

# Veiled entrapment: a study of social isolation of older Chinese migrants in Brisbane, Queensland

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents the findings of a study of the support and service needs of older Chinese people in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, Australia. There were two specific objectives: to ascertain the problems encountered by older Chinese-Australians in their daily lives and social activities; and to develop policy and service development recommendations, with a view to mitigating their problems, meeting their unmet needs, improving their quality of life, and enhancing their participation in Australian society. The study used multiple methods, including a literature review, focus group meetings, and a community survey. The findings indicate that older Chinese people, and particularly women, experience significant restrictions in their activity patterns, social isolation and loneliness. Their lack of proficiency in the English language, and the difficulties they have in accessing language-support and interpretation services, limit their autonomous mobility and make them heavily dependent on their adult children, not least for transport. Their physical and psychological wellbeing is affected further by strained relations with their adult children, and these are compounded by financial concerns. The implications of the findings for welfare policy and practice are discussed at the end of the paper.

**KEY WORDS** – older migrants, Chinese, overseas, needs assessment, loneliness, family relationships, filial piety.

## **Introduction**

As in many developed countries, the population of Australia is ageing rapidly both in terms of the number of older people and the changing age structure. During the 20th century, the number of people aged 65 years and over increased over 15 times, compared with a fivefold increase of the

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total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2003). As a culturally diverse society, a substantial proportion of Australia's older population were born overseas. In recent years, the number of older immigrants of non-English-speaking backgrounds has been growing five times faster than the Australian-born (Thomas 2003*a*: 40). According to the 2001 census, 30.5 per cent of those aged 65 or more years originated in foreign countries (ABS 2003). This older overseas-born population is projected to reach one million by 2011, and 1.5 million by 2026 (ABS 2002). As Thomas (2003*a*) observed, the emergence of two overseas-born groups of older people in Australia reflects changes in immigration policy since the 1970s (see also Jupp 1995; ABS 1999, 2001, 2004). One group arrived in Australia when they were young and have now turned 65 years of age, the second moved to Australia in old age for family reunion or retirement; together they account for the rapid increase in the number of older overseas-born in Australia in recent years (Rowland 1991; Hugo 2004).

Population ageing has become a major policy concern for the Australian state and federal governments. If they are to respond effectively, and particularly to plan appropriate 'aged-care services', more information about the needs of older people is required, which in turn requires a better understanding of, and sensitivity to, their biographies (Daatland and Biggs 2004).<sup>1</sup> Although discussion of these issues has begun recently (Office of Multicultural Affairs 1988; Rowland 1997, 1999; Benham and Gibson 2000; Thomas 2003*a*, 2003*b*; Weston, Qu and Soriano 2003), empirical studies of older migrants' needs and the implications for support systems are still sorely lacking (Rao, Warburton and Bartlett 2006). The aims of this paper are to report a case study of one of the more disadvantaged and excluded groups, the older Chinese migrants in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, Australia, and to explore the implications for policy and practice.

### **The older Chinese-origin population in Australia**

Although Chinese migration to Australia can be traced back to the second quarter of the 19th century, during the 'gold rush' era in New South Wales and Victoria, the exclusion policies of the second half of the century resulted in a sharp decline in the Chinese population, which only revived after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> A new wave of Chinese immigration to Australia began during the late 1980s (for an overview, see Lui 2006). In 1985, following the Commonwealth (or federal) government's decision to sell places in Australian universities and to provide English-language

classes to non-English speaking foreign students, many were attracted from the People's Republic of China (PRC). After the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, nearly 37,000 Chinese students were granted permanent residence and the right to be accompanied by immediate family members (Ip, Hibbins and Chui 2006). Two other flows have also grown during the last two decades; numerous Hong Kong professionals, managers and technical workers, concerned about their future after 1997 when the sovereignty of Hong Kong returned to China, entered Australia as entrepreneurs or highly-skilled, independent migrants (Skeldon 1994; Ip and Chui 2002); and many Taiwan-born Chinese also moved to Australia as business migrants when, in the late-1980s, the Taiwanese government eased its restrictions on its citizens' overseas travel and investment (Figure 1).

