

# THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE IN DUBLIN

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*In 1938, Emilio Segre, an Italian Jewish refugee and one of the foremost European physicists of his day, got a position in the Berkley Science Laboratory in the USA. While there, he used the  $E=mc^2$  formula of his more famous contemporary and fellow refugee, Einstein, to become a discoverer of the radioactive element plutonium. Plutonium was central to the construction of the nuclear bomb dropped on Nagasaki, which, rightly or wrongly, brought an end to World War 2. Segre was paid \$300 a month for his work. One day the head of the lab, Ernest Lawrence, asked him what would happen if he returned to his native city of Palermo. Segre told the truth. There was a good chance he would be turned over to the Germans and killed. This had happened to some of his relatives.*

*‘But why then should I pay you \$300?’ asked Lawrence. ‘From now on I’ll give you \$110.’*

In 2005 in a city centre office block in Dublin, Chen Li, a twenty-four-year-old Chinese girl, sobs quietly as she sweeps the floor. John watches her from behind his desk. His instinct is to keep working. None of his business.



In 1998 one Dublin language school recorded enrolling twelve Chinese students. The year after, that figure was closer to five hundred. The flood of Chinese into Ireland had begun.

Chinese students coming to Ireland paid up to Euro10,000 in advance. This covered their airfare, host family accommodation for one month and six months English classes. They had to attend class twenty hours a week. If they had an absence rate of more than

15% at the end of the course, the school wouldn't give them the attendance letter they needed to renew their visa for another six months.

For some students it was their first time outside China but they arrived in Ireland planning to be here for three to four years. They live together so the rent is low, don't go out, and spend money only on necessities. They work and save, and when they go back to China, they might have enough to get a mortgage or start their own business. Before they leave Ireland they often say to their employer that they can get someone else to fill their post. The new Chinese person who comes in gives their friend a week's wages as a finder's fee.

John's gaze is drawn again from the computer screen to Chen Li. A decade ago, John lived in Denmark. For three months he picked fruit and lived in a tent. A year later he was in New York, double-shifting in two restaurants. His employers paid him into his hand and deducted imaginary tax. One of them tried not to pay him at all in the end. Around the same time his landlord was refusing to return his deposit.

One night he didn't have money for the metro. An elderly man gave him change. There were days when he'd hardly anything to eat at all. He had to ring home and ask his parents to send more money. Through it all there was the fear emigration would come calling. There was fun too, a sense of adventure. He met a Meath man in an Irish bar who gave him the phone number of somebody who got him a better-paid job on the sites.

In Dublin, the Chinese work in the fast food industry, in corner shops, in bars, as waiters and waitresses, as cleaners, as sandwich board holders. Work many Irish are no longer prepared to do.

Others want to study. If they speak English well, they can get a good job in a multinational company back in China. In time they can pay back the money their parents gave to them to come here. Some want to go to on to third level education here but they complain that the fees are so expensive.

Within the language teaching industry in Dublin, there's an awareness that some schools have taken advantage of the Chinese situation. Up to the beginning of 2005, according to government regulations, the Chinese were permitted to work twenty hours a week. Many of them worked a lot more. Some returned home with little English. They went to classes for the first two weeks and only reappeared in the school when they

needed an attendance letter to renew their visas after six months. One language school is alleged to have had nearly 2000 students with only two classrooms. In effect, it was selling bogus attendance letters for huge profit.

John approaches Chen Li and asks if she's okay. She says she's fine, drying her eyes. John recognises the stubborn pride he had felt himself in not wanting to accept help. He takes Chen Li down into the canteen and buys her coffee. She's from Dalian in north-east China, a 'small city of four million people,' she says. She studied engineering at university there. She smiles and says that Dalian girls are supposed to be the most beautiful in China. She's been in Dublin for a year and lives with six others in a flat in Dublin 7. She can't remember the name of the street.

John thinks of his younger brother, just arrived in Australia, living in a flat of 11 Irish. He asks if Chen Li is studying English. She says yes with the same reticence about telling her business that Irish people have. He asks what she thinks of Irish people. She doesn't really know any but thinks old people are much friendlier. Young people can be very impolite. She says Dublin is not a modern city but she likes the clean air. She doesn't like Irish food. She misses dumplings. Chinese restaurants here don't serve real Chinese food.

The Irish government has changed the laws affecting the right of new arrivals from China to work as well as study. Those already here aren't be allowed to stay longer than eighteen months. The Chinese community is angry, saying that Irish people will only realise their importance to the economy when they're all gone.

What prompted this change of government policy? It was partly an attempt to control numbers. It's not clear, even among Chinese themselves, how many are living here illegally. In some factories, all the Chinese workers have been let go and replaced by Polish. The Polish, it appears, are prepared to do the jobs Irish are not, and in increasing numbers. From an employer's standpoint, there are no problems with emigration with a Polish worker.

John asks Chen Li about her job with the contract cleaners and immediately her eyes well up again. Finally she tells him. She was waiting for five weeks for her first paycheque. She shows it to him. €11.50 for over a hundred hours work.

John rings the cleaning company and is told very clearly that it's none of his business. He responds that until Chen Li gets paid, his office won't pay them. He talks to his colleagues. They offer to employ Chen Li directly at the rate they normally pay the cleaning company.

At a recent conference of the Democracy Commission in Liberty Hall, there was a developmental theatre piece about modern Irish society. One of the actors made the following statement, 'The Chinese have it really hard. They're away from home, don't speak the language. And sometimes they get really taken advantage of. It's sickening.' Afterwards a lady in the audience talked about the 'racist rubbish he was saying about the Chinese.'

The lady in question was not listening very carefully, but this suggests something deeper. There seems to be a felt need that non-nationals like the Chinese need to be protected in the new Ireland. From anecdotal evidence, mainly taxi drivers, there's a general appreciation that Chinese work hard and don't cause trouble. Yet, we know there's exploitation happening. We know there's racial tension. It doesn't sit easily with our conceptions of what it means to be Irish.

Most Chinese, hastened by the government's new regulations, will return home. For them, Ireland will become memory. Some, however, will stay. They'll fall in love, with the culture, with a sense of freedom, with a woman, with a man. They'll become an integral part of our Irish experience.

Every one has a unique story that merits hearing.

John leaves work. He walks up Grafton Street, one of the most expensive real estate streets in the world. He owns two properties himself in Dublin now. What he's thinking about is that he still has the tent he lived in, in 1994, at the back of his shed.

*Emilio Segre couldn't afford, on his salary of \$110, to pay for his parents to get out of Italy and join him in America. In 1942, his mother was killed by the Nazis. His father died a couple of months later. When Segre finally returned to Italy after the war, he scattered a tiny sample of the plutonium he helped create, over his parents' graves. 'Its half-life of hundreds of thousands of years will last longer than any other monument I could offer.'*