

# From Student to Citizen: A Survey of Students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Australia<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article is a survey of students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) who arrived in Australia after 1986 and were still there in 1992. Students from the PRC began to enter Australia in 1972 when China and Australia established diplomatic relations. The numbers were insignificant until 1986 when Australia launched its education export policy.

The article provides statistics and analysis on the motivation of these students, their education and family backgrounds and their present conditions and aspirations. The article also addresses issues such as Australia's education export and immigration policies, the dilemma between political and economic refugees in terms of human rights and the impact of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre on PRC students in Australia at the time.

The survey results suggest that the majority of the former PRC students have settled successfully in Australia, though not without considerable difficulties and emotional cost. The question of distinction between political and economic refugees is acknowledged as a very thorny one, and it is suggested that immigration policy based on national interest, and clearly stated, would be more convincing, less hypocritical and therefore in the long run more effective.

## INTRODUCTION

Students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) began to enter Australia in 1972 when China and Australia established diplomatic relations. In the early phase of the movement, most students were Chinese government-sponsored or

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exchange students arranged by the two governments. The number involved was insignificant until 1986 when Australia launched its education export policy. By 1989 there were about 18,000 PRC citizens in Australia, most of whom held student visas. By 1992, when our survey was conducted, 8,600 PRC citizens had come to Australia as visitors to see their relatives. By the middle of 1993, 26,000 more Chinese citizens were in Australia, most having come between October 1989 and June 1990 as students.<sup>2</sup>

The present article reports the findings of a survey of students from the PRC who entered Australia after 1986 and were still there by 1992. It provides some data on their motivations for coming to Australia, their education and family backgrounds, and their present circumstances. The article also raises some relevant issues, including Australia's education export and immigration policies, and the dilemma between political and economic refugees in terms of human rights.<sup>3</sup>

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

When the present survey was begun in 1992,<sup>4</sup> issues such as whether and on what criteria refugee status should be accorded Chinese students had become hotly debated. In addition to obtaining information on the students' backgrounds and the circumstances of their arrival in Australia, the survey also aimed to propose action that might be acceptable to both the students and the Australian Government.

The research method consisted of three parts, the major one being the survey questionnaire. As most of the respondents held four-year temporary visas which would expire in June 1994, and were therefore not sure of their destiny, we decided that the questionnaire should be anonymous, distributed through organizations formed by former PRC students, and collected by post. The questionnaire comprised nine parts, containing 175 questions in Chinese.

To supplement the questionnaire, two field trips were made to various state capitals; one before the survey questionnaire was administered and one after. The first trip was made to decide on questionnaire distribution points and to determine the percentages of questionnaires to be sent to the different categories of students. The aim of the second trip was to confirm survey results with in-depth interviews. Representatives of more than fifty organizations at various institutions (universities, language schools and overseas student centres) were interviewed.<sup>5</sup> We also visited the homes of a dozen former PRC Chinese students. More than 1,000 individuals were interviewed for the study.

Another part of the research was an examination of media reports, government policy statements, the then Australian opposition parties' statements, academic

discussions and published materials. We also examined the views and discussions reported in Chinese language newspapers and journals in Australia.

One thousand questionnaires were distributed nation-wide; 325 were returned. The effective return rate was 28 per cent.<sup>6</sup> Considering that the questionnaire needed at least 40 minutes to complete, the return rate is considered fair.<sup>7</sup> Our results were later confirmed by a similar survey (hereafter referred to as the Sydney Survey), although of narrower scope, nonetheless acknowledged our contribution in its conception and methodology (Federation of Chinese Students in Australia, 1993).

With the assistance of organizations established by former PRC students such as *Renquan Weiyuanhui* (the Committee of Human Rights), *Minzhen* (the Democracy Front), *Minmeng* (the Democracy Alliance) and *Aohua Qingnian Shanghui* (the Chamber of Commerce of Young Chinese in Australia), which we gratefully acknowledge, the questionnaire was distributed to two categories of students: category A, the so-called English language students; and category B, students who had studied or were studying at tertiary institutions in Australia. This categorization was based on the rough estimate that about 90 per cent of PRC Chinese students entered Australia as English language students and 10 per cent for tertiary degree courses. On this basis, about 90 per cent of the questionnaires were distributed to those who were supposed to be category A students (at language schools, or working part-time or even full-time at factories, shops and restaurants), and only 10 per cent were distributed to students who were at tertiary institutions at the time the survey was conducted.

However, in answering the question on the highest education level achieved in Australia, only 59.6 per cent of respondents stated that they were language students: 13.2 per cent stated that they had finished college education such as Australian Technical And Further Education (TAFE), 12.8 per cent had finished courses such as Diploma and Masters, and 14.4 per cent had either finished or were enrolled in PhD programmes.<sup>8</sup> The fact that only about 60 per cent of the valid respondents stated that they belonged to category A, as opposed to an estimated 90 per cent, does not necessarily mean the survey sample was biased. The response proportions most likely represent the true situation of Chinese students at the time of the survey. This is the case for a number of reasons. First, the 90 per cent and 10 per cent estimate was based on entry visas. Having entered Australia, not all students wanted to be English language students. They had applied for and entered Australia as English language students because it was the easiest and quickest way to get visas processed at the time.

