October 2000 for the *Post-War Chinese Australians* project, as part of the Chinese Australian Oral History Partnership, National Library of Australia**

**Introduction:** Mrs Phyllis Wang (Wang Shu Kan) was born in 1913 and educated in Nanjing, then the capital of China. She arrived in Sydney with her husband, Martin Liang-kwen Wang, in August 1937. He was Vice-Consul in Sydney for five years before being transferred to Melbourne as Consul for the next nine. He was then promoted and returned to Sydney as Consul-General [for the Republic of China]. The Wangs saw many changes in Australia-China relations, culminating in the Communist Revolution and the setting up of the People's Republic of China in 1949; the Cold War, and then, in the early 1970s, the normalisation of relationships between the two countries.

In 1954, Mrs Wang established the Chinese Women's Association. Its members initially met at her home, then, when numbers swelled to some 400, at Chequers Restaurant. Mr Wang engaged in the import-export business in the mid-1950s. In the early 1960s, Mr and Mrs Wang established the Trans-Global Travel Service which organised tours to China and business travel. In 1956, the Wangs were among the first Chinese to become naturalised Australians, when changes to the law made this possible.

**Childhood in a large family home, with several generations:** Mrs Wang says she was born the thirteenth child in her family in the thriving metropolis of Nanjing. Her family circumstances were comfortable, with their own rickshaw puller waiting to take them 'wherever mother allows us to go'. Her mother 'couldn't be bothered too much with children', so a wet nurse, a surrogate mother looked after the young ones. A tailor came to their house to measure each of them for clothes for each of the four seasons. In summer, they wore very thin silk pants and a top, while clothes gradually became thicker until winter, when they wore woollen clothes and padded cotton inside the house. Being the youngest, Mrs Wang was given hand-me-downs from her six sisters, but she did get new dresses for birthdays, New Year and official functions. Her favourite dress had greenish orchid patterns on a silver base, and was padded inside with wool to keep her warm. She wore her hair in plaits. She didn't see her parents much. They were much older, in their fifties. She was 'brought up by the servants', including a nanny. Most of her older brothers and sisters were married and had children of their own. In fact, one niece was only five years younger than she was, and another sister's children were two years younger. They all lived together in their 'huge house' 'like a country hotel', with large reception rooms for weddings, parents' or grandparents' birthdays, or funerals. These could hold 200 people. For the times and conditions in China, this was considered a very large house. It was arranged in sections, with a garden at the back. She remembers family incidents such as her sister-in-law being carried to her wedding in a sedan

chair, in the last of the old-style weddings. Their big reception room had a huge picture of mountains and trees, and big *kangs* (beds) with fires underneath. A glassed-in corridor adjoined the study room where she was tutored. Her mother and father lived in another large reception room. A married brother had his own room, and his children were in a side section with corridors. Chamber-maids occupied nearby corridors. Twenty people lived in the house at any one time. Her grandparents and her brothers and sisters-in-law were like fathers and mothers to her. When people came to holiday with them, they parked their rickshaws in the courtyard. The front of the house was occupied by a four-door chemist shop opening to the street, which was as busy as George St in Sydney.

Mrs Wang's Grandma was the head of the family, and everybody had to pay respects to her, and do whatever she said –'even my father'. He was a nobleman. One of her brothers was a Chinese herbalist, another a graduate of Beijing university, and a third a doctor of European medicine, practising in Nanjing. Her father was considered 'new-fashioned', since he played Chinese music in the house. She remembers playing under the lion's head during New Year, and putting lucky red envelopes under her pillow. She would offer visitors lotus tea for good luck in return, while they ate 'dragon's eye' longan berries. At this time, because her parents were Buddhist, they burnt paper 'money' out of respect to their ancestors. They had shrines in the second reception room in the house.

