

# Atherton Gardens Housing Estate



Sculpture in the grounds Atherton Gardens Estate, Fitzroy.  
ARTIST: Glenn Romanis

**My surname is Qian, first name is Rongcheng, and English name is Richard. Born in 1932, I migrated to Australia in 2000. I became blind, mute and deaf as I did not know English. Having studied 510 hour English at Adult Migrant Education Service without a very satisfactory outcome or much benefit I came to the classes here, after being told by a friend. Teaching and studying in a vibrant atmosphere, helping and caring for each other, I feel the warmth in such a big family here. Although I am 72 I know I will make progress as long as I continue to study. I participate actively in learning whenever possible to slowly improve my English. One will go backwards without learning. Performances have been organized often for our class, such as singing and choir speech. I believe that everybody should fully support and actively take part in those activities as this is a group issue. In the meantime these activities have a positive impact on us as our English level and team spirits are enhanced.**

**Rongcheng (Richard) Qian, member of *The Voices of Atherton Garden*, statement translated from Mandarin, 2004**

**This chapter is a first-hand account of the choral group *The Voices of Atherton Gardens* by Graham Pitts, the writer of *Public Art Public Housing*.**

**Essentially, *The Voices* are a choir or chorus of people who speak as well as sing. Predominately Mandarin-speaking Chinese, the group also contains Cambodians, Malaysians, Egyptians, an Afghani, a Pakistani and a Filipina. Many of them are older people. All have limited English language skills: some of them, originally, had almost no English at all.**

**Nonetheless, since their formation in 2002, *The Voices* have spoken and sung in English at many festivals and conferences such as the *Building Community Forum* organised by the Cultural Development Network of Victoria and the Department of Human Services and North Richmond Community Health Centre (2003); the *Vitality Symposium* held by the City of Port Phillip (2003); and the *Growing Resilience Conference* with the Cultural Development Network and the Victorian Local Government Association (2004). *The Voices* also performed for television during the Melbourne Fringe Festival's 2003 birthday celebrations.**

Their formation was unplanned. It occurred because they, as residents of the Atherton Gardens housing estate in inner-city Fitzroy, needed on-site English-as-a-Second Language classes; and because I was a member of a group of artists seeking performers for a play based on the lives of the residents of the Fitzroy estate. The obvious solution, that I teach English and they perform in a play, established the principle of mutual benefit which has ever since guided *The Voices* and me, as their co-writer and Artistic Director.

A professional playwright and former English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher, I came to the estate in early 2002. Artsworkeer Bronwen Gray and I were to start work on a visual art and community theatre project entitled *Such Lives*. Bronwen had worked previously with some residents on ceramic murals and the row of Babushka Dolls adorning the south-eastern corner of the estate. But for *Such Lives* we needed the active involvement of a much larger number of tenants.

**SPEAKER:** We are The Voices of Atherton Gardens. We often speak together. We practice this especially in our English classes.

**CHORUS:** We practice this especially in our English classes.

**SPEAKER:** (Sneezing) Ah-choo!

**CHORUS:** (Sneezing) Ah-choo!

**SPEAKER:** God bless you.

**CHORUS:** God bless you.

**SPEAKER:** Thank you.

**CHORUS:** Thank you.

**SPEAKER:** No, no. Do you mind not repeating everything I say?

**CHORUS:** No, no. Do you mind not repeating everything I say?

**SPEAKER:** Please stop it.

**CHORUS:** Please stop it.

**SPEAKER:** Stop it!

**CHORUS:** Stop it!

**SPEAKER:** I think I'm going insane!!!  
The chorus all silently nod their heads.

Excerpt from the script of a performance by choral group *The Voices of Atherton Gardens*, 2004

Participation was not immediately forthcoming. We were supported by community leaders but the residents, having been recently portrayed in the tabloid press as living in a *high rise hell*, were suspicious of outsiders. There was also a lack of mutual trust within the estate as the residents were forced to compete then, as now, for the sparse on-site services available. Therefore our initial efforts to persuade many of them that a theatre play would be a wonderful prospect were not remarkably successful.

There was, though, a clear need for ESL classes. None were available on-site, although the estate population of approximately three thousand people came from more than forty different countries. Communication within the estate was limited due to the lack of a common language. People tended not to go out into the wider world because, as one of them later wrote, *I became blind, mute and deaf as I did not know English*.

The English classes began in mid-2002 with six students: a month later, there were forty. (There are now more than one hundred students and six volunteer teachers as well as myself). In October 2002

the group performed as a narrative chorus in the highly successful *Such Lives* which, as the title suggests, portrayed the lives of estate residents. In all, more than one hundred tenants participated. *Such Lives* was produced at the Fitzroy Town Hall, adjacent to the estate, and was a packed-out success.