To the question why they wanted to come to Australia in the first place, 59.8 per cent of respondents replied to study, 3.0 per cent wanted to make

money, 11.7 per cent wanted to migrate, 3.4 per cent came to visit relatives, 13.6 per cent wanted to *jian shimian* (see the world). Second, after having studied English language and worked for some time, some students changed their visa status to obtain other qualifications so as to be able to stay in Australia. Third, some students obtained scholarships to study for higher degrees after they had studied either English or other courses in Australia. At the time of the survey, many students had been in Australia for a number of years. It can therefore be assumed that quite a large proportion of those who responded as having done, or were doing, tertiary and higher degree courses at the time of the survey had entered Australia on English language student visas.<sup>9</sup>

### TO STUDY ABROAD: THE MODERN GOLD RUSH

Since China's open door and reform policies began in the 1980s, a large number of PRC citizens have left China. According to one estimate, there are now worldwide 200,000 persons who left China as students after the late 1970s.<sup>10</sup> What is special about the Australian case is that most PRC citizens who came to Australia entered as "English language students"<sup>11</sup> (Bezzina and Butcher, 1990), a direct result of Australia's education export policy of the late 1980s<sup>12</sup> (James, 1990; Davenport, 1990).

Since the late 1980s, a Chinese student applying for a visa to study English in Australia has been required to pay at least A\$6,000 in advance, an amount equal to an average wage earner's twenty years' earnings in China at that time. But students were ready to borrow this astronomical amount to go to Australia because they assumed that they would not have to return to China until enough money had been made in Australia to pay off their debts and make a profit. The students' hidden agenda was that not only would their debts be paid off, but they would also return home with money and modern knowledge that would enhance their social status, the so-called *yi jin huan xiang* (return hometown in silk robes). Better still would be the possibility of staying abroad as an overseas Chinese.

Their perception was that the West promised unimaginable freedom and opportunities, whereas the Chinese Government was perceived as too corrupt and incompetent for its citizens to invest in China. Until 1989, there was a profound sense of national crisis among the educated in China. The popular and controversial television series *He Shang* (The Yellow River Elegy)<sup>13</sup> caught the national mood anticipating the 1989 Beijing events (Zhu Xiaoyang and Chen Paihua, 1994). Under the shadow of this perceived crisis, those who thought the situation hopeless wanted to leave the country. Any young Chinese who had a chance seemed ready to take the risk.

By the time the Australian Government had taken measures to adjust its education export policy towards China, it was already too late. By June 1989, nearly 18,000 had arrived in Australia; by 1992, the number had reached about 30,000 (James, 1990; Davenport, 1990). In addition, more than 10,000 had already paid their fees through the Australian Embassy or consulates in the PRC, but were refused entry visas because the Australian Government had changed its policy. Several thousand students were reported to have demonstrated in front of the Australian Embassy in Beijing and the Consulate in Shanghai, demanding that they be given entry visas or that their money be returned (James, 1990; Davenport, 1990).

At the time of the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, of the 18,000 PRC students who came to Australia, only 1,400 had returned to China (Fung, 1993). Since 1989, many more Chinese citizens have entered Australia on relatives' visas. By the end of 1993, an additional 25,000 students had entered Australia (Colins, 1993). According to the 1996 Census, the number of China-born persons in Australia was 111,009 (*Weekend Australian*, August 16 - 17, 1997).

## EDUCATION AND FAMILY BACKGROUNDS OF THE CHINESE STUDENTS

Because students who applied for the English language programme in Australia were not required to have a high school education, it was assumed that many in Australia were ill educated. It was even suggested that there were criminal elements in the student group. In fact, most had finished tertiary education in China and, as Table 1 (page 45) shows, some had already entered the workforce as professionals before they came to Australia. Competition in China for entrance into tertiary education is fierce and less than 3 per cent of the total Chinese population find places.

The fact that these students were able to raise sufficient funds to go overseas indicates that they were already above the lower stratum in Chinese society. In answer to the question on their parents' occupation,<sup>14</sup> 13.2 per cent stated "worker", 23.9 per cent "*guojia ganbu* (government officials)", 1.5 per cent "business enterprise", 17.4 per cent "academics, teachers and research personnel", 15.1 per cent "government employees" and 18.1 per cent "engineering and other professionals". Only 10.8 per cent of the respondents stated that their parents were of "peasant" background. Most of the respondents came from Shanghai and other better off coastal areas (Shanghai 33.6 per cent, Beijing 18.3 per cent, Guandong 17.9 per cent, Fujian 9.3 per cent and "other areas" 20.9 per cent), and had opportunity to borrow money from relatives and friends in business. Gender distribution of the PRC Chinese students in Australia was 77.1 per cent male and 22.9 per cent female; 51.7 per cent were already married and 40.1 per cent had children before they arrived in Australia.

## TO WORK OR STUDY?

Except for those who had scholarships, most students sought employment as soon as they arrived in Australia, not only to pay off debts incurred back home, but also to gain a livelihood in Australia. The cost of living in Australia was high and most students could not be financed by their families back home. Indeed, 57.5 per cent had to rely on themselves financially; only 25.2 per cent received some assistance from home, and then only initially. Some managed to obtain some assistance from other sources, (such as scholarships) but only after having spent some time in Australia.