**Education and growing up:** In the family, boys and girls shared school books. Boys were allowed to go to university, but girls only as far as high school. Mrs Wang wanted to go to university where her brothers were already studying. One brother in Shanghai studying medicine suggested she become a midwife. She negotiated to be able to study a year of medicine at Nanjing University, before taking on a midwife's course. When she was 20 years of age, she had her first boyfriend, Martin, who was 24 and a budding diplomat. He wanted to marry her because he had been posted to India. She had only finished first year of university, and did not want to go, as the hot climate did not appeal to her. Mr Wang requested a transfer to Palembang in what was then the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia. Mrs Wang thought that was 'even worse...so small, so backward...like a country yard'. However, she dropped out of university, was married and went with him, expecting their baby

**Early married life in the Dutch East Indies, 1934:** 'In China, you know, you always depend on your husband', but in this foreign country, she cried a lot, because there were 'no friends, no family. The food is different. I can't cook, and no servant'. 'I never even walk into the kitchen in China' she says. 'I don't know the measurements. I wouldn't know the quantity of food for a meal.' Local servants did the sweeping, cleaning and washing. She met another Chinese woman, from Fukien, with two children and told her: 'I'll mind the children. You do the cooking.' Her husband 'had been spoiled...the one male boy in the house, in his family', and like her father, expected her to obey his orders. One day, she

hired a cab to take her home to China, 'bumping, bumping, bumping' along the road. After a while, she came home and cried. Martin was unsympathetic to her homesickness, thinking it was 'just silly'. But she found the conditions unbearable, especially during hot tropical evenings, when sitting outside meant being exposed to lizards, mosquitoes and ants. Instead, she stayed behind the flyscreen in her bedroom: 'I don't want lizards dropping on my head, because I'm scared of all that'. Her pregnancy made her even more uncomfortable. She survived on soybeans cooked by her sister-in-law that she had brought with her. Their son was born in the Dutch doctor's surgery in Palembang in November 1935. She then went home for a visit to Nanjing. She found her mother had been dead for six weeks, and 'my nephew's mother...the only one who cuddles me'.

**Time in Saigon, 1936:** When Martin was transferred to Saigon, 'I was so pleased...there's a lot of life' there. The Wangs travelled by ship with their new baby, and Mrs Wang learned to change nappies. She found Saigon 'very much like Singapore –but very dirty'. At a party she went to, they smoked opium. There were 'sing-song girls'. 'That place is not good for a gentle-woman and I dislike it. I don't want to go out.' She decided that she wanted to learn to cook, but a servant told her, 'Good mistress never come to kitchen'. So there she was: 'I don't know how to boil water. I don't know how to make the tea. I know nothing about housework, cleaning. I know nothing!' Her baby was having breathing problems, so they went back to China for three months. She left their son there with one of her sisters-in-law to look after, together with her own six children.

## Tape 2

**Posted to Australia, 1937:** The Wang family arrived in Sydney in August on board a ship from Hong Kong. She remembers that a lot of people were seasick, but she was not. Off the coast of north Australia, they were shown 'an island full of birds' by the captain. After Cairns, 'Australian water is all blue, huge...lovely blue, sky blue'. A crew member was found to have smallpox, so they were not allowed to go ashore until being revaccinated at the Quarantine Station outside Sydney. On first reaching Australia, Mrs Wang continued to wear *cheong sam*, and children would follow her, teasing her by saying that she was still in her nightgown. Martin, being very patriotic, said: 'You must wear Chinese'. Not long after their arrival, Australia and China were both at war with Japan, and they lost touch with their families in Nanjing. The city suffered under the Japanese, with many rapes, massacres and other atrocities. 'We were very fortunate that we left China when we did.'

**Official functions:** During Mr Wang's time as Vice-Consul in Sydney, Consul in Melbourne and Consul-General in Sydney, especially under Menzies as Prime Minister, the Wangs attended official functions such as the opening of Parliament in Canberra. Mrs Wang wore a black *cheong sam* imprinted with silver leaves, 'the only black dress'. She remembers that dress so well because at the time, few people in Canberra were familiar with the *cheong sam*. It was difficult to

remember and use all the diplomatic and other official names at these functions. When Mr Wang was Consul in Melbourne, she was invited to a function with Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, 'a very stout woman, and she wears a military uniform...She just said, "We are allied together now. We have our soldiers in Chungking." I said, "Yes...They're doing a very tough job there."' She also met Queen Elizabeth several times, once at Government House where she asked Mrs Wang which country she represented. Since she was wearing a *cheong sam*, 'I couldn't be representative of Japan'. Another time, she sat close to the Queen at a Country Women's Association luncheon at the Trocadero: 'She didn't eat anything...she just touched a little bit, used the fork like that.' Mrs Wang ate: 'we eat, all right'. During World War II, the Wangs entertained many high-ranking servicemen, and she learned to recognise their rank by the number of stripes