*The Voices of Atherton Gardens* were delighted to perform in speaking roles as their confidence in English had increased dramatically with the classes and the rehearsals for the show. They also took great pleasure in choral speaking, which is sometimes necessary in large classes. Choral speaking happens when people speak together as a group or choir. Individual voices break up the pattern of group speech with remarks or stories of their own. Alternatively the group repeats or echoes what a speaker says. The individual speaker and the chorus might perhaps start arguing.



The Atherton Voices choral group.

The *Such Lives* project was a memorable success but came to an end in October 2002. By then the bonds of friendship between the participants in the English classes and myself were too strong to relinquish. The classes had grown even further in number and were playing an important part in building a strong sense of community on the estate. I stayed on. The only limits to further growth are funding and the number of available volunteer teachers. There are regular singing classes conducted by Ruth Schoenheimer, the Musical Director of *Such Lives*. Recently, dancing teachers have come to work with the group.

**My surname is Wang, first name is Chengtai. I migrated to Australia in December 1996 and moved to Atherton Gardens in May 2003 and I am well satisfied with the activities held in this community. In particular, the English classes have achieved good results. The learning content accords with our needs which we can apply in daily life and should really be known by everybody.**

**Different teaching measures arouse our enthusiasm for learning in terms of English. Speech choir has benefited both our study of English and we enjoy social activities by proudly performing at different occasions. We not only learn English from songs but also feel joyful while singing in English: we also communicate with our dance teachers orally to practice English and exchange ideas. Most importantly, the spirit of youth has been emerged in aged people by encouragement and a multicultural society has been evident. Aged people participating in those activities here feel that the life is rich, knowledge is expanding, vitality is improving and we are happy being involved in the society.**

Chengtai Wang, member of *The Voices of Atherton Gardens*, statement translated from Mandarin, 2004

*English classes* is something of a misnomer. In reality the sessions combine ESL, group discussion, presentations by guests, singing and dance lessons, drama coaching and day-long excursions in the buses provided by organisations who book *The Voices* for performances. The fees the group sometimes charges for these presentations go towards other excursions and educational materials, with the group deciding how such money should be spent.

**SPEAKER 1:** This is the story of how I moved into my flat, and found there a blue bowl. Downstairs, far below, I had arrived with friends and relatives to help me move in my furniture.

**SPEAKER 2:** More furniture than you can poke a stick at. (*Proudly*) We are very proud of learning Aussie slang.

**CHORUS:** We learn more Aussie slang than you can poke a stick at.

**SPEAKER 1:** We put the furniture into the lift ... and then we had to move it all out of the lift. Because the lift was broken down.

**CHORUS:** So we had to carry everything up the stairs.

**SPEAKER 2:** (*Still proud.*) More furniture than you can poke a stick at.

**SPEAKER 1:** Everyone was wonderful.

**SPEAKER 2:** I wasn't wonderful. I gave up and went home.

**SPEAKER 1:** But finally we moved all the furniture into the flat. And yet the flat felt very empty. As if no-one had ever lived there before. But then I found this. A chipped blue bowl. It had a note with it. A letter for me, from the person who had lived in the flat before. Dear New Person, it said ...

**SPEAKER 3:** Dear New Person. This is a small gift for you. This bowl was here in the flat when I moved in, and now I leave it here for you when you move in. It is to remind you that people have lived here before, and been happy. Every person who ever lives here leaves it for the next New Person. Enjoy living here. There will be trouble, and difficulties, but happiness also. That is the meaning of this chipped blue bowl.

Excerpt from the script of a performance by choral group *The Voices of Atherton Gardens*, 2002.

In August 2004 *The Voices* performed as the *English class* in the large scale community theatre play *Inside Out*. Like *Such Lives* in 2002, it was produced at the Fitzroy Town Hall. However the cast of public housing tenants in *Inside Out* was even larger (with one hundred and twenty participants) and it was produced for four consecutive performances with a total audience of six hundred people.

In October 2004, a companion play, *Outside In*, was a performance /installation work on the actual estate, in four flats refurbished to show the waves of immigration which have come to Australia over the past four decades. Specifically welcoming outsiders into Atherton Gardens, *Outside In* was part of the 2004 Melbourne International Festival of the Arts.

*The Voices* featured in both *Inside Out* and *Outside In*. They have come a long way since tentatively attending English classes in 2002. But of course they had come a much longer way before I was privileged to meet them.

*The Voices* have developed to the stage where the group is based around cultural as much as educative activities. Yet the ESL component remains crucially important. Employment opportunities for housing residents are limited not just because of the stigma of living in the flats but also because of their often minimal English skills.

