

Working owners and employees in Chinese restaurants in Australia

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Introduction

The last decades have seen, in many industrialised nations, a significant relative decline in manufacturing sector employment and a growth in the service sector. While enthusiastic prophets of post-industrial society, from Bell (1974) onward, hailed these developments as an upgrading of labour, Braverman (1974, ch. 16) was only the first of many (Tarling and Wilkinson, 1990, p. 25) to see in this restructuring a loss of skills, security, and status for the working class. For the dual labour market theorists of the 1970s this sector, especially small, labour-intensive firms providing personal services, was almost the paradigm of peripheral, secondary employment—providing low wage, insecure, and dead-end jobs to a workforce largely composed of women, juveniles, immigrants and other minorities. More recent concerns with the spread of disadvantaged non-standard forms of labour have included many of the self-employed (so prevalent in this sector) in this category, seeing them forced into working very long hours for little return, with few prospects for improvement and no union or legal protection from the buffetings of the market or the depredations of large firms (Tarling and Wilkinson, 1990, p. 25).

Restaurants, cafes, and fast food outlets are among the first that come to mind when there is talk of expanding low-level services (Rosenberg, 1989, p. 376). Cohen and Zysman (1987, p. 56) bemoan that the growth in employment in fast food outlets has exceeded the total employment created in information related services. Chiswick found restaurants to be major employers of illegal immigrants in Chicago (1988, p. 99) and a widespread image evokes echoes of George Orwell's 1930s journalistic descriptions (1940).

Segmentation theory and research has moved a long way in the past decade, from simple dualism towards the recognition and exploration of a multiplicity of segments which also vary over time and, transnationally, in character and boundaries according to different economic, legal, and institutional contexts (Rosenberg, 1989, p. 386; Wilkinson, 1988). Studies of small manufacturing firms in industrial districts in Italy and elsewhere, for example, have denied that they are characterised by low skill and technology or by dependence on large companies (Berger and Piore, 1980; Best, 1990). Immigrant workers in Western Europe and Australia in the post-war decades were channelled immediately into unionised production jobs in giant firms, which in the

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United States were considered bastions of primary employment. Here, their conditions, if not their pay, characterised them as a disadvantaged segment (Lever-Tracy, 1984).

Studies of the Cuban ethnic business enclave in Miami (Portes, 1987; Wilson and Portes, 1980) and of Chinese garment firms in New York (Waldinger, 1984) have claimed that ethnic enclaves provide small working owners with mutual support and preferential long-term business ties, which protect them from the vagaries of the market, and with a workforce which is not only cheap but also stable and reliable. As a consequence their incomes are significantly higher than those of co-ethnic employees with similar 'human capital' (Portes and Jensen, 1989, p. 938) and their businesses have opportunities for expansion and diversification. The loyalty of the workforce, they argue, is derived from restrictions which community norms place on insecurity within the enclave and from real opportunities for access to more skilled jobs and to entrepreneurship.

These findings are not unchallenged. Bonacich (1980) and Rainnie (1985) had argued that the advantages of ethnic employers derived essentially from their access to a more docile and exploitable workforce and from patriarchal authority over the unpaid labour of wives and children. Sanders and Nee have taken a similar position, contesting the Miami data and arguing that the prosperity of the owners was attributable to the level of exploitation of employees (Zhou and Logan, 1989).

Given the importance of non-professional services in the paradigm of secondary employment, it is surprising that so little recent research has been focused on employment relations and conditions in particular services. The unitary nature of secondary employment throughout the sector is more often presumed than demonstrated. One of the few important recent studies has been that by Bailey of restaurants in New York (1987) which found several quite different employer strategies leading to different work processes, types of employees and conditions and prospects. That segment owned by immigrants was distinctive in lacking many of the key secondary attributes, in marked contrast to other segments of the restaurant sector in New York, a finding similar to that of earlier studies of Macedonian restaurants in Toronto (Herman 1979) and of Greek pizzerias in Connecticut (Lovell-Troy, 1980). Community norms gave workers some protection and in return for training opportunities, leading frequently in time to self-employment, the employers obtained trustworthy and committed workers with low turnover rates and a willingness to acquire skills, despite low wages. These latter, however, remained crucial. Bailey argues that the success of immigrant restaurants depended on their ability to compete in price with the cheap fast food segment (Bailey, 1987, pp. 51-52).

Such case studies of the service sector have been too rare to make many generalisations possible and have had little impact on the undifferentiated stereotype of service sector employment. It is not clear whether such opportunities for skill acquisition and self-employment are generally to be found in immigrant restaurant sectors or only here, nor is it clear whether there are structural or institutional preconditions for their emergence. It seems likely, for example, that they will depend on successive waves of immigrants to replace the workers who become self-employed (Portes, 1987, p. 347) and on the existence of some established hold by the group on a sector with a potentially expanding market and where a start can be made with little capital (Waldinger, 1986). The relative contributions to business success of the cheapness

and of the commitment of the workforce remain unclear. This is then a field in which further case studies are needed to clarify the implications of a spread of service sector employment and to enable the development of a more complex and differentiated theoretical understanding than is provided by a simplistic dualism.

This paper presents the findings of a case study of Chinese restaurants in Brisbane, the capital of the State of Queensland in Australia. Australia is of particular interest for a number of reasons. It has had in the last 40 years one of the highest rates of diversified immigration in the industrialised world (over a fifth of its population in 1986 was born overseas, more than half in non-English speaking countries). It has also had, however, a highly centralised wage-fixing system, the pay awards of which are legally binding and applicable to most workers, whether unionised or not, in small and in large firms and in the service sector as well as manufacturing. Although award evasion undoubtedly occurs, it is likely that it has been limited in extent and scale. Immigrants are to be found throughout the working class, including most skilled jobs, and their average wage levels have not differed from those of indigenous workers in similar occupations (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, 1988, chs 1-2).

Another distinctive feature of the Australian labour market has been the under-developed crystallisation of a distinct informal sector in comparison with what is often claimed in the United States and Europe. Identity cards are not carried. Social security benefits have been paid out of general taxation and no identifying documents have been needed to obtain employment. Until very recently there has been little active pursuit of illegal immigrants in employment. A raid this year by immigration officials on a small Queensland factory employing visa overstayers made national headlines as one of the first actions of its kind. Indeed, because of its geographical isolation, Australia has experienced much lower rates of illegal immigration than have been found in Europe or North America. Chiswick (1988, p. 140), for example, estimates there to have been a stock of some four million illegal immigrants in America in 1986, constituting 4% of the total labour force and being some eight times more numerous than the annual intake of new legal immigrants. A recent Australian estimate (JSCMR, 1990) is of a stock of 90,000 in a country with a labour force of over 10 million and an annual intake of around 130,000 legal immigrants.

Most Chinese have come to Australia in the 1980s, in a period of manufacturing decline. By the 1986 census there were 185,000 people in Australia who nominated their 'ancestry' as Chinese, about 1.2% of the total population, four-fifths of them born overseas. In Brisbane there were 9300 in a total population of 1.2 million (ABS, 1986). The Chinese component of the population continues to grow.

Brisbane is a major regional centre, some 900 km north of Sydney, serving a large hinterland containing important rural and mining industries, and with major holiday centres and large recent tourist developments to its north and south. In the 1950s and 1960s Brisbane's manufacturing industry lagged behind that in other major cities so that the impact of the recession of 1975, and of the prolonged decline of manufacturing, was limited here. Thanks to this, and to its warmer climate, the state benefited from internal migration and since the early 1970s its economy and population has been growing faster than most other states.