**Food and entertaining:** Mrs Wang had 'a very good Chinese cook', and would personally shop for food for her functions. She had learned a lot since those days in Palembang. On one occasion, Prime Minister Menzies said, 'Your dinner is lovely, but every time I come, it costs me one tie.' She answered, 'If you used chopsticks properly, you wouldn't dirty your tie.' She made sure she gave lessons on the use of chopsticks to all the friends who came to her home: 'Hold the chopsticks firm with three fingers...Let your chopstick rest on your third finger. Then use your second and third. First finger hold your chopstick.' She had friends practise picking up cashew nuts, because they have 'a curve...very easy'. She gave cocktail parties with easy-to-eat finger food, and her parties were very popular, often with dishes using fish such as Murray cod. However, she did not find cooking easy for quite a while. One of the first meals she learned to cook was fish and rice. 'The fish wasn't cooked properly...and the rice...the top is soggy, bottom is burned.' She practised cooking on her husband and son for two months, and learned by going to restaurants: 'I watch how they put meat with vegetables; what kind of meat with vegetables...what kind of soup they make; how they make the fish. Now I know all that, and then I come back and try again...Practice makes perfect.'

**Australian manners and customs:** Australian habits and eating schedules were hard to fathom: washing on Monday, ironing on Tuesday, big shopping on Wednesday, sports on Thursday, more shopping on Friday, and taking the family out on Saturday. When the Wangs were first invited to dinner with an Australian family they had befriended, they were surprised that they dined at 6 pm on a Sunday meal of 'ham and turkey and vegetables and sweets'. She decided this time was a good and healthy idea, since it gave people time to digest their meal before going to bed. She subsequently changed her own dinner time from 8pm to 6pm. Domestic housework was something else she had to learn. At first she gave all her washing, 'wrapped in a blanket', to a laundry. Later she was shown the copper at the back of her house, 'so I put everything in...woollens, sheets, and cotton and silk...I didn't know. White turn to all colours, colour turned to something black...I find out how stupid I am. No sense of housework.' She also told her children to buy clothes that didn't need ironing. Another thing she found

strange in Australia was putting out money for deliveries of milk and bread. 'We could never can do that in China.' It was simple things like that which endeared Australia to her, 'so honest, so nice, so friendly, so kind'.

**End of World War II and creation of the People's Republic of China:** During the War years, because of poor communications and irregular arrival of income, the Wangs decided to supplement their salary by purchasing a chicken farm in the Dandenongs outside Melbourne. They sold the eggs, and the money helped pay the office expenses. When the Communists took control of China in 1949, the chicken farm money was just as important to maintain the office of the Republic of China, the Nationalists now in Taiwan. In 1950, Mr Wang was made Consul-General and they moved back to Sydney. Other than official communications and the rare visit by a member of the Nationalist government, the Wangs had not had any contact with their families since leaving China in 1937. They were loaned money for a house in Vaucluse by the ANZ Bank, which her husband had previously advised on how to get money out of Hong Kong. She feels that conditions in China were made 'difficult' because of the civil war, and that Australia could also have civil war in twenty years because 'you let all these people come into your country. You let them carry their own religions', speak their own languages and run their own schools, 'which is wrong, totally wrong'. She feels they should instead learn 'the Australian way'. During the War, they got news of fighting from Cantonese friends, but 'I was homesick. I don't get any news from China.' She remembers with pleasure going back there for first time in 1979, even though she was worried it might be dangerous for them, with their diplomatic background. In those years of the Cultural Revolution, she looked different from everyone else because she had permed hair and wore a colourful dress. On arrival in Nanjing, she found the relative who had stayed had been sent to the countryside to dig vegetables. Her sister, principal of a girls' school, had been sent to the mountains to 'chop bricks'. Previously, in 1972, Mrs Wang had asked the Third Secretary of new PRC Chinese Embassy in Canberra to locate her doctor brother in Hangchow, from whom she had not seen or heard since 1937. She had finally located him and other relatives and tried to encourage them to come to Australia. When she saw him in 1979 after forty-two years, she told him that he 'looks like the day I left home. Father is just like you.' He had practised as a doctor through all the political turmoil, but was paid only \$350 a month. Another brother worked at a university, and his wife was a teacher. At the beginning of 2000, she visited China again. Her accountant nephew's home in Shanghai she found 'more beautiful than my own home here, now'. 'Shanghai is even better than New York', she thinks, due to Chinese being 'hard-working people'.