The students were caught in a dilemma. Their stay in Australia was in jeopardy if they did not attend a registered study programme, yet they could not make the money they expected to make if they devoted all their time and energy to study. This dilemma gave rise to two situations for most students. Either they attended English language classes in the day time and worked at nights, or they quit classes altogether and illegally worked full-time. Many students found lowly paid jobs cleaning, or washing dishes in restaurants, and were exploited by other Chinese in legitimate or illegitimate businesses. Some women became commercial sex workers. The survey showed that most students were young or middle aged (4.6 per cent were aged 25, 22.6 per cent aged 26-30, 29.5 per cent aged 31-35, 31.8 per cent aged 36-40, and 11.5 per cent aged 40 years or older) and ready to undergo hardship.<sup>15</sup>

Only a small percentage of those with scholarships could afford to be engaged in full-time study. Most had to find part-time or casual work while studying. Some had to abandon study altogether in order to earn enough money to pay off their debts and to survive. It is therefore not surprising that many students studied for only six months or a year during their entire stay of several years in Australia (Table 2, page 45).

The survey showed that because of the pressure of tuition fees and cost of living, 39.7 per cent of students had at some time worked concurrently at two jobs, including 12.6 per cent who continued to hold two jobs at the time of the survey. Thirty-seven per cent of the surveyed students earned hourly wage rates of A\$9-10, 15.2 per cent earned \$11-12 and 21.4 per cent \$13 or above. On the other hand, 14 per cent earned hourly rates of \$7-8 and 3.8 per cent only \$4-6.

Students were constantly on the move in search of jobs paying higher rates. When they had saved enough money, some entered educational or professional institutions to upgrade their qualifications and skills. The hourly rates quoted above provide only an indication of the situation at the time of the survey. What was earned before and after the survey varied greatly from individual to individual.

## THE EFFECT ON STUDENTS OF THE POLITICAL EVENTS OF 1989

Most PRC Chinese students in Australia were in a precarious situation as they watched the tragic 1989 events unfold in Beijing. The survey shows that most PRC students were sympathetic with the protesters although some were cautious in their support because they feared that they might have to return to an unchanged China. During April and May 1989, some PRC students in Australia organized activities in support of the demonstrating students in Beijing, including a protest against the Chinese authorities. Their activities peaked during the first few days after 4 June (Table 3, page 45).

During the period of protest, most Australians were inclined to support the students in Beijing and to sympathize with Chinese students in Australia. The then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, promised to protect the Chinese students in Australia from persecution by the Chinese authorities. In June 1989, the Australian Government declared that all PRC Chinese citizens could extend their visas until the end of July 1990. Shortly afterwards, the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs issued category-829 visas which allowed PRC Chinese citizens to stay in Australia until the end of January 1991, and promised to allow them to apply for permanent residence status on humanitarian grounds.

In mid-June 1990, Prime Minister Hawke declared that about 18,000 students who were in Australia before 4 June 1989 would be granted permanent residence status. However, under pressure of widespread opposition, including some from his own government, Hawke changed his mind and on 27 June 1990 stated that these students should be granted a four-year temporary residence status. He also promised that there would be no forced repatriation.

The Australian Government was in an awkward situation. Many of the 25,000 students who came after 4 June 1989 also applied for refugee status. By June 1990, 75 per cent of the students who were in Australia before 20 June 1989 had applied for permanent residence. The Australian Government demanded that those who had applied for a four-year temporary residence visa should withdraw their application for permanent residence. The then opposition parties, mainly the Liberal Party, while not opposing the policy of allowing Chinese students to stay temporarily, were against granting permanent residence status without screening. However, the dilemma was that nobody could guarantee that once the students returned to China they would not be persecuted by the Chinese authorities. On the other hand, given the large number of applications, the Government was unable to allocate enough resources to deal with them on a case-by-case basis.

In November 1993, the Australian Government took the dramatic step of allowing those PRC Chinese students who held four-year temporary residence

visas to apply for permanent residence. About 20,000 PRC Chinese students were therefore given permanent residence status without case by case processing. The Government also allowed those students who had arrived after 20 June 1989 to apply for permanent residence on condition that they met age, education and English language criteria.

During the heated debates of those four years, which were agonizing for PRC Chinese students, three issues of most concern to the Australian community were raised in the mass media: whether the students, once granted permanent residence status, would join the unemployment queue and add to the worsening unemployment situation; the impact on labour relations because of the Chinese students willingness to take low paid jobs; and the view that the Government's solution was discriminatory in that it favoured PRC Chinese at the expense of refugee seekers from countries such as Cambodia, thus violating the established quota system (Joel, 1990). There was also the fear that too many Asians admitted at one time might cause racial tension in the community.<sup>16</sup>

## EMPLOYMENT AND THE ENTITLEMENT TO BENEFITS

Some PRC Chinese students had accepted low paid jobs because they were financially desperate. They had to make enough money to pay their debts and establish themselves and their families in Australia. By working hard, they could earn more in their low paid jobs than on unemployment benefits. Table 4 (page 46) shows that the number of students receiving unemployment benefits was actually quite small.<sup>17</sup> However, the figures need to be qualified by the situation that during the time of the survey not all students were entitled to welfare provisions. Most had to work (including some who held two or three jobs at the same time), and work many hours per week: 21.5 per cent worked 50-60 hours; 21.2 per cent 60 to 70 hours; and 19.2 per cent more than 70 hours.

