

Eddie Liu OBE, OAM



Eddie Liu has been the public face of Chinese Australians in Queensland for almost sixty years. He is also known as the ‘Father’ of Chinatown in Brisbane and the longest serving Honorary Secretary of the Chinese Club of Queensland. The latter position was almost accidental, he says: “I was dragged in by my mate Tommy Young to attend a meeting in 1953. Someone had to take minutes so I did the job. And I have been secretary of the Club now for 51 years.” Indeed, that is where Eddie may be found every day, ‘minding the shop’ at the Club.

To the Chinese, age is synonymous with wisdom. And, says Eddie sagely: “I’ve done a lot of work in my lifetime; raised a lot of money for worthy causes. My children want me to slow down, as I am so enthusiastically involved with the Club.” The Club, located in the heart of Chinatown, has helped revive commercial

activities in Brisbane’s Fortitude Valley, pulling in 3000 members throughout the year who socialize and integrate with the wider community.

Eddie arrived in Melbourne in 1937 when he was 14 to complete his secondary education at Christian Brothers College and to join his father, a herbalist, who had been in Australia since the turn of the century, establishing a laundry and a grocery store. The Sino –Japanese War had just erupted but he was able to return to Hong Kong for school holidays in 1939, when World War II broke out. Eddie was fortunate to board the *Taiping*, the last ship leaving for Australia. He had happy times at school where the Chinese students socialized well with the Aussie kids. But life outside school was a different matter: non-Caucasians faced daily racism and discrimination. Some Australians would not sit next to an Asian in the cinema or on the tram. But Eddie still ended up marrying an Irish girl, Elizabeth Margaret Brown, whom he met at table -tennis. This union produced 4 daughters and 2 sons, 13 grand-children and 4 great grand children.

During the War, Eddie was called up to serve in the Australian Military Forces (AMF), and was immediately recruited by the Manpower Department and moved north to Queensland. In Brisbane, the headquarters of General Douglas McArthur, Eddie became supervisor for an American project building landing barges in Bulimba. This Bulimba Small Ship Division Project was wholly staffed by 2000 Chinese seamen, many of whom were stranded in Australia by the war.

China was on the side of the Allies, so the Chinese seamen were issued with ‘Alien Certificates’ and allowed to move about freely. Soon they decided to form their own seamen’s union and Eddie was invited to become their paid Secretary. His volunteering career took off – he raised funds for wartime refugees, took care of men who fell ill and with dignity and respect, buried the ones who died from accidents. At

the end of the war, all left to go home, leaving only 6 who wanted to make Australia home.

Eddie too decided to stay on in Brisbane, and he became a fruit and vegetable supplier. He continued to be helpful whenever he could. As he says: “The best thing you can achieve is to do something for the community. You meet with a lot of people and get involved in very exciting things. You really either like it or you don’t! And I have never gone looking for jobs – all things have happened naturally. But I ‘d rather do the BIG projects – small ones waste a lot of time!” Even then, Eddie concentrated his efforts on fund-raising for a variety of good causes, including the Mater Hospital, Royal Brisbane Children’s Hospital, Leukemia Foundation and Guide Dogs for the Blind. He has raised funds for 4 children from Hong Kong to have liver transplants in Brisbane, and helped sponsor a Chinese student to do his Doctor of Philosophy degree here.

But Eddie confesses, it is the BIG projects that have given him the most stimulation and satisfaction. For example, in the early 1960’s, he was told about a Chinese temple in Breakfast Creek that was lying derelict, a target for vandals who had smashed all the idols. The original 3 trustees were dead and no one actually ‘owned’ the building that was first constructed in 1886. Eddie, who by this time had made some very important contacts, lobbied for State legislation to return the temple to the Temple Chinese Society of Brisbane, instead of auctioning it off. In 1963, Deputy Premier Gordon Chalk introduced into Parliament a Private Member’s Bill, returning the land and tenure of “Joss House” to the Temple Society.

