

The West Australian Branch of the Australia China Friendship Society (ACFSWA) was formed on 29 June 1970, when seven seniors met to inaugurate the Western Australian Branch of the Australia-China Society, electing Mrs Nancy Wilkinson as president and Mrs Celia Taylor as secretary-treasurer. The branch soon linked with other branches and was given representation on the National Council. This was some twenty years after similar societies were established in New South Wales and Victoria. Initially these branches were known as the Australia China Society (ACS). The pioneer branches endorsed the principles of cultural understanding, trade relationships and peaceful relations between Australia and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) with a goal of the establishment of diplomatic relations.



Dr. Han Suyin

The catalyst for the formation of a Western Australian ACS was undoubtedly the visit in May 1970 of a Chinese born qualified medical practitioner who wrote under the pseudonym of Han Suyin. It was a time of anti-communism in the community and China was regarded with trepidation. There was little knowledge about China, or its culture. The idea of friendship with China was very contentious. The voice of support for China needed to be loud and clear. Consequently, in 1971, a less reticent John Thomson was elected president.

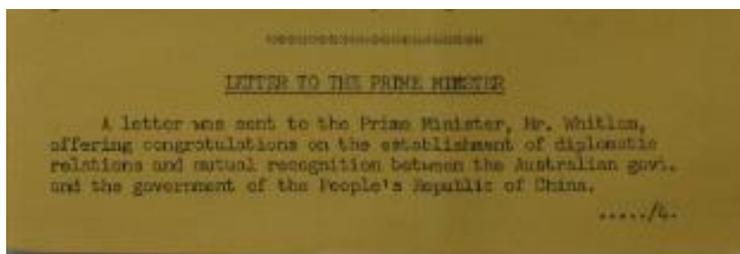
The Branch's early committees reflected two lines of thinking. Some were attracted primarily to Chinese art, culture and cuisine and others to the efforts of the Chinese development through utilising Marxist-Leninism- Mao Zedong thought.

From its beginning, the Branch has focused on providing information about and generating an understanding of China. This has been achieved by showing Chinese films, forming and operating study groups, supporting exhibitions on Chinese culture and describing life in China with talks and through its newsletter. It still supports people to people interactions through leading tours and delegations to China under the auspices of its National body and promotes the teaching of Chinese in Western Australian schools and co-sponsors student visits to China to help bridge the cultural gap between the two countries.

Two of its major programs were operating a bookshop distributing Chinese literature and text books and providing teachers to various educational institutions in China to teach English. For a while other activities included providing language classes, and having a weekly slot on WAIT community radio entitled 'China Today'.

In an era of anti Peoples Republic of China sentiment, the ACS was the only organization in Western Australia to welcome Chinese scientists, journalists, sporting teams, acrobats, postgraduate students and the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe and even the crew of visiting Chinese freighters. In the second year of its inception, 1971, the ACS organised the first ever Western Australian public banquet to commemorate China's National Day. In later years the ACFS shared the banquet planning and celebrations with other organisations wishing to recognise the occasion.

1971 was a landmark year. A branch newsletter was published monthly and distributed to China and New Zealand. The Western Australian ACS joined with other branches to lobby support for the recognition of the People's Republic of China. In October the United Nations recognised the Peoples Republic of China as the legitimate China. Gough Whitlam visited China. in 1971, while leader of the opposition. When the Australian Labour Party formed Government, it established diplomatic relations with the PRC on 21st December 1972.



Early members had to be very brave to support People's China in any way, during that Western-inspired era of the bamboo curtain. The Society's early members are to be commended for their courage and humanity in the face of a reviling barrage from government, the media and general public that continued years after the Whitlam initiatives in December 1972. After a series of firebombing of Chinese restaurants, in 1997 it combined with the Chung Wah Association to arrange a meeting for the Minister for Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs, the Hon. H.R. Broad MLA, to address a public meeting on concerns regarding racial intolerance in the community.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations between Australia and China, the ACS has progressed from being a political based organisation to one of friendship. To reflect this, the National committee and all branches changed their names to 'Australia China Friendship Society' (ACFS) in 1983.

When the Chinese consulate was established in Perth, the Chung Wah Association and the Branch co-hosted a welcoming banquet that gave the first Consul General Cai Chuan an opportunity to meet the Chinese business and community leaders. This was the beginning of a relaxed and friendly ACFS relationship with Chai Chuan and his successors.

A major difference between our two cultures is the way in which we welcome and entertain visitors. The entertaining of the Consular staff and visiting members of delegations through a mixture of formal dinners and informal get togethers, meals at private homes, picnics and outings to various parks provides a relaxed atmosphere for the exchange of ideas. This approach has also provided many opportunities for the visitor to gain a greater understanding of our culture by seeing how Western Australians live.



Les and Ann Grieve entertaining Mr Cai Chun