### **Tape 3**

**Life after the diplomatic service:** When Mr Wang left the service, he decided to go into the import-export business, which they didn't know anything about. They exported Australian rice to Hong Kong and Singapore, because 'Australian rice is better'. In 1962, they decided to go into the travel business. They had to be

recommended by two shipping companies and two airlines. They set up Trans-Global Travel in George St next to the Catholic Church, in the Haymarket, traditionally the Chinese end of the city of Sydney. 'We did very well because we are the only Chinese doing Chinese travel.' They sent people to Hong Kong, Canton [Guangzhou] and Beijing, then extended their travel network to Nanjing and Hangchow. Most trips took between 10 and 14 days, and most travellers were older people 'sneaking in' to see their families in China. When Mrs Wang took parties back to Nanjing, 'my home town', 'they all say...' "How lovely, how lucky you are".' Once when told her group would be classified 'second class', Mrs Wang wrote to the authorities in China and cancelled the trip. They came back immediately and offered her 'first class always'. They sent representatives to apologise, and set up special dinners, mostly Peking duck: 'we got fed up with Peking duck!' She has now been round the world on several 'travel education' tours, checking out hotels and airlines.

**Establishing the Chinese Women's Association, 1954:** Mrs Wang went to visit her nephew and niece in Taiwan, and met President and Madam Chiang Kai-shek, who suggested Mrs Wang form a Women's Association in Sydney. She discussed it with her husband, and he agreed. On the basis that the Chinese Australian woman is 'always at home', looking after her husband and children, never going out to work, and never doing any social work, 'I formed the Association...so we can see each other. We can talk to each other. We can go to shows with each other.' There was no politics, since she thought 'this could be a bit disruptive': 'don't divide it up'. The Association is open to everybody Chinese, or married to a Chinese person, their friends and relatives. They started with tea parties in her home on Saturday afternoons, and when they gained more members, moved to Chequers Restaurant in the city or KMT headquarters in Chinatown. They had 4-500 members of whom around 30-40 regularly came to meetings. They organised tea parties, dinners, dances, went to movies and on picnics, had barbecues and sewing circles. Once they took fifteen cars on a picnic to Wollongong. The first President was Mrs Ma Howe, 'a very capable woman'. She promoted charity work, selling buttons for the Spastics Centre outside the old Hotel Australia, and also raising money for the elderly, for deaf and dumb people, and for the Salvation Army. One week in Melbourne they raised \$35,000 for the Red Cross. The Association also had a Younger Set, with its own President. They arranged dances and dinners. Now, members find it better to go along with the younger people's new ideas. The young English-speaking members prefer raffles to button selling. The present committee works 'very, very hard. They are the best workers I have ever known. I do admire them.'

**Her views of Australia and Australians:** 'Australia looks so beautiful, so nice...Australia is one group, one people, one country...The Australian nature, is so pure, so kind and they all love their country, and are honest. Australians are not fussy, and just want to help each other.'

Mrs Wang adds: 'I have always considered myself fortunate that my husband was sent to Australia so many years ago and that we have made this place our home. Certainly, my roots may be in Nanjing where my parents are buried, but I shall be happily put to rest at the side of my late husband, here in this my new homeland, Australia.'

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