In the relative absence of manufacturing Brisbane had attracted less of the large, post-war influx of immigrants, especially from non-English speaking countries than

any other mainland city (though this was still high by international standards). Thus, by 1986, 18% of the city's population were born overseas with figures ranging from 26 to 32% in other major cities (Hugo, 1990, pp. 130, 139). This gap is now narrowing and Brisbane is proving attractive to business immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The impact of a cosmopolitan population is thus more recent here than in other Australian cities and Asians are more central to it.

Brisbane is of particular interest both because of the rapid expansion of its restaurant sector as a whole since 1976 and because ethnic Chinese business is proportionately very strong here. Between 1976 and 1986 while the employed population of Brisbane increased by 20%, the numbers employed in restaurants and cafes grew by 116% from 2300 to 5000. The growth has been largely accounted for by the spread of small business. While the decade saw an increase of 113% in the numbers of employees in restaurants, it saw an increase of 151% in the self-employed and of 131% in employers in the sector, so that by 1986 owners comprised 17% of the restaurant workforce in Brisbane (ABS, 1976, 1986).¹

Over a fifth of Brisbane's Chinese workforce in 1986 were employers and self-employed, mainly in small service businesses. This is almost double the proportion to be found in Sydney, Australia's largest city and the one with the biggest Chinese community. Given a certain propensity to employ people of the same ethnic origin, it is likely that a majority of the 5000 Chinese labour force in Brisbane (but not in Sydney) were working owners or employees in these ethnic small businesses. Fifteen per cent of this labour force were in the restaurant sector including over a fifth of the working owners, and there were probably another 10% of owners and rather fewer of employees in 'take-away' fast food outlets.²

The growth in the number of Chinese restaurants has outpaced that of a sector which has itself been experiencing an explosive growth in its workforce and even more in its numbers. The Brisbane business telephone directory listed 238 restaurant outlets in 1976. Ten years later this had risen to 813, an increase of nearly three and a half times. In the next three years growth continued, but more slowly with 844 listed by 1989. In 1976 Chinese restaurants already represented a substantial proportion, with 31 outlets, 13% of the total, and these grew even faster over the next ten years, to 132, 16% of the total. Since then, however, there has been only negligible increase.³ The numbers and growth rate cannot be accounted for in terms of an ethnic market. In 1987 there was one restaurant for every 1700 people in Australia (ABS, 1989A, p. 1). On the basis of ethnic custom alone there should have been two or three Chinese restaurants in Brisbane in 1976 and eight in 1986.

¹ Between 1980 and 1987 part-time employment in all restaurants increased at more than double the rate of full-time employment (ABS, 1989A, p. 6), thus the total hours put in by small proprietors have increased, relative to that of employees, even faster than have their numbers.

² 'Take-aways' are common in Australia, and involve the sale of hot cooked food in plastic or aluminium containers with little provision for consumption on the premises. The census classifies them as retail shops, but an estimate of their numbers can be obtained by a count of those with Chinese names in the business telephone directory.

³ This refers to restaurants with Chinese names or indicating Chinese cuisine. While almost all of these are probably Chinese owned, increasing numbers of Chinese are proprietors of restaurants serving other Asian and even European food. These would not have been included in the count. Three of the survey restaurants sold Western food, but two of them and others who had tried and abandoned such business reported hostility by customers or non-Chinese staff.

This case study is derived from a larger study of 138 businesses owned by ethnic Chinese and Indians in Brisbane and Sydney.¹ It makes use of long, largely open-ended interviews with the owners of 16 restaurants and four take-aways and with 17 other small business people who were ex-restaurateurs or restaurant workers, or the children of restaurateurs or wholesalers and producers who supplied restaurants. Since no sampling frame of Chinese businesses exists and since it was clear that co-operation from this group would depend on personal introductions, a snowball approach was chosen. Three members of the research team (two of whom are Chinese speakers long resident in Brisbane) had between them a wide range of Chinese acquaintances including friends, shopkeepers, students and their relatives, members of a Chinese church, etc. These supplied introductions to small business owners who in turn, on completion of the interviews, were generally willing to provide further contacts. Refusals were negligible. A comparison with census data indicated quite a good fit in terms of the range of business types, countries of birth and length of residence and the distribution in different parts of the city. It seems likely, however, that our respondents would have filtered out possible contacts who were likely to be unwilling or with a reputation for illegality or for breaches of accepted norms, while isolates would not be included. Underrepresented, too, were the Australian born and small units with no employees.

Introductions to the 20 restaurateurs were most often provided by people who were not themselves restaurant owners and their diversity made clear that they were not a particular select group. They had come from a variety of countries. Three restaurants were in Chinatown, and three in the central district, four were in inner suburbs and the remaining ten in various outer suburbs. Six had settled in Australia in the 1980s and four before 1970.

All but three made use of the work of family members and relatives, most often as working partners, and in addition all but two employed non-family labour, often full time in the kitchen, and casual part-timers, frequently overseas and immigrant Chinese students, as waiters. In view of the likely difficulty in gaining access to unselected employees, it was decided to approach such students directly by distributing and collecting anonymous questionnaires before lectures in Brisbane Universities. These asked a wide range of specific questions about pay and conditions and then an open-ended question about problems or complaints. Forty responses were obtained from students who had worked in restaurants serving Chinese food (mainly overseas students of Chinese ethnicity) and 48 from those who had worked in restaurants serving Anglo-Australian food (mainly indigenous students). Sixty-two of these were obtained in 1990 and another 26 in 1991. An approach was also made to the relevant trade union, but they had made no attempt to recruit in Chinese restaurants and had no information.

¹ The research was funded by the federal Government's Office of Multicultural Affairs and was carried out by Constance Lever-Tracy, Irene Philips, and Noel Tracy of Griffith University, Brisbane; David Ip of Queensland University, Brisbane, and Jim Kitay of Sydney University. The project involved interviews with the owners of 68 Chinese and 28 Indian businesses in Brisbane, carried out mainly between May 1989 and February 1990, and with the owners of 31 Chinese and 11 Indian Businesses in Sydney, carried out in June 1990. Short follow-up telephone interviews were held with the Brisbane respondents in March 1991.

This paper begins with a description of the origins of today's Chinese restaurants in the narrowly circumscribed, stagnant niche which was almost the only toehold enabling a Chinese presence to survive in Australia through the era of the White Australia policy. The 'commuting system' starved them of resources of family and community and almost totally restricted opportunities for growth and mobility. None the less ethnic closure was established and their monopoly was maintained on the cooking of Australian-Chinese food and the ownership of the outlets that provided it.

When new Asian immigration recommenced in the 1970s and became sizeable in the 1980s these foundations enabled the sector to take advantage of expanding markets to grow, diversify, and increase in sophistication. It developed a hierarchy of attainable skills, ready channels of access to ownership and, among the owners, a ladder leading step by step from small to large, from single to multiple and from down to up market establishments. This pattern of growth and mobility provides a context for a sector with relatively non-antagonistic labour relations which exhibits many of the training opportunities, job ladders and opportunities for access to self-employment found by Bailey in immigrant restaurants in New York. Although minor breaches of the award were common, the centralised wage-fixing system did provide the framework within which pay was calculated, and the sector seemed less dependent for its success on relatively cheap wages than was the case in New York.

Part 1

An examination of Chinese restaurants in Australia cannot start either with the present day or with the immigrant community itself. Light has said of the United States that 'the classic small businesses of prewar Chinese were . . . monuments to the discrimination that had created them' (1972, p. 70), and the same is, if anything, even more demonstrably true of Australia. Little has been written about the Chinese in 20th century White Australia and the best account is provided by C. Y. Choi (1975).