In 2001, there were 21,295 PRC-born, 2,775 Hong Kong-born and 432 Taiwan-born persons aged 65 or more years in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Although the Chinese population is relatively young and dominated by young adults and dependent children, it is also ageing rapidly. For instance, in 2001 the PRC-born had the largest number of people aged 65 or over among all Asian migrant groups in Australia, and the total had risen 31 per cent since 1996 (Hugo 2004: 60). Between 1991 and 2001, the proportions aged 45–64 years among those from Hong Kong and Taiwan also increased rapidly (respectively from nine to 25 and from four to 21 per cent) (Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research 1995; Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003*a*, 2003*b*, 2003*c*). The 2001 census also showed that nearly 90 per cent of Chinese migrants lived in the four major cities of Australia. Brisbane alone had attracted five per cent of the PRC-born, eight per cent of the Hong Kong-born, and 32 per cent of the Taiwan-born populations (Chiang and Hsu 2003, 2005). Within Brisbane, many of the Chinese immigrants had settled in certain southern suburbs, particularly Sunnybank Hills, Carindale and Runcorn, which continue to be the principal destinations for recent Asian migrants (Ip, Anstee and Wu 1998; Ip, Wu and Inglis 1998; Ip 2006).

Previous studies have shown that proficiency in the English language varies greatly among the Chinese immigrants, with those from Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong having the fewest problems and those from Taiwan and PRC the most (Ip, Wu and Inglis 1998; Wu *et al.* 1998; Ip 1999). The 2001 census likewise indicated that older Chinese people had considerable difficulties with the English language; for instance, close to one-half (45%) of the PRC-born population aged 45–54 years spoke English 'poorly' or 'not at all', and a majority (55%) of those aged 55–64 years were similarly lacking in proficiency – these percentages

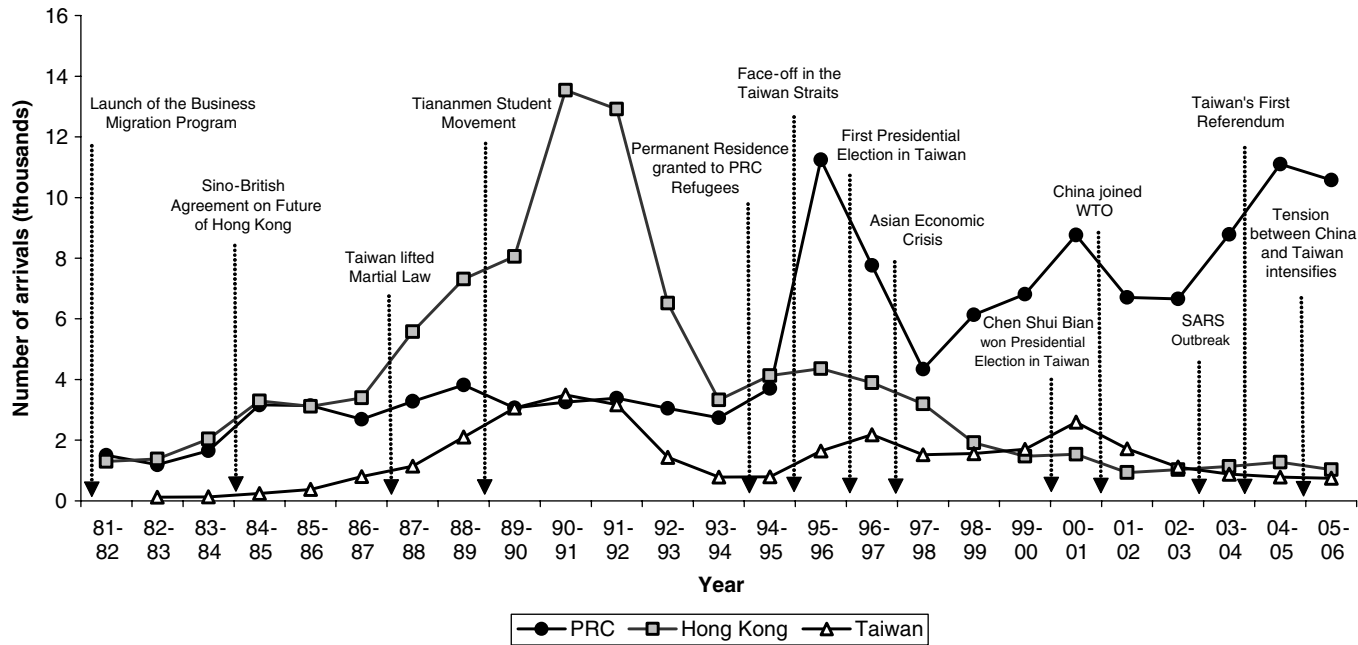


Figure 1. Settler arrivals in Australia and socio-political landmarks in the Pacific Region, 1981–2006. *Source:* Australia Bureau of Statistics, *Overseas Arrival and Departures* and *Migration*, various issues.