By the time of our survey in 1992, some students had become successful entrepreneurs. In Sydney, where most former PRC Chinese students are concentrated, 21.6 per cent had their own businesses, most with investment capital of between 10,000 and 50,000 Australian dollars. There were more than a thousand businesses run by former PRC students in Australia. One garment factory employed 30 workers and produced 3,000 garments daily. A high technology company, the Shangnasi Pty Ltd, had a registered capital of 2.8 million dollars (Huang Yong, 1993).

Initially, most students were willing to work long hours for low rates of pay. The survey shows that 14.6 per cent of PRC students were paid only 2 to 3 dollars an hour at some time during their employment history. However, once able to work legally, they were in a position to bargain with employers.

## FAMILY AND EMOTIONAL STRESS

Until their residence status was finally settled in 1993, most former PRC Chinese students lived in uncertainty and anxiety, having paid a high emotional price to gain a foothold in Australia. The Australian (Labour) Government inadvertently brought anguish to some Chinese students by first promising to give them protection and then offering hope (through Prime Minister Hawke's offer), on which basis they chose to stay. Had the Australian Government taken a hard-line position, some students might have gone back. At least one student told us that he was planning to return when he heard the news that he might be allowed to stay.

During their four-years temporary residence in Australia, married students (58.4 per cent) were unwilling to return to China to see their spouses, children and parents for fear that on their return to Australia they would have lost their grounds for refugee status. While they could apply for their spouses to come to Australia to visit them, and some did, it was very difficult to arrange such visits because of the long and complicated procedure required by both the Chinese and Australian governments. Besides, some were not inclined to spend money for such visits when they themselves were unsure of their own status in Australia.

While the situation was no better for unmarried students, some female students married or lived with local Australians. Male students were less inclined to marry; some became regular visitors to gambling institutions and brothels. Reports on this issue appeared frequently in local Chinese papers. For instance, "Guanya Zhongguo Fu Aodaliya Zifei Liuxuesheng Qingkuangde Diaocha Baogao" (A Survey Report on the conditions of Self-Sponsored Chinese Students in Australia), *Man Jiang Hong* (Australian Chinese Magazine), No. 11, 1993, p.5; "Liuxuesheng Ziyang Seqingye Fuwu Shuijin Lie Lingren You" (Sex Industry run by the Chinese Students Themselves: Worries over Lower Standards), *Huasheng Ribao* (The Chinese Herald), October 6, 1993, p.9; "Shixia Liuxing Anmo Yuan" (The Fashion of Massage Salon), *Xin Yimin* (The New Migrant), No. 2, 1993, p.28; and "Tongju Zai Xueli" (Cohabitation in Sydney), *Chaoliu Shidai GuanCha Yuekan* (The 21st Century Chinese Magazine), August 1993, p.20). A small number of male students became prostitutes when the going got very tough ("Xueli Zhongguo Nanji Tanmi" (The Secret of Chinese Male Prostitutes in Sydney), *Chaoliu Shidai GuanCha Yuenkan* (The 21st Century Chinese Magazine), August 1993, p.17).

In China, most of the students belonged to what may be called the middle class where maids had done the family's housework. In Australia, some of the students had to wash dishes and clean for others. Other things also distressed them. Thirty-six per cent claimed that they had encountered instances of racial discrimination, and 47 per cent had heard or read racially discriminatory words

or signs. While these figures relate only to their perceptions, and some of the instances may have been misunderstandings, the feeling of alienation and marginalization was genuine. The Chinese students coined a term to refer to their emotional distress under the pressure of work, debt and anxiety: *liuxuesheng pilao zonghezheng* (overseas student fatigue complex). The emotional distress and hard work took its toll (“Juezheng Zai Liuxuesheng Zhong Manyan” (Cancer Spreads Among the Students), *Da shijie* (The Great World Magazine), May 1992, p.4), and one female student died after she had worked hard for three months to earn just enough to pay debts incurred back home.

## HOUSING AND MOBILITY

Because of financial pressure, most students initially lived under poor housing conditions (by Australian standards), the main reason being that they wanted to save for other purposes. Indeed, 27 per cent of students spent less than A\$35 a week on rent. Typically, a student rented a house or an apartment and then invited many others to share it. Their survey showed that 49.6 per cent of students shared accommodation, 42.9 per cent had rented a house or apartment, and 7.5 per cent had purchased a house.<sup>18</sup> Except for a small number of the elite and Communist Party bureaucrats, housing conditions are extremely bad in China. To own a house is beyond the wildest dreams of many ordinary Chinese. Therefore, by Chinese standards, housing conditions for students in Australia were not bad at all. As for transportation, 75.1 per cent of students had their own vehicles (mostly second-hand cars valued between \$3,000 and \$6,000); 19.2 per cent relied on public transport, 4.1 per cent rode bicycles; and 1.6 per cent used other means. Again, private ownership of a car, second-hand or not, is beyond the reach of almost all Chinese in China.

## INCOME AND CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

Table 5 (page 46) shows that half the students earned between A\$300- 500 per week. Most saved \$150 a week (twelve times average weekly urban earnings in China). The largest item of expenditure was housing (38.6 per cent), followed by food (20.1 per cent), “other” (21.6 per cent) and investment (19.7 per cent). The Sydney Survey showed that 63.5 per cent of students spent between A\$100 to A\$200 a week, 21.7 per cent spent more than A\$200 and 14.8 per cent less than A\$100 a week. By China’s standards, many students, as they expected, had made a “fortune” in Australia within a few years. But this was not without cost; 3.9 per cent of respondents stated that during their most difficult period in Australia they spent only \$A5-6 a week on food, 7.8 per cent spent \$6-9, 17.8 per cent \$10-11 and 21.7 per cent \$12-15. Even so, 34 per cent of students reported having accumulated assets exceeding A\$30,000, 33.8 per cent \$11,000 - \$29,000 and 34 per cent \$10,000 or less.