Chinese were first attracted to Australia, as earlier to America, by the gold rushes. The movement was organised by the village-based male lineages, which only sent men, and expected them to come home. Therefore numbers fell continuously when restrictions on new arrivals were progressively introduced, with a near complete ban imposed at Federation in 1900. They fell from a peak of perhaps as much as 50,000 in the mid-19th century to less than 10,000 by 1947, with no more than 400 in Brisbane (Choi, 1975, pp. 27,56). The community none the less did survive.

In the 1920s large-scale movements of women to the Chinese settlements of South-east Asia began, but in Australia a unique permanent commuting system was perpetuated by restrictions on naturalisation or family reunion (*ibid.*, p. 36). Asian exclusion was achieved by means of a dictation test in 'any European language' (Gaelic was a common choice by immigration officials) but administrative manipulation of exemptions allowed certain select Chinese activities to be replenished and sustained (*ibid.*, p. 41). From generation to generation Chinese business owners in Australia returned to China to marry and conceive children, then came back alone, and when a son or nephew was old enough, were able to bring him out as an 'assistant' on a temporary permit, which could be made permanent when he became a 'substitute' for the retiring older man, who would often then return to China (*ibid.*, p. 84).

Although Australians have developed, over the last 20 years or so, a passion for an ever-widening range of exotic cuisines, the taste for Australian-Chinese food is much older and more deeply rooted, and widely acceptable in the working class and in small town areas as well. This acceptability goes back to the gold rushes, when women were scarce but men of British origin preferred to avoid female tasks. When Chinese opened small eating places they were welcomed.¹ For the first half of the 20th century Chinese food was, in many places, the only kind of non-British cooking which was incorporated into standard Australian culture. It was in fact a highly Australianised version of the original, with deep frying instead of steaming, no spices, and only Western vegetables and with a very restricted range of comfortably familiar dishes.

The handful of interviewees who had restaurant experience prior to migrating told us that they had to relearn here all they knew. None the less, Chinese restaurateurs were successful for a century in establishing closure on their skills by creating and sustaining a belief that only they could provide this requisite commodity. A consequence was that chefs, assistants, and substitute 'managers' for restaurants and cafes were among the few exempt immigration categories (Choi, 1975, p. 41). In urban areas (and the Chinese were increasingly urban) restaurants became, more and more, the main effective and sustainable form of Chinese activity. In 1968 Choi found that of 165 surveyed Chinese men in the Melbourne workforce, 27% were self-employed cafe owners, 8% were cafe-owning employers and 23% worked as chefs or waiters in Chinese cafes (*ibid.*, p. 87).

This distribution makes clear how small most of these businesses were, with nearly three-quarters employing no labour, and an average of three employees each for the remainder. This constrained, resourceless and stagnant business sector, providing a standard bastardised product, offered little beyond survival to most. Assistants were unable to change jobs and had to wait for their employers to retire before they had any prospects of independence, while owners also had few opportunities for growth or prosperity. Yet they were able to sustain the broad market for their product and the exclusive right of their ethnic group to supply it, foundations on which new arrivals would build when the ice of the White Australia policy began to crack.

After the Second World War, entry restrictions were, if anything, made tighter, but in 1956 assistants were allowed permanent residence, and naturalisation after 15 years was allowed. The following year men, whose fathers and grandfathers may have been living in Australia for 70 or 80 years, at last began to bring in their wives and children. By 1966, in Victoria, 80% of those married outside Australia had done this (*ibid.*, p. 96). In 1968 racial restrictions on new entrants were loosened and in 1973 the White Australia policy was formally ended.

The Chinese restaurant sector today has been built on the foundations of the earlier ghetto-like experience of the White Australia period. Of the 20 restaurateurs we interviewed, four could trace personal or family connections directly back to the restaurants of those times, and another four had worked in commuters' restaurants in the 1950s and 1960s when they had been overseas students in Australia. Most others

¹ There is a well-known story from the 1950s of a country town branch of the Returned Services League (the most determined supporters of the White Australia policy) who conducted a campaign in defence of their Chinese cook, who had been discovered to be an illegal immigrant and was to be deported.

had working experience in restaurants whose owners could trace such connections directly or at another remove.

The experience of one old timer spans the change. He had been an apprenticed cook in Hong Kong and had been brought out in 1959 as chef for an aging childless commuter in a medium-sized provincial town. The exemption papers were arranged by the local senator, who did not want to see his favourite restaurant close down. After a few years of hard work and appalling living conditions he was able to buy out his retiring employer. When naturalised, at the end of a 15-year wait, he went back to Hong Kong to marry and brought out his wife. The business now entered quite a new phase. She had completed high school, worked as a bank clerk and spoke good English (which her husband did not). She took over much of the management, the accounts and the relations with the public, and the business grew. Growing numbers of new immigrants made it possible to take on staff and expand and they in turn benefited from the boom. 'There are now 22 Chinese restaurants in the town and 19 of their owners used to be cooks in my restaurant.'

The most important continuities lie in the established market for the product and in the assumption that only Chinese could provide it. Its client base, though now segmented, still demonstrates its broad acceptability to working class Australians. The growth in fashionable eating would not have been able to sustain the high proportion of Chinese restaurants if they had not been able to retain their broad mainstream acceptability. Although pizzas have now also become assimilated to Queensland mainstream culture, Chinese cooking remains here the pre-eminent form of non-British Australian food.

Only four of the 20 had owned or worked in a restaurant before coming to Australia. 'I never thought of restaurant work in Hong Kong. I did not fancy the hours—I liked my leisure, swimming, picnics. If I had not come to Australia I do not think I would ever have got into it', said one ex-garment cutter. 'I came to Australia as a consultant engineer', said another, 'but I found this was expected of me. People said all Chinese had restaurants. To make money you need your own business'.

While a few of our interviewed restaurateurs had employed non-Chinese waiters, kitchen work was something else. Despite often serious staffing crises, the community resisted for a century the temptation to train non-Chinese in the mystiques of the kitchen. 'We have employed European boys in the warehouse', said one interviewee, who combined the restaurant with a wholesale business, 'but it would be ridiculous to have them in the kitchen. It is hard to imagine Europeans chopping in a Chinese way'. The exception was an experienced chef who had recently bought an existing Chinese restaurant where to his amazement he found Anglo-Australian students on the pay roll as kitchen hands. He fully expected that he would need to dismiss them, but was delighted and amazed, he said, to find them quite competent at the job.

Part 2

Although built on long established foundations Chinese restaurants and their owners in Brisbane today are very different from the old commuters. The commuters had been very largely villagers from rural Guangdong with little education. Of our interviewees, 13 had lived in Hong Kong before immigrating, four in Malaysia, two in Vietnam, one in New Guinea, and one in New Zealand (although six had been born in

China). Six had university degrees (three from Australia, New Zealand, or Britain and three from China, Hong Kong or Malaysia) and eight others had completed high school and may have done some further studies as well, either in Australia or overseas. It is notable that those well educated in 'Western' countries had chosen to open a restaurant as a business venture, starting from a base in some other business or in a professional job, while those educated in Asia were far more likely to have found their credentials unrecognised and been forced, like those with less education, to find jobs as waiters or kitchen hands, working their way up to ownership laboriously.

The ending of the commuting system and the onset of large-scale immigration and wider provisions for family reunion have allowed the resources of family, kinship and community to be used, providing a larger and more diverse base of skilled and reliable workers and of management.