were significantly higher than for older people in Australia from other (mainly southern European) non English-speaking countries (ABS 2004).

The review of the literature revealed that, over the past two decades, little had been written on the settlement experience of older Chinese migrants in Australia. This is probably for two reasons: first of all, the predominant middle-class background of many of the Chinese migrants who have entered Australia over the past 20 years has stimulated research interest in the 'trans-national configurations' of the new generation (Ong and Nonini 1997; Yeoh, Huang and Lam 2005; Ip, Hibbins and Chui 2006). A spate of studies has examined how these 'cosmopolitan capitalists' or 'flexible citizens' take tactical and strategic advantage of immigration policies in Western countries to further their personal or family interests (Hui 1993; Man 1993; Chan 1997; Pe-Pua *et al.* 1998; Zhou 1998; Hamilton 1999; Irving and Tsang 1999; Ong 1999; Ho 2002; Waters 2002, 2003, 2005; Mitchell 2003; Tsang *et al.* 2003; Landolt and Da 2005). The unprecedented zeal of the new mobility, connectivity and flexible familial practices of Chinese transmigrants' across the globe has been enthusiastically described, and has drawn the attention of researchers away from more traditional concerns, such as settlement adjustment problems and the barriers to integration and inclusion faced by older immigrants.

Another reason for the scant research on the older Chinese in Australia is the widely held assumption that Chinese families 'take care of their own' dependants. It is commonly believed, not least in government, that the Chinese culture places an exceptional value on filial piety, and that all families are obliged to look after their elderly parents well (Mak and Chan 1995; de Vaus 1996). Recent research has indicated, however, that traditional Chinese filial values and practices have undergone much transformation (Chow 2004; Ikels 2004; Mehta and Ko 2004). This is especially the case when families have inadequate resources or are separated from their wider kin network, which makes it difficult for them to live up to the traditional ideals (Batrouney and Stone 1998; Chiu and Yu 2001). The adoption of capitalist and western values may also be weakening adherence to customary practices. It has been shown that older Chinese-Australians' expectations for their quality of life and their attitudes towards living in nursing homes differ from those portrayed and presumed to be 'traditional' (Fitzgerald, Mullavey-O'Byrne and Clemson 2001; Tsang, Liamputtong and Pierson 2004). Given the radical changes in the societal and familial settings that older members of the Chinese immigrant community in Australia have experienced, it is timely to investigate their social problems and needs.

TABLE I. *Composition of the five focus groups*

Group/language	Number of participants	
	Male	Female
Older Chinese men (Cantonese)	6	0
Older Chinese women (Cantonese)	0	8
Older men and women (Mandarin)	5	6
Adult children of the older Chinese (Cantonese)	4	5
Service providers <sup>1</sup>	5	3

*Note:* 1. Including community workers and health-care practitioners (Cantonese and English-speaking).

### Concepts and methods

'Need' was conceptualised, following Kaufman (1992), as a discrepancy between an actual and a desired state. The study sought to determine the nature and causes of such discrepancies, and to recommend priorities for corrective action. It adopted Kettner and others' (1990) fourfold classification of needs: *normative* needs (those which are standard for the entire population); *perceived* needs (services which people think or feel are necessary); *expressed* needs (those which are displayed when people attempt to obtain services); and *relative* needs (those particular to especially vulnerable groups).