There is a more subtle consequence of possessing only minimal English. The Department of Human Services and non-government support agencies at Atherton Gardens (actually most of them are housed outside in the surrounding streets) place a high value on community participation in decision making. This is encouraged by the provision of interpreters at meetings. But true participation in group decision-making often depends on prior discussions between those involved. A committee can be defined as a meeting in which committee members ratify decisions made in talks elsewhere. Without the social exchanges made possible by a shared language, the representatives of different ethnic groups find it difficult to understand the attitudes of others. Divisive suspicions are aroused. A consultative committee meeting might not empower members of a community as much as dis-empower them if they do not have a common language: in this case, English.

*The Voices* practice their English at every opportunity. Some of the most entertaining exchanges happen when they question the guests who come to speak at the classes. Speakers have included Department of Human Services workers, representatives of Centrelink, health advisers, child-care specialists and community development workers from an array of government and non-government agencies. The visitors can be jolted by the questions which are often of a personal nature.

**Going to the English class in Atherton Garden makes my life colourful. I have not only met many new friends, enjoyed the warmth of friendship but also learned English in fun and a relaxed environment. It is never too old to learn and now I have life goals and energy to make progress. I can open my mouth to speak English more and more, which brings convenience in daily life and starts a communication channel for me with people from other cultural backgrounds.**

**People from English class have often been invited to perform as a speech choir in conferences and seminars playing a role in a multicultural society. Although I am old I still make contributions. I feel proud and happy that we, people from Chinese background, can perform in English in front of the audiences coming from other cultural backgrounds.**

Jian Zhiduan, member of *The Voices of Atherton Garden*, statement translated from Mandarin, 2004

**ALL: JOURNEY SONG.**

***Ocean and sky  
Ocean and sky  
Far over land and sea  
My journey carries me.***

***I need courage and strength  
For my boat is so small  
And the ocean is so wide.***

***Home is the heart  
here must I start  
I lay my head to rest  
With those I love the best.***

***Chorus.***

***All rivers flow  
Flow to the sea  
There are no separate waves  
On the ocean deep.***

***Chorus.***

***Ocean and sky  
Ocean and sky  
And the ocean is so wide.***

*Journey Song*, lyrics by Ruth Schoenheimer, Musical Director of *The Voices of Atherton Gardens*.

Writing for the performances is a painstaking process which involves my gaining an initial consensus on the substance of what is to be said, then the drafting of a script which is debated by The Voices until the final copy is ready for rehearsals. At every stage the English terminology is explored. For example, the phrase *more furniture than you can poke a stick at*, used in one script, led to a month-long examination of Australian idioms and slang. These linguistic explorations infuse the eventual

performances with added confidence, humour and zest. It is also fascinating how words such as *community* are seen by the choir as fresh and exciting. For instance it was they who decided that *community* means the *sharing of our memories, worries, wishes and dreams*. Their own sense of community, a community of people who share the memory of their first homeland, is discernible when they speak about leave-taking on the way to a future which *flows like a great river into the far horizon*.

**SPEAKER :** Our visitors come to tell us about important new things on the estate. But we also ask our visitors questions like ...

**CHORUS:** Are you married?

**SPEAKER:** Are you happy, or lucky in love?

**CHORUS:** Do you like your job?

**SPEAKER:** What is your opinion of Mr. John Howard?

**CHORUS:** Many other questions like that.

**SPEAKER:** Sometimes our guests get embarrassed. But...

**CHORUS:** It's always very interesting.

**SPEAKER:** They share their lives with us, and we share our lives with them. This, we believe, is called "community". The sharing of our lives, our memories, worries, wishes and dreams.

*The Voices of Atherton Gardens, 2003*

**SPEAKER 1:** This is a poem by the Chinese poet Li Bai.  
He wrote about a good-bye to home.

**CHORUS:** (In Mandarin) Gu ren xi huang he lou.

**SPEAKER 2:** At Yellow Crane Tower in the west  
My old friend says good-bye.

**CHORUS:** (In Mandarin) Yan hua san yue xia yang zhou.

**SPEAKER 2:** In the mist and flowers of spring  
He goes down to Yangzhou.

**CHORUS:** (In Mandarin) Gu fan yuan ying bi kong jin.

**SPEAKER 2:** Lonely sail, distant shadow ,  
Vanish in blue emptiness.

**CHORUS:** (In Mandarin) Wei jian chang jiang tian ji liu.

**SPEAKER 2:** All I see is the great river  
Flowing into the far horizon.

*The Voices of Atherton Gardens, 2003*