Women now came to play a full role. In five cases a venture was essentially started by a woman, while the husband continued in a job or another business and at best merely added part-time help in the evenings, at least for the initial period. In two other cases a wife or daughter was in full charge of a second branch, and in four others a woman was a partner involved full time in the business and its management. At some stage in their history four of these businesses had involved at least two adult generations and five others had involved other kin, siblings, in-laws and cousins in the ownership, management and operation.¹ In only three cases were no family members involved.

With the growth of a larger ethnic community with more diversified economic activities the restaurants were increasingly involved with and dependent on community grapevines and reputation. 'Staff are really nosy—can't blame them because when you work in the kitchen you have to keep conversation going. What else to talk about except people you know in the Chinese community? Whatever you do, you will hear it around Chinatown. It is also difficult to fire Chinese staff. People will talk'. People heard by word of mouth of restaurants for sale and of their reputation. Most sought wherever possible to employ people on the basis of personal recommendations. New restaurants were immediately approached by people seeking work or offering to deliver Chinese vegetables or seafood or tofu, or plastic containers for take-away food. It was often these suppliers who were a major means of circulating information. It was in fact a seafood wholesaler who told us that there were norms on the hours of work of permanent staff and on how many hours a good employer would give to casuals and on a hierarchy of wage rates for chefs of different standard as well as expectations on the quality of the free meals employees should be given.

¹ Much of the literature on Chinese business in other countries suggests that co-operation and partnerships involve men and only draw on patrilineal kin (Watson, 1977, p. 184; Wong, 1986). Omohundro, however, in his study of the Chinese in the Philippines, argued that the requirements of business operation in the diaspora encouraged a more central role for women and a move to draw in relatives in the female line as well. Where such relatives were involved the influence of the women to whom they were related increased within their own families (1981, ch. 5). Bernard Wong's study of the New York Chinatown also concedes that woman and kin of the wife may be involved if there are not enough men in the male line available (1982, p. 52). We have found considerable evidence of bilateralism both among the restaurateurs and elsewhere in the study, with partnerships, mutual aid, and co-operation with relatives of wives occurring almost as often as those in the male line, and with no expressed preference. While wives and daughters, including married ones, have frequently themselves played a central role in the business, we have found an equal concern for the education of daughters as for that of sons.

The demand has also developed. Many more Australians have travelled in Asia or have developed an interest in authentic multicultural products in a society that has been changed almost out of recognition by diversified mass immigration, first from Europe and the Middle East and now from Asia. Increasing numbers of Asian tourists and immigrants, some of them wealthy business people and professionals, also now form a segment of demand for a few of the restaurants. Three-quarters of the restaurateurs, including old timers, had responded by going beyond the limited and stereotyped activities which had characterised the sector for so long. Even small take-aways in working class suburbs were making more use of Chinese vegetables and were willing to cook special dishes to order. Others had imported professional cooks from overseas or themselves gone there to do cookery courses. Some now specialised in seafood dishes, or had introduced a morning Yum-Cha, or a Chinese vocalist and a number had turned to other Asian cuisines, introducing Korean or Malaysian or Thai styles to the city. Several restaurateurs attributed the success of Chinese restaurants to 'a better ratio of quality to price that in Australian restaurants'. This contrasts with the importance attributed by Bailey to low price as such in New York's immigrant restaurants. Bailey counterposed the low proportion (31%) of native restaurants in New York whose meals were in the lowest price category with the much higher proportion (66%) of immigrant restaurants in the cheapest price bracket. In the Brisbane student survey, 37% of the restaurants serving Chinese food and a not dissimilar 32% of those serving Anglo-American food charged under A\$8.00 for the main course.

One outcome of these developments seems to be that while the statistics indicate that restaurants in general have been getting smaller, Chinese establishments have increased in size and their operators have developed some tendency to multiply branches and to become involved in diverse business activities at the same time. This is facilitated by the trusted management resources of family and kin.

The Chinese restaurant sector has broken from its traditional corner, become larger, more innovative, internally differentiated and an employer on a larger scale. Both its owners and its customers have become more sophisticated and it is inserted now within a much larger and more complex ethnic business and occupational structure.¹

Although it now occupies only 13% of Chinese wage earners and 22% of owners the restaurant sector holds within the Brisbane Chinese community a unique position as the core of economic activity, able to function as the major conduit into both employment and independence, and as a means for mobility within these. It is internally articulated, with its own norms and channels of information, means of acquiring skills and ladders and hierarchies. In contrast with the immobility of the past, the sector has been providing both its workers and its small proprietors with some realistic perspectives of promotion to better paid jobs, of access to ownership and of advancement step by step from small, struggling outlets to larger, more prosperous or multiple ones.

¹ A sharp contrast can be made here with the Chinese restaurant sector in Britain as described by Watson (1977). In the absence of a context of general Chinese immigration these continued to be owned and staffed by chain migration family members from rural Guangdong, had few innovative features, reached a saturation point by 1970 and did not play a role in a more diversified ethnic business sector and have links with professionals in the group. Lovell-Troy's Greek pizzerias (1980) also seemed to lack any capacity for innovation or diversification.

Restaurants remain the main first employer of Chinese labour force entrants, providing jobs for a substantial majority of recent arrivals who were employed in survey businesses as a whole. School and university students, whether children of old commuters or of more recent immigrants or those sent by their families from overseas to study, can find casual jobs as waiters, as can recent arrivals and those with blocked qualifications, if they know some English. For those without English or relevant skills, there are jobs as kitchen hands. It is expected that women already have many of the necessary skills, while men can acquire them by observation and practice, progressing in time to permanent waiters or barmen or to fried rice cooks and then chefs. One owner-chef complained that 'kitchen hands tend to neglect what they are supposed to be doing, like cleaning and preparation. Instead they all want to cook'.

The move from such jobs to self-employment is not difficult, as long as some money has been saved and there is a will to work very hard for extremely long hours. The product is standardised and familiar and requires little advertising. Competition from co-ethnics, especially 'Vietnamese refugees with large families' may be seen as a threat, but non-Chinese are not really in the running. Little capital has been needed to subcontract catering for a club or pub or to rent take-away premises (new shopping centres are often keen to include one), or to start a down-market restaurant, or take over a lease on a run-down business, installing second-hand equipment, especially in the country towns where many started their first ventures. In addition to their own savings, 10 had used bank loans for the initial start up, three had brought in money from overseas and three had raised the sum from relatives and friends.

Such a move has been common in recent times and is still widely expected. Of the 20 restaurants, 15 had at least one active partner who had gained experience and worked their way into ownership through earlier employment in the Chinese restaurant sector in Australia. In some cases chefs had bought the employers' lease or premises when they retired. In a couple of cases they had entered into partnership with them, but had later bought out the ex-employer's share. Advice and encouragement from employers had been common. Eleven out of 15 restaurant and take-away owners who employed labour and answered the question could remember at least one, and in most cases quite a few employees who had left them to set up on their own. A 12th, just opened, thought it would certainly happen with the passage of time. While staff turnover was seen as a problem, such moves were generally thought to be inevitable and their prospect was expected to contribute to employee motivation. They were only resented in the rare cases where a rival establishment was set up in the vicinity.

It is true that interviews were only held with those who had succeeded in setting up independently and some recounted other people's and their own earlier failures. A consideration of the parameters makes clear, however, that success cannot have been an unrealistic perspective for most employees. The 1986 census indicated a ratio of under two employees to each working owner in the Brisbane Chinese restaurant sector. A proportion of the former were students with quite different mobility paths ahead. This study indicates that a majority of owners are ex-employees. In circumstances where the number of Chinese restaurants increased more than four-fold in the 1976-1986 decade, it is clear that a substantial proportion of employees must have been successful in setting up independently in this period.