To examine these four types of need, multiple methods were used, including a literature review and a community survey. In addition, five focus group meetings were held, three with different groups of older people in the Chinese community (one with men, another with women, and the third with Mandarin-speakers of both genders). The fourth focus group was with adult children of the older Chinese, and the fifth with service providers, community leaders and health-care practitioners (Table 1). The great value of the focus groups was that older Chinese-Australians were enabled to articulate in their own terms their problems and needs. The older Chinese-Australians and the adult-children groups were invited to describe *perceived* and *relative* needs, while the service provider group were encouraged to concentrate on *normative* and *expressed* needs. The recruitment of the focus group participants was arranged through the community network of the Hong Kong Business and Professionals' Association of Queensland (HKBPAQ).<sup>4</sup>

For the community survey, 100 questionnaires were distributed through the HKBPAQ and the Chinese Fraternity Association in metropolitan Brisbane to Chinese migrants aged 60 or more years (Table 2). The questionnaire was in Chinese and had questions on personal details, needs and problems encountered in daily life, relations with family members,

TABLE 2. *Socio-demographic profiles of the survey respondents*

Attribute and category	Number	Attribute and category	Number
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age</b>	
Male	30	60–69 years	40
Female	44	70+ years	34
<b>Marital status</b>		<b>Country of origin</b>	
Married	50	China	16
Divorced	2	Hong Kong	30
Widowed	22	Taiwan	3
<b>Years in Australia</b>		Pacific Islands	2
1–15 years	43	Vietnam	8
16–25 years	19	Singapore	1
26+ years	12	Malaysia	7
<b>Living with children</b>		Indonesia	2
Yes	37	Papua New Guinea	5
No <sup>1</sup>	37	<b>Education</b>	
<b>Sample size</b>	74	No formal education	22
		Primary	21
		Secondary	15
		Post-secondary and above	16

*Note:* 1. Including five respondents who had no children in Australia.

and the respondent's social contacts and activities. The researchers constructed and refined questions that derived from the literature review and the focus group discussions. They also pilot-tested the questionnaire with the older Chinese women group. Any respondent who had difficulties reading and completing the questionnaire were assisted by social workers of the two collaborating organisations. A total of 79 questionnaires was returned, but five were incomplete and subsequently discarded. While the use of mostly closed-ended questions in the questionnaire proved efficient in terms of time and effort, the rich contextual data generated by qualitative inquiry were sacrificed. A comprehensive understanding of the problems and issues encountered by the older Chinese migrants in Brisbane thus necessitated iterative analyses of the survey and the focus group findings. For this reason, the results of the survey and focus group have been conflated and are presented together.

## Results

### *Social contact and isolation*

One-half of the survey informants lived with their adult children, while the older migrants who participated in the focus groups all lived with their adult children. The survey revealed that the social networks of older

TABLE 3. *Patterns of social contacts and activities and of transport dependencies*

Attribute and category	Always/ often (%)	Seldom/ never (%)	Attribute and category	Number	%
<b>A. Contacts and activities</b>			<b>B. Transport dependency</b>		
<i>With friends (N=74)</i>			<i>On no-one</i>		
Face-to-face meetings	63	37	Males	15	
By telephone	58	42	Females	5	
Conversations	54	46	<i>Subtotal</i>	20	27
Eating out	46	55	<i>On family members</i>		
Exercise	22	78	Male	10	
Shopping	39	60	Female	28	
Entertainment	39	61	<i>Subtotal</i>	38	51
<i>With children (N=69)<sup>1</sup></i>			<i>On volunteers/social services</i>		
Conversations	67	33	Males	2	
Eating out	63	38	Females	7	
Exercise	19	81	<i>Subtotal</i>	9	12
Shopping	36	64	<i>On friends</i>		
Entertainment	31	70	Males	3	
<b>C. Participation in Chinese community activities</b>			Females	4	
	52	48	<i>Subtotal</i>	7	9

*Note:* 1. Excluding five respondents who had no children in Australia.

Chinese migrants in Brisbane were very restricted, particularly among women. Nearly one-half (43%) of the respondents disclosed that they had either no or only a few close friends in Brisbane, and 23 (52%) of the 44 women gave this reply. More generally, many of the respondents had little contact with their friends (Table 3). More than one-third (37%), for example, suggested they seldom or never met with their friends. While most of the focus group participants agreed that the easiest way for them to stay in touch with friends was by telephone, nearly one-half (42%) stated that they rarely or never called their friends by phone. The main reason for not using the phone, as explained by many of the focus group participants, was a concern that the charges would be an extra financial burden for their children. Some also said that they felt uncomfortable using the phone, particularly when their adult children and family were around, and that they occasionally received complaints that they were 'blocking the lines', meaning that the children's friends could not call in.