## ATTITUDES, VALUES AND BELIEFS

Despite uncertainty, anxiety and hard work (71.8 per cent of students stated they had to work harder in Australia than in China), 52.7 per cent stated they liked Australians “very much”. To the question what was the most attractive aspect of life in Australia, 67.3 per cent replied freedom, 24.1 per cent good environment and 7.1 per cent democracy. To the question what they disliked most in China, 64.2 per cent stated lack of democracy, 15.1 per cent lack of freedom, 7.9 per cent lack of opportunity to develop their talents, and 9.4 per cent “complicated human relationships”.

Concerning their social status in Australia relative to China, 38.9 per cent stated that it had been “lowered a lot”, 20.4 per cent “lowered a little”, and 21.1 per cent that it remained more or less the same. The remainder (19.6 per cent) felt it had been raised. However, to the question concerning material well-being, 68.9 per cent stated “improvement”, 20.2 per cent “the same” and 10.9 per cent that it had declined. Being born and brought up in the PRC, most of the students did not have any religious beliefs. However, after several years in Australia, many had become interested in religion. Only 27 per cent had never participated in any religious activities, and of those who participated, 31.9 per cent replied either “a lot” or “very often”.<sup>19</sup> When asked why they wanted to take part in religious activities, 35 per cent responded for cultural understanding, 21.8 per cent for beliefs, 7 per cent for spiritual fulfilment, 6.6 per cent for making friends, 4.1 per cent for social life and 3.3 per cent for learning English. To the question relating to their beliefs, none said communism, but 29.6 per cent stated Christianity, 24.7 per cent humanitarianism, 18.8 per cent Buddhism, 12.6 per cent democratic socialism, 6 per cent liberalism, 4.6 per cent capitalism, 2.5 per cent individualism, 0.8 per cent socialism and 0.4 per cent Islam. When asked what was the most important factor in a happy life, 33.5 per cent gave a successful career, 28.8 per cent a happy family, 17.8 per cent freedom, 9.5 per cent being respected, 6.9 per cent being rich and 3.5 per cent having a highly-paid job. Finally, when asked whether they would like to become Australian citizens, 92 per cent said “yes”; only 8 per cent expressed reluctance.

## THE PRC CHINESE STUDENTS AS A GROUP AND THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Some Australians expected that once the former PRC students had been granted Australian permanent residence status, family reunion would increase the number of migrants from China to a quarter of a million or more. Indeed, the former Minister of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (Gerry Hand) claimed that the figure would reach 300,000 (*The Australian*, 3 November 1993: 2). The quality of this group of migrants, and their role in Australian society, had

understandably generated great concern in Australia. While our survey does not provide conclusive evidence that these students joined the welfare benefit queue, it should be noted that immediately before and during the survey many students were not entitled to welfare benefits.

Complaints expressed explicitly against this group included their illegal employment and offensive practices such as their dodging fares for public transport services (“Liuxuesheng Beibu Neiqing” (Inside Information of the Arrest of Chinese Students), *Da Shijie* (The Great World Magazine), August 1992: 32.) Like newly-arrived migrants from other countries, they tended to stick together and sometimes talk loudly in their own language, an aspect of cultural residue which gradually fades away.

Despite negative reports in the media, mostly local Chinese papers, our survey shows that PRC Chinese students in Australia as a group were well educated and motivated migrants who were resourceful and ambitious. Their average age was thirty-five and their educational level was well above the average Australian.

That these students had received very little financial support from either the Chinese or Australian governments, but quickly found jobs, are indications that they would probably settle well in Australia (Wang Haiwai, 1992). Some have already established their chambers of commerce in Sydney and Melbourne. According to the 1991 Census, China-born immigrants had a high rate of participation in manufacturing industry (23.8 per cent) compared with the total Australian population (13.1 per cent) (BIPR, 1994). Through their connections with China, they could act as an important bridge for Sino-Australian trade. Most of the group came from the rapidly developing areas of Shanghai, Guangdong and Fujian, and their cultural and linguistic knowledge of both China and Australia could benefit cultural and business exchange activities between the two countries.

Ironically, the loudest initial protest against PRC Chinese student immigrants in Australia came from the local community of Chinese origin. Some Chinese community leaders in Melbourne argued that the students were economic refugees and alleged that many were poorly educated and some had criminal backgrounds (“Zhongguo Xuesheng Gao Yimin Buzhang An Shimo Ji Hanyi” (The Story of Chinese Students Taking the Minister of Immigration to Court and Its Implications), *Zhongguo Ren* (The Chinese), No. 2, 1991: 8).