In Brisbane the indications were that once established, there was a reasonably accessible ladder for the successful. Owners had moved from take-aways or clubs to restaurants, from small towns to the city (with the children's education the prime motive) and from renting to ownership of the premises. While a small take-away may be run by one person with some help from family members, a large city restaurant may employ as many as 40 of 50 people including professional chefs recruited overseas. While this may seem a world away from fried rice and sweet and sour pork in a country take-away, it is clear that there has been for some a systematic movement, step by step, from one to the other. This is more reminiscent of the description by Portes and Jensen (1989) of the advantages of entrepreneurship among the Cubans in Miami than of the stagnation and self-exploitation depicted by Aldrych, Jones and McEvoy (1984) among immigrant shopkeepers in Britain.

Six of our 20 businesses had, at some time, operated more than one outlet at once. In one case a restaurant, opened in 1982 with innovative ideas, had been so successful that within a couple of years the family opened five separate outlets, each managed by a different member. There were also five cases (four additional to those above) where the owner was also involved in another business venture (most often the primary responsibility of other family members)—a wholesaler, a Chinese grocery, an engineering firm, a real estate office, and one in a prawn farm and a noodle factory overseas, which he left to partners and visited twice a year.

The full progression is illustrated in the career of one particularly successful interviewee, but most had travelled some part of the way. He arrived in 1973, and being blocked from his previous occupation as a teacher, found work in the restaurant of the sister who sponsored him. After a couple of years he subcontracted the cooking for a sports club and then opened a take-away. A few years after that he moved to a rented restaurant, and later bought the premises of a second restaurant as well, with the help of a \$300,000 bank loan. With grown-up children now entering what is a prosperous business, he was able at the age of 54, to reduce his own work load and devote time to community leadership.

The Brisbane study cannot be conclusive on the prevalence of such moves because of its underrepresentation of the smallest units, but it does present a picture of considerable prosperity and past upward mobility, which accords with some available broad data. The 1986 census indicates that employers outnumber the self-employed among all Chinese independents while in restaurants there were 2.7 Chinese employers for each one who was self-employed without employees. This is in contrast with Choi's Melbourne of 1966 where there were more than three self-employed Chinese restaurateurs for every employer (1975, p. 87), and also contrasts with Zhou and Logan's estimate that 90% of Chinese businesses in New York in 1982 had no employees (1989, p. 809). The 1990 Brisbane business directory listed 138 restaurants with Chinese names but only 73 that were simply take-aways.

Certainly all our respondents worked extremely long hours, four worked more than 80 hours a week and nine between 60 and 80. The only two working less than a 50-hour week were doing another job as well. Several were struggling with high rents and insecure leases especially in new shopping centres. The economic climate at the time of the interviews was unfavourable to restaurants, whose expansion now appeared to be over, and some who had done well in the past were complaining of

declining custom, and spoke of plans to move out of the sector into other kinds of business. The evidence of past mobility was, however, widespread. Some of the wealthiest and most successful restaurateurs in our survey had started as kitchen hands. None of the four take-aways was more than two years old, while many restaurants had involved an expansion of or a move from an earlier take-away.¹

Part 3

The use of family labour is cited by many, along with other sources of community labour, as a significant resource made available to migrant businesses. About the nature of the advantage, however, there is neither agreement nor clarity. To some such as Bonacich (1980, pp. 215–216) and Lampugnani and Holton (1989, p. 60), it seems self-evident that the advantage is that it is ‘cheap labour’ or indeed ‘unpaid’. Others (Bailey, 1987; Waldinger, 1986) emphasise rather the solution these represent to the chronic problem small businesses have in finding and holding reliable, skilled labour.

The notion of ‘cheap’ or ‘unpaid’ family labour can involve three kinds of confusion. In the first case there are sometimes involved people, such as old non-English speaking parents, who would never find a job in the labour market, and whose labour cannot therefore be said to have a market value which is being underpaid. There were two such cases in the survey, one paid at ‘normal wage rates’, the other unpaid. Such people may be employed for reasons other than their calculated contribution to profits, with the restaurant providing a secure and dignified place for an elderly family member to have company during the day and to continue to make a useful contribution to the family which is supporting them (aversion to welfare was both intense and pervasive among the respondents).

A second, more important conceptual problem lies in the very notion of payment between people who form part of a common consumption unit, drawing on a common budget, and even more so if they are (as was very often the case in the survey) members of a common property owning group, partners or members of a family trust. Wages may be no indication of the goods and services received by family members out of the profits of the enterprise.

One restaurateur remarked that neither he nor his wife were paid, but as members of a family trust they each received their share of the profits from the accountant. Much of this was ploughed back into the business. However they lived in the same house, ate the same food, and ‘we get the same pocket money’. The wife was now withdrawing from involvement owing to ill health, but would of course continue to be supported out of the profits of the business which her ‘unpaid labour’ had built up.

¹ If restaurants and take-aways represent a significant, articulated sector of Chinese business in Brisbane, it would seem to be the only one. Other interviewees did not speak of gossip networks in their businesses, of accepted employment standards, or of former employees who had set up on their own—indeed they explained that high initial requirements for capital or credentials or skills or the need for overseas contacts made such moves improbable. Studies in New York suggest the garment industry as another such articulated Chinese sector (Waldinger, 1986). The census scarcely records any Chinese garment entrepreneurs or employees in Brisbane. Indeed four or five of our interviewees had experience and skills in the clothing industry in other countries, and had come to Australia with that in mind, but had abandoned the idea, and some of these had turned to restaurants instead. Such ethnic enclaves clearly owe as much to the structure of opportunities as to the proclivities or resources of the ethnic group.

In many cases a central focus of the family's expenditure, sometimes the main motive for immigrating or for setting up the business, was the education of children who may also contribute some unpaid or underpaid labour.

Whether 'exploitation' is occurring between family members cannot be determined without an analysis of relative power in family decision making and of differing consumption patterns by different members. While the survey did not provide the means to answer this question we could note Omohundro's conclusion, based on long-term, in-depth study of a Chinese merchant community in the Philippines, that full participation in the business shifts the balance of influence within the family in favour of the participants (1981, p. 142).

The third and greatest problem with the notion of unpaid labour as a significant business advantage is that it ignores the opportunity cost of such labour, which will normally cancel out all the cash advantage. A family member who works in the business for no pay, or who is available on call as a flexible resource, is unable to obtain paid employment outside and the family loses this contribution to its budget. In the Brisbane survey it was the families with infant or marginal businesses who were more likely to be dependent on such external earnings than those whose growth made possible and desirable the drawing in, especially on a full-time basis, of multiple family members.

That there were, however, substantial advantages in family labour is suggested by the prevalence of its use by all but three of the restaurants. Children worked part-time in seven of the restaurants. These were often school children helping out for pocket money, though in some cases wages were paid. The part-time labour of school-age children was, however, limited in its usefulness by the much higher priority placed on their schoolwork by all but a couple of respondents, and was generally restricted at most to holidays, some weekend time and one late night, hours not dissimilar to those worked as employees by many other Australian children. One small take-away owner recounted how she had been unable to take even a few hours off, when dizzy with a high fever the previous year, because her son's exams were approaching and he could not be called on.

Both spouses worked in 13 of the restaurants. In six cases both were full time, while two wives and three husbands participated part-time after another full-time job or work in the home and in another two cases previously full-time wives had reduced their hours markedly owing to ill health.