The most preferred social activities were chatting and having meals with their friends, but 46 per cent of the respondents stated that they 'seldom or never' chatted, and 55 per cent admitted that they 'seldom or never' had meals with their friends. Moreover, as revealed in the focus group meetings, most of the older people seldom visited their friends, nor did they organise social functions at home to entertain their friends.



TABLE 4. *Levels of proficiency in the English language*

Language skill and gender	Level of proficiency			Sample size
	Fluent	Average	Very poor <sup>1</sup>	
<b>Writing</b>		<i>Percentages</i>		<i>Number</i>
Men	10	43	47	30
Women	0	13	86	44
<b>Speaking</b>				
Men	17	43	40	30
Women	0	16	84	44

*Note:* 1. Including 'not a word'.

Many felt they did not want to make things more 'inconvenient' for their children, for example, by asking them for a lift in the car when they already had a hectic schedule. Some also felt strongly that their adult children did not like them to hold parties at home. As one participant said, 'they [the adult children] complained that we would mess up the house, make noise, and make neighbours complain'.

Given their lack of private space for socialising, it was not unexpected that all the focus group participants strongly agreed that churches or Chinese community organisations were very important as locations for meeting (new) friends and making contact with the 'world outside'. Nonetheless, close to one-half (48%) of the survey sample 'seldom or never' took part in activities organised by Chinese community organisations. Only one-fifth (20%) claimed to have participated in these activities regularly, while close to one-third (32%) attended only occasionally. The sense of social isolation was even more apparent on examination of the amount of time they spent alone at home; 29 or close to 40 per cent of the survey respondents spent 13 or more hours each day at home by themselves. Among these 29 respondents, 20 were women. It was thus not surprising that many of the older women 'jokingly' described their homes as 'prisons' during the focus group discussions.

#### *Language and transport problems*

Although 42 per cent of the survey respondents had completed secondary school or a higher level of education, their command of the English language was generally poor (Table 4). Not surprisingly, a large proportion of those unable to write and speak English were women, and in fact not one woman considered herself able to write or speak the language fluently. Among the focus group participants, many had enrolled for but

later dropped out from English-language classes. They said that they found it extremely hard to learn a new language at their age. The lack of language skills posed serious problems for the older Chinese, one consequence being that they lacked the confidence to venture out on their own, to visit their friends or to attend social activities, which reinforced their social isolation and sense of low self-esteem. The problem was especially critical among the women. During the focus group discussions, some complained that they were not allowed to answer incoming telephone calls, even when their children were not at home. One woman repeated her adult son's instructions: 'What if there's an important message for me in English? I don't want you to mess things up because you don't know English. Better to leave it ringing than have you answer the phone'. In effect, most of the participants admitted that language problems had severely limited their communication with non-Chinese speakers, and thereby stopped them from taking part in any of the special events and programmes for older people organised by Brisbane City Council.

Their poor proficiency in the English language also explains why the older Chinese preferred to consult Chinese-speaking doctors when they were ill. As a physiotherapist pointed out during the focus group discussion, this meant that many older Chinese were severely disadvantaged in accessing health services. They were not aware of the free services and amenities for older people, as these were not advertised in Chinese languages. Their poor English-language ability also made it difficult for them to consult a specialist when needed. As a medical practitioner maintained during the focus group discussion:

It is hard to find specialists who are conversant in both Chinese and English. Even more difficult [restricted] is the availability of qualified interpreters who could interpret effectively and accurately to Chinese patients about their medical conditions. ... Many older patients think they could rely on their adult children to tell them what advice was given to them by the specialist, but most adult children have difficulties in understanding medical jargon. Ultimately they, both the adult children and their parents, had to visit us again to find out what the condition was all about and what medical advice had been given to them; additional visits cost them both time and money.