When some students wanted to take the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs to court for alleged violations of human rights, and when some staged a hunger strike to protest against the Australian authorities for not allowing them to stay, some members of the Chinese community were unsympathetic, believing that the action taken by students violated their sense of propriety and

code of behaviour. They also alleged that some Chinese female students had divorced their spouses in China so that they could marry local Australians (“Guanyu Zhongguo Fu Aodaliya Liuxuesheng Qingkuangde Diaocha Baogao” (A Survey Report on the Conditions of Chinese Students in Australia), *Man Jiang Hong* (The Australian Chinese Magazine), No. 11, 1992: 5; and “Wo Dui Zhongguo Liuxueshengde Kanfa” (My Views of the Chinese students), *Man Jiang Hong* (Australian Chinese Magazine), No. 9, 1992: 12). As the debate progressed, the Chinese community, with a better understanding of the students, shifted its position and later, together with the Italian and Yugoslav communities, supported the students and helped them argue their right to stay.<sup>20</sup>

Our study also indicates that the Chinese students were ready to embrace the Australian way of life. Forty-four per cent had many Australian friends, an equal percentage had some friends, and only 11 per cent had few friends. Nine per cent of the students had no Chinese friends and only 46.6 per cent said that Chinese comprised more than half their friends. The majority of their friends were non-Chinese, and 51.7 per cent were employed by non-Chinese persons. Ninety-four per cent claimed to have had “very friendly” or “rather friendly” contacts with local Australians and only 0.4 per cent had had an “unfriendly” experience. On the other hand, the language barrier was a major hindrance, only 14.7 per cent felt that their listening and speaking ability in English was “very good”, and more than 20 per cent had great difficulty in communicating in English. Their most frequent contacts were with their employers and landlords. Fifty nine per cent indicated that relationships with their employers were “very good” or “rather good”, and 79.8 per cent had maintained “very good” or “rather good” relationships with their landlords.

## AUSTRALIAN POLICIES OF EDUCATION EXPORT AND IMMIGRATION

Because of the world dominance of Western cultural values and technology, many students from developing countries value their experiences in a developed Western country. In China, *liuxue* (studying abroad) used to be, and still is, called *dujin* (getting gilded). Even in rapidly developing and rather wealthy nations such as Singapore, study in a Western country is a prerequisite for a good career path. As George Yeo, the Singapore Minister of Information declared, “You are not considered fully educated in this region unless you *liuxue* – leave to study in the West” (Martin Jacques, “Sun Sets on the West”, *The Weekend Australian*, November 26-27, 1994, p.29). By 1993, 42,000 full fee-paying overseas students were studying in Australia, each paying an average \$A10,900 a year. In the tertiary sector, 86 per cent of overseas students were from Asian countries (DEET, 1994).

Because of the disparity in living standards between Australia and some Asian countries, many students from those Asian countries are potential migrants. While Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Malaysia are rapidly catching up with, and even overtaking, Australia in terms of GNP per capita, other factors make migration attractive: lack of freedom of expression in Singapore; fear in Hong Kong before the takeover by China and remaining uncertainty after the takeover; discrimination against ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and unsettling political conflict between Taiwan and mainland China, are “push” factors which motivate migration to Australia.

One question remains. If the Tiananmen Massacre had not occurred, would the PRC students in Australia have wanted to return to China? The answer would probably have been no, although more PRC students would have gone back. The Australian Government at the time, in response to the situation, provided the PRC students with the opportunity to seek asylum. If the Tiananmen Massacre had not occurred, many students would have still worked illegally in order to pay their debts. Forced repatriation would have been impractical, considering the high cost of locating and removing such a large number of persons. Even a few hundred boat people have caused the Australian Government considerable trouble.<sup>21</sup>

If Western standards were rigidly invoked, almost every citizen from PRC could claim refugee status. The politico-economic system in China is such that almost anyone can make a political case for refugee status. The implementation of one child family policy in China is both economic and political. The Australian Government’s tougher stand towards PRC citizens seeking refugee status on family planning grounds has already drawn criticism from senior UN officials (Catherine Armitage, “UN Calls for Softer Stance on Refugees”, *The Weekend Australian*, February 25-26, 1996: 9). The handling of former PRC Chinese students in Australia has shown that distinction between a political and economic refugee is very difficult to determine. Immigration policy based on national interest and clearly stated as such, would be more effective in the long term.