Adult children were vital in three of the businesses. In two, children were full-time partners in large enterprises, in one case managing a branch of the business. In the third, a struggling business was kept afloat with the efforts of various family members. In this case their father, who was running the business, knew little English and relied on their assistance in dealing with the public, particularly answering the telephone. In general the age structure of the interviewees, due to the recent date of much migration, restricted the number of children who had reached adulthood. In seven of the restaurants relatives other than spouses or children were actively involved in various capacities ranging from full-time presence and partnership to part-time work.

The respondents' own explanations for the wide involvement of family members approximated those of Waldinger and Bailey far more often than that of Bonacich. In

only a few cases were the advantages of family work expressed in terms of its cheapness. The major emphasis was rather on the trustworthiness of relatives and on their likely long-term commitment to the business and willingness to acquire the skills needed. Complaints about experiences of high turnover and lack of reliability and skill among many non-family employees were common.¹

It was noted above that restaurants provide a significant source of employment for the Chinese community in Brisbane, while some also employ Anglo-Australians as waiters and waitresses, particularly in the outer suburbs.

In order to understand employment relations in Chinese restaurants, it is necessary to outline briefly the regulatory framework within which they are located. The level of state involvement in this area is unusually high in Australia. Terms and conditions of employment are established by a number of industrial tribunals which operate at either state or federal level. The awards set by these tribunals apply to almost all non-managerial employees. For most of the private sector, the terms and conditions prescribed in these awards are legally binding minima. They are policed by (under-staffed) arbitration inspectors, in response to complaints and by unions where they have a presence, and breaches may result in penalties and/or damages.² In addition to minimum wages, awards govern a range of employment conditions, including conditions of hiring and discharge staff, hours of work and leave.

In Queensland, the restaurant industry is covered by the state Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Commission. The restaurants in our study operate under the Cafe, Restaurant and Catering Award — Southeastern Division. This award specifies a number of different wage rates, depending upon the age and occupational classification of the employees. In late 1989, for example, full-time adult chefs were entitled to a minimum weekly wage of A\$338.30, while waiters or waitresses were awarded A\$301.90 and kitchen hands A\$298.90. This legal minimum represents, in the last case, 63% of the average ordinary time earnings actually received by all full-time adult employees in Queensland at that time (ABS, 1989C). Employees under the age of 21 receive varying proportions of these rates, ranging from 85% down to 55% for those under 17 years of age. Leave entitlements are specified and, as in most awards, include a 17.5% 'leave loading' while on holiday. Part-time employees receive *pro rata* terms and conditions of employment, while casual workers³ should receive proportionate hourly wages plus a 19% loading in lieu of various entitlements such as sick pay and holiday leave provisions. A flat amount is granted to non-casual

¹ A clear finding of the broader survey was that the most important contribution of extended family members was to management rather than to labour power, and that it was positively associated with the use of non-family labour. Of the 20 Brisbane firms which employed over 10 workers each, 13 involved extended family members as working partners, while this was the case in only six of the 32 firms without employees.

² Award rates constitute a very large part of most non-managerial earnings, although overtime and some over-award payments are also common. A consequence is a relatively small spread of earnings inequality. In 1989 the average, ordinary time, weekly earnings of full-time, adult, non-managerial employees (persons) in Australia were as follows (ABS, 1989b): skilled workers = A\$457, of which food trades = A\$425; factory operatives and drivers = A\$455; labourers = A\$402, of which: cleaners = A\$377, miscellaneous = A\$415 (includes kitchen hands).

³ The distinction between casual and part-time work is complex, involving the amount and regularity of hours of work, award entitlements such as sick pay and paid annual leave, and an ongoing contract of employment.

workers for work performed between 8 p.m. and midnight, with overtime for late work or work beyond the standard working week of 40 hours.

Awards are established through the activities of industrial tribunals and of employer associations and trade unions. Thus employment conditions in Chinese restaurants are governed by lengthy, complex documents that are the outcome of activities by remote organisations with little or no membership in these establishments. In these circumstances, as Littler, Quinlan and Kitay (1989) note, even with goodwill, detailed award observance in the small business sector in general is variable (Kitay and Sutcliffe, 1989; Routley, 1985; Sappey, 1985), with many minor award breaches likely due to ignorance or oversight as well as intention. The main award provisions, none the less, provide widely known points of reference, with most of the owners in the survey claiming to know and abide by them and others referring to accepted standards in Chinese restaurants which are themselves clearly set in the context of the award.

Within the broad context of the weekly income levels set by the award for full-time staff and the hourly rates for casual workers there was evidence of some deficiencies in detailed provisions (for holiday leave loading in at least one example) and considerable ambiguity in the method of calculating payments for overtime and late work, as well as quite widespread use of a lower 'training wage' for beginners. Common also is higher pay than specified in the award for scarce skills and experience, and the widespread provision of benefits such as free meals, which are not included in the award. Such variations above or below award requirements are determined both by market forces and by community norms.

For employees other than chefs, most said they considered it best to follow the award. 'For pay we use the state award. If we need to know [the rate] we ring up [the state agency that provides information on wages]'. Another leaves the correct payment of wages to his accountant. These are probably the two most frequent sources of information on wages for mainstream employers as well. As one respondent put it, 'For casual staff there is the award rate, and I usually pay them the award rate. There's no point in underpaying them because most people know what the rates are anyhow. Besides, if you underpay them, they'll try to rip you off or work less efficiently. You'll end up losing'.

The student questionnaires provided only a few unambiguous replies on pay rates of what were almost entirely casual waiters and waitresses.¹ Although only 11 such responses were available from each group, the indicated very similar pay rates. The average hourly post-tax pay in the Chinese restaurants was A\$7.43 and in the Anglo-Australian ones A\$7.80. In each group there was one person earning below A\$6 (A\$5 in each case) and the highest pay was A\$10 in a Chinese restaurant and

¹ The problem was that in Australia employers have the responsibility of deducting tax before paying employees. Immigrant employers, especially in the case of overseas student employees, tend to cite wage rates in terms of cash in hand sums (whether or not tax is actually due or paid). Such students often have no idea of their formal wage rates and will answer questions (however specified) in terms of post-tax rates. Indigenous employers and students, on the other hand, always think in terms of pre-tax sums and sometimes become confused about how deductions have affected the hourly sums actually received. It was necessary to change the wording of this question several times, and it was only the last batch that produced strictly comparable data from 11 students working in Chinese restaurants and 11 in Anglo-Australian restaurants.

A\$10.40 in an Anglo-Australian restaurant. The ambiguous data from the rest of the survey did not appear to contradict this picture.

Of the 40 students who had worked in Chinese restaurants 17 had initially received a lower 'training wage' while only two of the 48 in Anglo-Australian restaurants had done so. Several owners spoke of offering such a rate to beginners. One starts 'with a learner's wage. If they are OK I pay more. If the business does well I give a bonus'. Another pays 'Pretty low to start and once they are good they are up there'.

A third elaborated on the practice and the problems it could cause. 'As far as casual staff are concerned, we pay them award rates, \$8.50 an hour and \$7.50 when they're being trained. But we had problems . . . because . . . [they] demanded that they should be paid \$8.50 an hour although they were still being trained. They complained to the government. So we paid them, but from now on, we'll employ only experienced staff'. The 'training wage' is a clear breach of the award but seems to accord with community norms and reflects emphasis on skill training which corresponds with their own perceptions of their needs and responsibilities. Several expressed their belief that there were no really unskilled jobs in restaurant work and most said they sought stable and reliable staff because the retraining effort was considerable and disruptive.¹ Within the Chinese community, the issue is usually more one of expected standards than technical compliance with the law. Community norms and the availability of alternative employment appear to keep terms and conditions within acceptable standards, though employees who feel aggrieved and have an understanding of the regulatory system may call on assistance from outside agencies as well.