Turning to mobility, both the focus group discussions and the survey findings indicated that many older Chinese had to rely on others for transport (Table 3). They were dependent on their family members, and to a lesser extent their friends, volunteers and social workers, for transport to and from shops, friends, clinics or doctors. In comparison to the women, however, the men were much less dependent. Of the 20 survey respondents who claimed that they were *not* dependent on others for transport, 15 were men. A majority of the focus group participants

TABLE 5. *Family relationships, feelings of loneliness and confinement*

Statements	Agree	Disagree	No comment
	<i>Percentages</i>		
My relations with my family are not harmonious	22	61	18
My family has imposed a lot of constraints on me	14	67	19
I have maintained regular contact with relatives in my place of origin	49	36	15
Life here is lonely	39	46	15
Nobody cares about me	18	69	14
It is very difficult to go out	53	38	10

*Note:* 74 respondents answered this question.

considered that public transport services were inadequate, inefficient and infrequent. Many also complained bitterly about the lack of direct bus services between different suburbs, and they felt strongly that the fares-concession during off-peak hours was unreasonably restrictive and inconsiderate for older people. As one of the participants explained:

We [members of an elderly club in the Chinese community] can only meet on Saturday because it is the only day in the week when off-peak discounts apply all day. There are concessions on Sunday too but the services are so infrequent.

In summary, the language and transport problems constrained the mobility and reinforced the social isolation of the older Chinese. Their sense of isolation was particularly acute if the adult children were too busy to take them out at the weekends, leaving many feeling powerless and trapped.

### *Family relations*

The first reading of the responses to the survey did not suggest that there were serious problems or conflicts between older Chinese parents and their adult children. As shown in Table 5, when questioned whether their relationship with their family members was *not* harmonious, over one-half (61 %) of the respondents disagreed. Similarly, a clear majority (67 %) disagreed with the statement that their family imposed a lot of restrictions on them. When the issue was discussed closely in the focus groups, however, the relationships between older Chinese persons and their family members were revealed as far from perfect, and it became apparent that many respondents were uncomfortable about admitting that their family relationships were under strain, because they believed that they should avoid conflicts or confrontations with their adult children, as is the vaunted tradition in Chinese families. It was also learnt that most of those who reported unhappy and strained family relations were women. In the older

women's focus group, many confessed that when they were at home, they wanted to do a share of the housekeeping, cooking, cleaning and looking after the grandchildren, but their children did not allow them to cook or even enter the kitchen, for fear they would get burnt, or because they believed that their mother did not know how to operate the equipment in a 'modern' kitchen. As one participant observed, 'Even with the best intentions, I can't help but feel hurt and useless around the house'. Yet out of concern for the wellbeing of their adult children, and to avoid direct confrontation, many chose to keep quiet rather than talk about their feelings openly. Most did no more than whinge to their friends when they met at a shopping mall or at the activities organised by Chinese community organisations.

The types of interactions between the older people and their children illustrated their equivocal relationships (Table 3). Although their most frequent social activity was having conversations with and eating out with their children, more than one-third of the respondents 'seldom or never' participated in these interactions. Furthermore, most reported that they 'seldom or never' shopped or exercised (including playing sports) with them, and nearly 70 per cent claimed that they 'seldom or never' shared entertainment activities with them. More importantly, although many participants in the focus groups felt 'fortunate' they were able to live with their adult children – the open space and clean air of their residential area being particularly appreciated – they were also 'disappointed' by the little time there was to communicate with their adult children because they were 'always busy at work'. They also perceived that their relationship with their adult children was harmed by a 'generation gap', especially the differences in values between their own 'traditionalism' and their adult children's 'westernisation'.

On the other hand, during the focus group discussions the adult children described their parents as frequently nostalgic, and recognised the difficulties they had in adapting to new situations and accepting new ideas. Some even believed that their parents did not want their help and preferred to keep to themselves. Many also complained that their parents spent too much time at home, one even remarking that they were 'imagining things and getting themselves into a state of unnecessary depression and emotional instability'. A few also thought that their parents depended too much on them, and had become a 'financial liability'.

#### *Emotional and social needs*

The responses to the survey made it very clear that feelings of loneliness and confinement were most prevalent among the oldest age group, and

particularly the women (Table 5). More than one-third (39%) agreed that life in Brisbane had been lonely, and although only 18 per cent felt that ‘nobody cares about me’, a majority (53%) agreed that it was very difficult for them to go out. If it was difficult for the older Chinese immigrants to discuss their problems with their children, it became evident during the service providers’ focus group that at least some health-care professionals became the ‘sympathetic ear’, for several reported that older people spoke to them about their personal and family problems during the consultation. The professionals also observed that many older Chinese suffered from a lack of motivation, demonstrated little self-respect, and showed signs of withdrawal that in some cases led to further health complications.