## NOTES

1. We are very grateful to the editor of *International Migration* for his encouragement and to the anonymous readers whose detailed comments have been addressed in the article. Of course any errors are entirely our own.
2. According to figures published by the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, Australia's China-born population reached 77,799 by 1991 (BIPR, 1994).
3. As one anonymous assessor of this article points out, there had been intense debate within the then Hawke Government on the issue of education export, especially regarding PRC students. Some quarters of government had anticipated problems involving the recruitment of PRC citizens as students of English language. However, it is not our intention to dwell on the differences between policy makers at that time. We intend to focus on evaluating officially implemented government policies.
4. The survey was planned and conducted through a project headed by Edmund Fung at Griffith University, now professor at the University of Western Sydney. He submitted a report to the Australian Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs in April 1993. The study attracted wide media attention and a summary version of the report appeared in the June 11, 1993 issue of *The Australian* with "Chinese Students make Model Migrants" as its headline. A Chinese version of the report appeared in the *Sing Tao Ri Bao* on June 26-27, 1993. A final report in Chinese appeared in a Chinese magazine published by Chinese students (cf. Liu Xian, "Zai Ao Zhongguo Xuesheng Wenti Jiqi Shehui Yingxiang He Zhengce Hanyi Yanjiu Baogao" (The Question of Chinese Students in Australia and its Social and Policy Implications: A Research Report), May, Nos. 1-3, *Man Jiang Hong* (Australian Chinese Magazine), 1994.
5. We also visited more than 30 social and welfare service centres which provided interpreting and immigration services to Chinese students, some editorial staff of newspapers and journals published by former PRC Chinese students, more than 20 retail shops (food, garment, vegetable, etc.) and restaurants, and eight garment, furniture or computer maintenance factories and workshops run by former Chinese students, 15 factories which employed Chinese students.
6. Of the 325 returned questionnaires, 30 had only ten questions answered, ten had half the questions answered and five returned without answer.
7. In terms of qualitative research, a higher return rate would have been desirable.
8. Those who were enrolled in PhD programmes assumed that their highest education level was higher than being English language students.
9. Field work interviews confirm that many students came to Australia as English language students, but later changed their status after working or studying, or both.
10. See *Shenzhou Xueren* (Students from the Sacred Land), No. 8, 1993, p.50. Andrew Nathan (1994) gives 110,000 which he admits is an underestimate.
11. According to the then Australia Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET), in 1990 the number of Chinese students at Australian tertiary institutions was 1,216 by country residence and 2,713 by country of birth.
12. By 1987, 21 per cent of overseas students on a six-month visa to study English in Australia were Chinese: by 1988 the number had reached 49 per cent.
13. The *He Shang* phenomenon and its implications are evaluated in Seldon et al. (1991), Wakeman (1989) Chen Xiaomei (1992) and Tu Weiming et al. (1992).

14. If his or her parents had different occupations, the respondent was asked to state the father's occupation. This choice was made on the basis that it had been the practice (in filling government forms for instance) in the post-liberation gender-equal PRC!
15. According to the 1991 Census, the age pyramid of the China-born is a little top heavy, with 41.5 per cent aged under 34 years, compared with 54.3 per cent for the total Australian population; 59.6 per cent for the Australia-born; and 35.6 per cent for all overseas born (BIPR, 1994).
16. In 1988, the then opposition leader of the Liberal Party, John Howard, tried to exploit this fear by saying that Asians had different values that might undermine Australian society. Immediately before becoming the opposition Liberal Party leader again, John Howard, during a television interview, withdrew his 1988 remarks and admitted that he was wrong. The latest episode of this debate was raised by an independent MP Pauline Hanson, whose maiden speech in Parliament in 1996 on anti-Asian immigration was widely reported in the mass media throughout September and October 1996.
17. The 1991 census shows that labour force participation of the China-born population (64.6 per cent) was higher than for immigrants from other non-English speaking countries (59.8 per cent). However, the unemployment rate for the China-born population in 1991 was 16.3 per cent compared with 11.6 per cent for the total Australian population (BIPR, 1994).
18. According to the 1991 census, 34.4 per cent of the China-born resided in dwellings which they fully owned, compared with 41.0 per cent of the total Australian population and 46.75 of the overseas born non-English speaking community (BIPR, 1994).
19. According to the Sydney Survey, 40.4 per cent of the students had come to believe in one kind of religion or another.
20. "Fuyu Aozhou Jiena Zhongguo Xuesheng Wei Ao Gongmin" (An appeal for the Acceptance of Chinese Students as Australian Citizens), *Man Jiang Hong* (The Australian Chinese Magazine), No. 5, 1992, p.5; "Kanjing Tanpan Zhuiji" (Trace the Negotiations at Canberra), *ibid.*, p.5; "Shou Huanyingde Li Jingqiou" (Cheers to William Lee [an Australian of Chinese origin who alleged that there were criminal elements among the Chinese students]), *Hualian Shibao* (The Chinese United Times), August 29, 1993, p.14; "Xueli Huashe Qiaolin Zai Shu Jijian" (Overseas Chinese Community Leaders Expressed Their Opinions Again), *Xin Haichao Bao* (The New Tide Chinese Newspaper), September 16, 1993, p.1; and "Juliu Qianjing Keshi Haixu Jinxing Nuli" (The Prospect of Residing Is Good, but Efforts Are Still Needed), *Hualian Shibao* (The Chinese United Times), October 8, 1993, p.2.
21. James Walker, "Bolkus Defends Deportation", *The Weekend Australian*, November 19-20, 1994, p.4. In 1994, 700 boat people arrived at the Australian coast. The Australian Government, and the mass media, were alarmed at the prospect of many more coming. Judging from the letter columns in Australian newspapers, the overwhelming response was to turn them away. See Amanda Mead, "Refugees at Peak since Vietnam," *The Weekend Australian*, No. 9440, December 24-25, 1994, p.1; Peter Lalor, "Gamble Worth Taking," and "Behind Barbed Wire Fences," *The Courier Mail*, December 31, 1994, p.21; "Government Closes Boat People Loopholes,"; and Kavanagh's Saturday column, *The Courier Mail*, December 31, 1994, p.8 and p.15.

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TABLE 1  
EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF CHINESE STUDENTS  
BEFORE THEY ENTERED AUSTRALIA

Level of education	University graduate	College graduate	Post-graduate	Technical college	Senior high school	Others
Per cent	42.5	28.6	15	9	3	1.9

  

Occupation	Teachers	Other profession	Research job	Gov't officer	Student	Worker	Others
Per cent	27	25.5	18.4	14.2	5.2	5.2	4.5

Source: The Survey Questionnaire.