Restaurant hours do not coincide with a standard week. Penalty rates for overtime are seen as costly and are avoided by some by restricting employees' hours to a maximum of 40, worked during certain periods. 'The penalty rates for public holidays and Sundays make it very difficult. So we close on public holidays, or we try to cover by ourselves and keep employee hours down to only a couple'. 'The waitress has to go at 10 o'clock, you can't keep her on for just a couple of customers. Then I have to do the waiting myself'.

In other establishments employers take some liberties with the letter of the law. Some spoke of what amounts to a 'going rate' among Chinese restaurants, using the award as a reference point but calculating wages on more than a 40-hour week to take account of the fluctuating but often long hours commonly worked by full-time employees in restaurants. 'There is a basic wage all round the Chinese community. The state award, on top of that depends on the basis of the work. They work 40-60 hours. In our type of trade it is different to the state award, overtime is built into the package . . . it's like a contract type. I give you the job, the hours will be this, the pay

¹ The employees who complained may have been motivated as much by breaches of community norms as the award. According to a former employee of this respondent, with whom we became coincidentally acquainted outside the study, this man paid staff less than they had been led to expect, paid cooks less than was current in other establishments and offered below the normal leave entitlements. This restaurant had high turnover levels and evidently had more difficulty retaining staff than did others. Those in the student survey who had received a training wage were almost all among the 1990 respondents, when it seemed the norm, rather than in 1991 when it was rare. It may not be fanciful to suggest that word of complaints and their outcome had circulated around the business community and that the practice was being discontinued.

will be this. Individual contracts'. Such arrangements apply to full-time employees. Rather than paying overtime, an average wage is devised for all purposes. Another employer asserted that his full-time staff were paid a standard wage each week, regardless of their hours, on the assumption that it would average out over the long run.

Such schemes lend themselves readily to partial tax evasions, as well as to the possibility of concealed underpayment. Put simply, fewer hours are declared for tax purposes than are actually worked, lowering the employee's tax obligation, in exchange for which they receive less than their full award entitlement wages. Both gain at the expense of the public purse. Such partial tax evasions do not constitute a full-fledged 'informal sector' and are widespread in Australia. They are, however, becoming more difficult now as regulations are tightened up.¹

If the award is a point of reference for the wages of many staff, most employers consider it to be irrelevant for chefs, for whom market demand has pushed wages well above the award. The owner of a suburban restaurant said, 'If you talk about wages for the chef, you cannot pay him by the award rate because it's too low. \$400–600 is not enough to attract them to work for you. You have to pay about \$700–800 a week these days. But then, we pay them \$300–400 according to the award rate on the book, the rest of the amount is given to them as bonus. Otherwise they are not willing to work for you till 2 a.m. They'll be gone by 10.30 p.m. But chefs are reasonable. The amount of bonus they receive is usually flexible, depending on the business'. However, in return for over-award wages, chefs are expected to work long hours. The operation of the Chinese 'community standard' gives chefs something more akin to a salary than a wage. Thus the effort side of the wage–effort exchange remains open. As one restaurant owner put it, 'Cooks we pay over award. But if you work out the hours — as we work 60 hours and award is worked out on a 40-hour week — what we pay is not that enormously higher. Chinese cooks used to be paid a lot higher than other cooks, but as the rate of pay-rise is slower, pay for other cooks is gradually catching up. By now Chinese cooks aren't paid all that much higher'. To add to the ambiguity, this employer said that he 'paid the cooks' taxes', leaving it unclear whether these were deducted from the sums above or were in addition to them.

While the failure of some to adhere to all award requirements is undesirable, the employment relationship itself does not appear to be generally antagonistic. Some of those who were clearly in breach of the award on the pay of beginners or the holiday leave loading, as well as others, went out of their way to portray themselves as good employers who hoped to keep their staff happy, and clearly did not see their practices as illegitimate. One of these claimed that 'I believe in two-way traffic, if you treat them well there is more chance you will get better from them. A lot [of employers] pay too little and then whinge. I do not whinge at my staff . . . I pay the right wage. If I find good waitresses I pay good wages. We all eat together a good meal at the end,

¹ One respondent gave evidence of some more completely informal practices, about which community norms may vary, when he complained that 'It was a real hunt to get good staff. Some people want a job and they ask for cash, so they can go on getting the dole. They even asked to be paid at a cheaper rate so long as it is cash. Chinese people from Hong Kong work hard and would never go on the dole, would think it was shameful, but a lot of those from China and especially Vietnam work and get government help as well. I do not like that, I've become an Aussie. I hate that. I say, if you want to work for me do it properly'. He had dismissed a newly appointed employee who had asked for such cash in hand payment.

sometimes even lobster . . . if you respect people and treat them right, you have more chance of finding good staff. I do not rip them off . . . If you don't get good workers it is because you are too hard on them'. Another stresses the dependence of restaurateurs on the goodwill of their staff because 'if they are unhappy and put too much salt in the dish or bang it down on the table, you'll lose customers and never know why. If they decide not to come in you are in trouble and they cannot be easily replaced by people who know what they are doing'.

Only 10 of the 40 students from Chinese restaurants did not consider that they had been 'treated fairly' by their employer, in comparison with the somewhat higher figure of 17 out of 48 of the students from Anglo-Australian restaurants.¹ All but one of the Chinese restaurant employees and three of the others had been classified as casual workers, but seven of the former had received some pay when sick or on holiday compared with only one of the latter. Twenty-three of the 40 in the first group had received a 'proper meal' free and another 14 'some free food', while in the second group these proportions were again somewhat lower with 23 out of 48 receiving a 'proper meal' and 13 'some food'. None of these are entitlements of casual workers.

Thirty-three of the first group worked the same hours most weeks, only five were given less than a week's notice of when they were required and 29 felt they could refuse to work hours that did not suit them without risking their jobs. The proportions among the Anglo-Australian employees were similar although with slightly more constraints.

The picture obtained from the interviews with employers leads to the conclusion that the official system of awards provides a real but somewhat distant benchmark, and that within limits a considerable amount of self-regulation takes place. While some breaches of the awards are probably common, so are benefits not specified in it, and while unreasonable demands and heavy-handedness are not unknown they are not the norm and may be resented. The student questionnaires do not contradict this view. While undoubtedly students are likely to be less vulnerable and more confident than, for example, newly arrived immigrants with no knowledge of English, they are none the less widely employed.²

There is nothing in the picture we have obtained of the pay, conditions and treatment of chefs and waiting staff which conveys the impression of dependence on

¹ The complaints of the 10 were that 'the owner was a real fusspot', 'he never smiled', in one case that 'the work was hard' and in two cases that the pay was not worth the effort. Two complained of dismissal, one because of 'lack of work' and the other specified that there had only been half an hour's notice and added that they were 'not paid award rate (then again we don't pay tax)'. One complained of the inconvenience of being on call at short notice and one wrote that 'wage rate is below the standard rate because of keen competition in gaining such kind of part-time job' (this last was completed in the 1991 recession period). One gave no comment.