Given the problems faced by the older Chinese migrants in Brisbane, what were their most urgent needs? According to the responses to the survey questionnaire, the most important was clearly better public transport, for almost one-half maintained that its shortcomings ‘should be fixed’. After transport, the most frequent demands were for better interpretation services, and for a permanent venue where they could socialise with old friends and make new acquaintances. More attention and better care from their family members, and greater financial assistance, were less important, with only 16 per cent considering these issues as urgent. When these issues were discussed in depth during the focus groups, it emerged that the strongest consensus was for a social centre that catered specifically for older Chinese people. Given that most had earlier indicated that they wanted to maintain ‘a sense of independence’, ‘emotional support from friendship’, or ‘just being active’, it was understandable that a dedicated, conveniently-located social community centre with appropriate opening hours was considered imperative. As two social workers in one of the focus groups observed:

If you look around in Landmark (a popular Chinese restaurant at Sunnybank Plaza that is a venue for *yum cha* [the custom of chatting, havng *dim sum* and drinking Chinese tea with friends or family members]), you’ll find that groups of older people are always hanging around from late morning to early afternoon. It didn’t take them long to finish their lunch or *dim sum*, but that is not the point. They are there because they don’t want to stay home and there is no other place for them to hang out. The restaurant is the only place where they can have a bit of social contact with people outside their homes and families. [Going there] has become a routine, a ritual.

I know quite a number of older Chinese men who go to Chinatown everyday to buy Chinese newspapers. In fact, they don’t have to go there to get their Chinese newspapers – they could easily get them in many newsagents in the suburbs where the Chinese are known to congregate, but they go to Chinatown. Why? Because it gives them something to do, to get out of the house, be themselves, feel independent and, knowing that they can still be on their own, confident, and able

to look after themselves despite the fact that they have few places to hang around in Chinatown.

The older Chinese women had the fewest opportunities to meet others and do things outside the house without a dedicated social centre. As one of the participants said:

It is more difficult for us women to hang around in restaurants and Chinatown without our spouses [because by custom this is not the proper thing to do]. We just want to have a place where we could meet our friends, engage in a bit of small talk, to have a few laughs, a few whinges, and a few moments to reminisce. We don't really need to have activities organised for us. We feel comfortable just having a place to meet people. We don't even have to see our friends everyday, but just knowing we have a place where we can meet up with friends whenever we need to do so will give us a sense of hope, and something to look forward to. You have no idea how important that is to us.

When asked to rank their preferences for additional services appropriate to their needs, the desire for a nursing home ranked second but a long way behind the community centre. Contrary to the widely accepted belief that older Chinese people would refuse to live in a nursing home, during the focus group discussions many said that they would have no objection to moving into such a facility if it was staffed and managed sensitively and adapted appropriately to their cultural background. One said:

I don't see anything wrong with being in a nursing home if the staff could speak Chinese and allow us to maintain the Chinese way of life and cultural practices. ... As long as I can tell people what my problems are in my own language and people can understand me speaking Chinese, I'll be fine.

The results from both focus groups and the survey indicated strongly that older Chinese people in Brisbane valued their independence and autonomy and wished to be less dependent on their adult children for social support.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

### *Limitations of the study*

Given the absence of a proper sampling frame for the sample and its confinement to one city, the limitations of the survey findings are obvious. The reliance upon community organisations for the distribution of questionnaires ran the risk of reaching only those who were more active, mobile and sociable. Given the constraints of this study both in terms of sampling and resources, the findings are not generalisable to all Chinese immigrant groups in Australia, and other ethnic groups do not necessarily share the problems that have been described.