Note: College education in China is tertiary. One difference between a college and a university education in China is that the former is more technical or occupational-orientated. Another is that while college education usually lasts two years, university education lasts longer.

TABLE 2  
LENGTH OF STUDY AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE WHO WORKED  
WHILE STUDYING

Length of Study	6 months	6-12 months	13-24 months	25-36 months	3 years+
Per cent of students	14.9	30.7	21.7	15.5	17.2

  

Period of work while studying	6 months	6-12 months	13-24 months	25-36 months	3 years+
Per cent of students	29	34	14.5	13.6	8.9

Source: The Survey Questionnaire.

TABLE 3  
ACTIVITIES AND ATTITUDE IN SUPPORT OF BEIJING STUDENTS  
DURING THE 1989 POLITICAL EVENTS

Activity and attitude	Activity organizer	Active participation	Some participation	Support but non-participation	Sympathy but not support	Some sympathy	Neutral	Other
Per cent of students	18	33.8	19.9	13.9	7.9	2.3	1.9	2.3

Source: The Survey Questionnaire.

TABLE 4  
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT  
AND FAMILY ALLOWANCES

Unemployed	Never	1-3 months	4-6 months	6-9 months	10-12 months	12+ months	not applicable
Per cent of students	41.7	26.1	15.2	4.9	5.3	2.7	4.1
Unemployed benefit claim made	less than 1 month	1-2 months	3-4 months	5-6 months	9-10 months		
Per cent of students	6.6	1.2	1.9	0.8	1.6		
Family allowance claim made	less than 1 month	1-3 months	4-7 months	8-12 months	13-19 months	19+ months	
Per cent of students	1.2	2.8	2.0	3.6	2.4	1.6	

Source: The Survey Questionnaire.

TABLE 5  
WEEKLY INCOME IN AUSTRALIAN DOLLARS

Weekly income A\$	100	100-200	200-300	300-500	500-700	700+	not applicable
Per cent of respondents	3.2	8.4	24.2	47.8	7.2	4.8	4.4

Source: The Survey Questionnaire.

DU STATUT D'ETUDIANT A CELUI DE CITOYEN :  
ENQUETE SUR LES ETUDIANTS ORIGINAIRES  
DE REPUBLIQUE POPULAIRE DE CHINE EN AUSTRALIE

Cet article est le résultat d'une enquête menée auprès d'étudiants originaires de la République populaire de Chine, arrivés en Australie après 1986 et s'y trouvant encore en 1992. On a commencé à voir arriver des étudiants chinois en Australie en 1972, lorsque les deux pays ont noué des relations diplomatiques. Leur nombre est resté insignifiant jusqu'en 1986, date à laquelle l'Australie a lancé sa politique d'enseignement tourné vers l'étranger.

Les auteurs fournissent des statistiques et des analyses sur la motivation des étudiants, leur niveau d'éducation et leur contexte familial, ainsi que sur leur situation actuelle et leurs aspirations. Ils examinent aussi un certain nombre de questions telles que la politique d'immigration de l'Australie et la politique d'exportation de son enseignement, le dilemme que posent les réfugiés politiques et économiques en termes de droits de l'homme et la façon dont les étudiants chinois qui se trouvaient en Australie lors du massacre de la Place Tiananmen en 1989 ont ressenti cet événement.

Les résultats de l'enquête font ressortir que la majorité des ex-étudiants de la RPC se sont intégrés avec succès en Australie, mais non sans avoir rencontré des difficultés considérables. La question de la distinction entre réfugiés politiques et réfugiés économiques est ressentie comme très épineuse et les auteurs estiment qu'une politique d'immigration fondée sur l'intérêt national et clairement déclarée serait plus convaincante, moins hypocrite et donc plus efficace à long terme.

DE ESTUDIANTE A CIUDADANO:  
UNA ENCUESTA ENTRE ESTUDIANTES  
DE LA REPUBLICA POPULAR DE CHINA (RPC) EN AUSTRALIA

Este artículo consiste en una encuesta realizada entre estudiantes de la República Popular de China (RPC) que llegaron a Australia después de 1986 y aún permanecían ahí en 1992. Los estudiantes de la RPC empezaron a llegar a Australia en 1972, cuando China y Australia establecieron relaciones diplomáticas. El número de llegadas fue insignificante hasta 1986, año en el que Australia inició una política de exportación de educación.

El artículo da estadísticas y análisis sobre la motivación de esos estudiantes, su educación y medio familiar, y presenta su situación y aspiraciones. Trata asimismo de cuestiones como la política australiana de exportación de educación y la de inmigración, el dilema entre refugiados políticos y

económicos desde el punto de vista de los derechos humanos, y los efectos de la masacre de la Plaza de Tiananmen de 1989 sobre los estudiantes de la RPC que se encontraban en Australia en aquellos momentos.

Los resultados de la encuesta indican que la mayoría de los antiguos estudiantes de la RPC han podido adaptarse bien a Australia, aunque con dificultades considerables y un costo emocional. Sabido es que la cuestión de distinguir entre refugiados políticos y económicos es espinosa y se propone que una política inmigratoria basada en el interés nacional, a condición de que esté claramente enunciada, habrá de ser más convincente, menos hipócrita y, por consiguiente, más eficaz a largo plazo.