Money was raised to repair it and a bank loan was taken to help construct a residence next to the temple building to house a monk and a caretaker. The temple building was extended to include a sanctuary for Kwan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. The repairs took one year and by 1966, this Taoist Temple was officially re-opened. Eddie, a Catholic, considered this work to be the preservation of Chinese culture and one that would benefit the Chinese community greatly. Shrewd as ever, he ensured that important revenue was obtained by charging parking fees from punters flocking to the Albion Racecourse, adjacent to the temple. Every weekend, thousands would frequent the trots, and valuable money was gained as racing fans parked on temple grounds! Lavish celebrations were held to mark the centenary anniversary of the temple.

In 1974, Eddie set up a herbalist practice in Fortitude Valley, which he ran until 1986. In 1983, Russ Hinze, then Minister for Local Government, invited Eddie to be part of a committee to establish a Chinatown. Eddie was activated and went to China to hire B. Z. Mo, chief architect of the Guangzhou Planning Administration to design it. Brisbane City Council gave \$1.5 million dollars, but this was insufficient, so the other half of the costs were paid by the State Government of Premier Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen.



Eddie with Dr F. Y. Tung, Chairman of People's Consultative Committee, Beijing

Six other architects and engineers arrived from Guangzhou to commence the Tang Dynasty-styled pagodas and arches. The two stone lions guarding the mall entrance were a gift from the People's Republic of China. In the meantime, the Fortitude Valley Chinatown Advancement Committee was formed with Eddie as Chairperson. It was "one of the happiest days of my life" Eddie says, when it was officially opened in January 1987, coinciding with the Lunar New Year celebrations.

During all these years, Eddie was still actively involved with the Chinese Club of Queensland. Voluntary workers had completed the Club building in Dixon Street in Auchenflower in 1957, but it was extensively damaged by the disastrous 1974 flood. Eighteen months after its restoration, the building was sold and 5 acres at Deagon were purchased from the State government. The land was too large for their purposes, so Eddie visited Hong Kong, hoping to find a religious group that would be interested in setting up a temple, aged care facility and Chinese Garden.

The offer was taken up by the Ching Chung Taoist Association, who spent \$ 3.5 million dollars developing a temple complex on the land, paying only \$1 a year rent to the Club. The Chinese Club itself had completed their own building in 1989, but as members complained that it was too far from the city, moves were made to re-locate, yet again. The Ching Chung Taoist Association bought their club building for \$1.2 million, enabling the Chinese Club to purchase its current premises at 256 Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley. After a major re-furbishment, the building was officially opened by then Governor of Queensland, Her Excellency Leneen Forde, on the 11th of August 1996. Today, the Club has over 3000 members from various ethnic communities.

Eddie's involvement in so many key projects has led to recognition by State and Commonwealth on many occasions. Eddie believes that to get things done "You've got to know people – it always is a case of "not what you know, but WHO you know. In a way, when you begin lobbying and negotiating, you get somewhere, and soon, you too become influential without even looking for it!" Thus in 1980, Eddie was awarded an Order of the British Empire (OBE) for community service, particularly in assisting the restoration of the Breakfast Creek temple; and in 1987, he was appointed

Honorary Ambassador for the City of Brisbane. In 2001, Eddie was awarded the Order of Australia (OAM) and three years later, he was nominated Australian of the Year (Local Hero) for Queensland.

Despite pleas to 'slow down' by the family, Eddie is still out and about. His own business interests include several property developments, and, a public relations consultancy that necessitates many trips into China and Hong Kong annually and of course, supervising the Chinese Club. As Eddie says: "It doesn't matter where you go; you still have to make a living..." He still manages to participate on several boards. From 1999 to 2000, he was a member of the Advisory Board on International Business and Politics, Griffith University; and from 2001 to 2004, he was the Director of the Valley District Chamber of Commerce.

Eddie still has plans for another big project – a Chinese Retirement Village. He is disappointed that he has so far not been able to make this a reality. Having achieved such a high profile in society, he is also well aware of the 'tall poppy syndrome'. "No matter how good you are, some will be critical of your actions. If anyone does not like what I do, well, too bad! The Chinese tend to be competitive but no problems, I think I am doing well." It is evident that Eddie raises the bar where he is concerned but after all his achievements, he can now afford to take things a bit easier. He has won the appreciation and respect of nearly all (if not all) the people who know him and who have worked with him. Eddie can rest on his laurels. After all, he is OFFICIALLY Brisbane's local hero!