*The principal findings*

The findings of the focus group discussions and the community survey can be summarised as follows. In marked contrast to the popular impression that recent Chinese immigrants are 'flexible' or 'cosmopolitan' capitalists with the resources and ability to take advantage of the new transnationalism that frees them from constraints of time and space, this study has presented a less favourable picture of the lives of older Chinese migrants in Brisbane. Both the survey responses and the focus group discussions suggested that social isolation and feelings of loneliness and confinement were common and particularly acute among women. For many, a sense of social isolation was exacerbated by poor access to, and increasing dependence upon, their adult children for transport. Their restricted mobility, limited finances and language barriers led inexorably to restricted social and psychological lives, that for some were compounded by self-imposed solitude, which resulted in loneliness, boredom, unhappiness and, in exceptional cases, depression. Inadequate support from family members made it more difficult for them to take part in social activities or to access the amenities provided by the city for older people in general. Paradoxically, because of the common belief that Chinese older parents are usually well looked after, especially among middle-class families, the predicament of many was unnoticed.

While previous research had shown that many older parents who came to Australia by 'family reunion' migrations found themselves dependent economically and socially on their adult children (Birrell 1990; Rowland 1991), the findings of this study suggest that the consequences of this dependence are more wide ranging and severe, and that they create strains in family relations. Older Chinese women are clearly the most disadvantaged; in our sample, they were less likely than men to know the English language and less mobile because they were constrained by traditional Chinese cultural values, and many were relatively confined to their homes, and expressed alienation and a sense of isolation. Overall, the findings suggest that the settlement and incorporation of older Chinese migrants into Australian society has not been as easy and complete as many have believed. As MacKinnon, Gien and Durst (2001) found among elderly Chinese men and women immigrants in small Canadian towns, to avoid being a burden to their families, many kept their physical and emotional concerns to themselves, and consequently suffered from diverse problems, ranging from physical symptoms such as insomnia and loss of appetite and energy, to negative psychological states such as feeling imprisoned, the inability to make independent choices, and the lack of motivation to make or maintain friendships. Bauman (1998*a*, 1998*b*)

observed that one of the human consequences of globalisation was the emergence of new social divisions. Chinese middle- and professional-class migrants were for a time presented as beneficiaries of globalisation or 'the new mobility', and courted and welcomed by western democratic economies (Ong 2005). But the older parents of these new 'flexible capitalists' have been trapped in dependent and isolated social situations by their lack of appropriate cultural and social capital for life in the new societal setting, and have little control of their everyday lives: 'they can only kill time, as they are slowly being killed by it' (Bauman 1998a: 45).

Despite the limitations of the study, the findings have clear policy implications. First and foremost, there are lessons for national migration policy. The Commonwealth government is pursuing a new approach to 'population management', through a policy of increasing the intake of skilled, entrepreneurial and wealth-bearing independent migrants (Hugo 2003). It is clear, however, that the policy should not be implemented without full and detailed consideration of the human and social costs for the less mobile and resourceful older parents of the admitted migrants. Planning appropriate responses to Australia's ageing population must also be responsive to the needs of the various ethnic groups of older people. Guidance and financial support should be made available at the state and city levels of government to provide a basic infrastructure of community facilities for the dependents of the migrants that the country is keen to welcome.

At the level of city and community services planning, a dedicated social centre for older Chinese persons would provide a meeting place, a locale for social activities, and a focal point for information dissemination about government policies, access to social and health services as well as community events. Most importantly, it would provide better incentives for older Chinese persons to break away from their social isolation. The state or local governments should also ensure the implementation of multi-lingual signs in public areas and the simplification of information about language support services. They must work closely with voluntary organisations and use various ethnic media to disseminate information about government services to older Chinese people in the community.

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## NOTES

- 1 In Australia, more than in other major English-speaking countries, older people are commonly referred to in policy discourse as 'the aged', and policies and spending programmes for the age group are collectively known as 'aged-care services'.
- 2 The 1861 census in Australia enumerated 37,720 Chinese-born people; two-thirds were in Victoria but just 10 were women. The Chinese-born population of Victoria 'fell by about half in the 20 years to 1880 and almost by half again by the turn of the century'. By 1888 popular agitation against competition from Chinese labour had reached such proportions that all mainland colonies from South Australia to Queensland adopted exclusion legislation, which was systematised in the 'White Australia' policy (Kingston 1993: 17 and 135–7).
- 3 Unpublished ABS tables from Chiang and Hsu (2003). At the time of the 2001 census, about 32 per cent of the PRC-born, 23 per cent of the Hong Kong-born, and 39 per cent of the Taiwan-born Chinese had been resident in Australia since 1996 (Hugo 2004).
- 4 The participants were not remunerated for their attendance at these meetings.

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