² Ong (1984) depicts America's Chinatowns as repositories of cheap and disadvantaged labour with high levels of insecurity and unemployment. In Brisbane the so-called Chinatown area is small and non-residential. Few Chinese live in areas of ethnic residential concentration and there are thus no clear ghettos where disadvantage can be measured in a concentrated form. Unemployment among recent arrivals is shown to have been very high, 27% for those with under five years residence in the 1986 census, with 16% for those resident between five and 10 years. After that it falls to near the national average. Australia's immigration policy has focused on attracting skilled arrivals with extra points for knowledge of English. Among the employed Chinese in Brisbane in the 1986 census only 14% of men and 17% of women had poor English and no qualifications, but the proportions among the unemployed and those out of the workforce would be higher. Disadvantage is mainly concentrated among Chinese from Vietnam, who constitute around 18% of Brisbane Chinese (ABS, 1986).

cheaper labour than competitors for success. This is particularly clear when we bear in mind that cheap fast food chains such as MacDonaldis, Pizza Hut, or Hungry Jacks employ a considerable number of part-time school children, rare in Chinese restaurants, who are certainly cheaper than university students of whatever ethnic origin. We can say little with confidence, however, about kitchen hands (the first positions of new arrivals, especially if they speak little English). It is usually of these that anecdotes of super-exploitation are repeated. While some of these are certainly true we are sceptical of their prevalence, but can merely assert that the evidence on either side is limited and that this is the main position in which cooking skills so essential for mobility can be acquired.

Part 4

The decade of 1976–1986 saw rapid increase of Chinese restaurants in the context of a general expansion of the sector and of the Chinese population. Since then, although observation suggests that the number of Chinese residents has been increasing even faster, the directory indicates almost no further growth in Chinese restaurants. While our survey fills in the picture of past dynamic growth, prosperity and sometimes wealth, it also confirms a current stagnation and an absence of expansionary perspectives.

Of new Chinese businesses in the survey which have been started since 1986, a smaller proportion were restaurants than among those founded before that date. Only a quarter of the 20 restaurants had any current plans to expand. This contrasts with half who had such plans among the non-food Chinese businesses in our study. On the other hand nearly a third were hoping to sell out, compared with less than a 10th among the other businesses. A follow-up study in March 1990, 12–18 months after the interviews, found that one of the 20 had closed and three had changed hands.

The sector has been squeezed from two directions, by external pressures and by internal flight to alternative opportunities. The total restaurant sector has had very much reduced growth in the last few years, suggesting that perhaps there has been saturation of the new demand. In 1985 a fringe benefits tax was introduced which severely hit certain, mainly city restaurants, which depended on expense account business lunches (three mentioned this as a particular cause of declining trade). More generally they have been affected by the very high interest rates of the last couple of years, and then by recession. Many claim that restaurant meals and even take-away orders are the first items of discretionary spending to be cut when people find their mortgage repayments have gone up, or their incomes reduced.

The Chinese have been able to exert ethnic closure, for a century or more, on the ownership of Chinese food outlets and on the cooking and to a lesser extent the serving of Chinese food. They have been able to take advantage of a general expansion and to increase the size and the standing of their businesses. None the less this was a sector created and perpetuated by the exclusion of the Chinese from other occupations and business fields. Its major disadvantage is the enormously long hours required. The hours in other businesses were noticeably less.

Many felt unhappy about keeping such long hours indefinitely, especially as they grew older or ill health intervened, and were finding it harder to persuade other family members to remain there. Several multi-establishment businesses had had to

contract when one spouse became sick. While several had at some stage involved a full-time input by adult children, the number of these was shrinking. Others stated explicitly that they did not wish their children to enter such a business, because of the long hours.

Viable, continuing trans-generational and kinship involvement was considerably more common in other parts of the survey. In addition there seemed to be more hopes outside the restaurant sector for such broader familial involvement in the future, when children grew up or other family members immigrated. One restaurateur explained that a motive in building up his restaurants had been to prepare a place for his brothers when they came out. In the event the days of restaurants were, he felt, numbered when they did come, and so he had helped them to establish an engineering construction company instead, where he now intended to join them when he had sold his remaining restaurant. Another interviewee had bought a restaurant recently from a Vietnamese Chinese family. The son of that family had just qualified as an architect and joined a partnership and was now in a position to provide his father with employment there.

The stagnation of the Chinese restaurant sector does not, however, seem to indicate a disintegration of ethnic business activity, but rather its diversification, and the beginning of a shift of its dynamic centre of gravity to other kinds of business. On the one hand, there has been a growth of vertical integration. Market gardeners growing Chinese vegetables, container manufacturers, wholesalers and business services such as accountants and estate agents have come into being upstream of the restaurant sector. On the other hand, there has been the increasing exploitation of another ethnically specific resource, namely the network of overseas contacts which has facilitated a multiplication of import/export agencies aimed at the Asian market. These developments have been accentuated by the recent arrival of a number of wealthy business migrants, who require not only standard business services, but also upmarket consumer goods and services delivered in a way with which they feel comfortable.

Conclusion

In keeping with the findings of Bailey (1985), Waldinger (1985) and the Miami studies, employment in Chinese restaurants in Brisbane cannot be seen as 'secondary' in nature. Rather, work in Chinese restaurants has constituted for many the first step on a clearly understood ladder of opportunities which can lead to well-paid, skilled jobs and eventual self-employment. Such business involves very long hours of work, but they are not heavily dependent on big business and although landlords and banks have sometimes taken a disproportionate cut of the profits, they have been able to retain a significant part of the profits themselves. Such working ownership thus cannot be characterised as self-exploitation and it has provided a ladder allowing movement from small, struggling family businesses to the more successful ownership of large or multiple establishments with considerable equity.

A variety of factors have contributed to this outcome. The Chinese were able to survive through the White Australia period and to maintain their ethnic monopoly on a small and stagnant niche but one which was well entrenched in Australian culture.

After the mid-1950s the relaxation of the prohibitions on naturalisation and family reunion, as well as the presence of a part-time workforce of overseas students, brought new resources to bear, so that the sector was more strongly based to enter the following period. Dynamic growth in the restaurant sector as a whole, in a period of renewed and then rapidly growing immigration, created a very favourable environment. In this climate family, kinship, and reputation based community networks provided a workforce whose treatment and prospects could not be characterised as secondary and which in turn therefore made possible the provision of 'a better ratio of quality to price' than their mainstream competitors. When opportunities for expansion or innovation presented themselves, family and kin were available as a trusted layer of management to seize them.

What is unclear is the extent to which cheap labour was an essential or even a significant element in the outcome. While Chinese restaurants were rarely found in the highest price brackets they had been able to thrive without much greater concentration in the lowest brackets than was the case for mainstream restaurants. In a period when jobs for women and part-time work for school children have been growing the 'cheapness' of family labour is unlikely to have provided much cash advantage over sending them out to work and using their earnings to pay employees. The standard of living of owning families is not one of deprivation. Most owned cars and suburban houses and while many sent their children to private school, all planned for them to go to university.

The evidence is far from conclusive, but the study suggests that Australia's centralised wage-fixing system has prevented major gaps in wage levels between workers in Chinese and in mainstream restaurants, and between those in this sector and in manufacturing. The consensus of respondents was that skilled chefs had very strong bargaining power and obtained wage levels at least as high as those of other restaurants. The student survey, although limited, does not give evidence of lower payment of casual waiters and waitresses in these restaurants. There is less evidence on the pay of kitchen hands and though one would hesitate to deny that instances of serious underpayment might occur here, it is unlikely that they are the norm or that they could continue for long without the workers concerned becoming aware of alternatives through the community grapevine.

If these conclusions are correct, then this study goes beyond that of Bailey in not only denying that immigrant restaurants are necessarily characterised by secondary attributes of insecurity, low skill, and dead-end jobs, but even by a dependence on especially low pay for survival and success.

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