

## **Chinese sojourners, immigrants and settlers in Victoria : an overview**

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The first arrivals were indentured labourers, imported to Australia between 1847-53 when the colonial master and servant laws were extended to Chinese. Some 3,500 men boosted the labour force of shepherds and rural labourers, cooks and gardeners on the east coast. Most were from Fujian, in contrast to those who followed and joined the great gold rushes of the 1850s – the men of the villages of ‘Canton’ (Guangdong) and in particular, the Sze Yup – the ‘five districts’ – as well as the Sam Yup, Chungshan (Zhongshan) and other districts. By 1854 they numbered several thousand, growing to over ten thousand by 1855 and two and half times that number by 1857. The settlements they encountered were stirring with unrest over the governance of inflows from across the globe. The silk-bound ‘Bendigo Goldfields Petition’ of mid 1853, some thirteen metres long and with over 5,000 signatures from Victoria’s goldfields highlighted the poverty among the diggers and sought a reduction in licensing fees; land tenure; and an end to the brutal policing of the diggings. Seven Chinese names are included (probably written by the same hand) among the signatories.

In the following year Chinese were largely absent from events at Ballarat, the famous ‘Eureka Stockade’ incident, and from the ensuing mythology of a popular, democratic foundations laid on the goldfields. Raffaello Carboni’s account of the lead up and battle of Eureka barely mentioned Chinese or issues of ‘colour’ other than to note that gardeners, too, needed land to work (Carboni, 1855).

The Goldfields Commission of December 1854-March 1855, enacted to bring peace and effect changes the diggers sought also introduced anti-Chinese-immigration law, Victoria’s first and the first in the British-colonial world, extended to residential head taxes, taxes on arrivals and limits on their number in any one vessel, and a system of residential ‘camps’ across the colony (Cronin, 1982).

Yet, the Eureka episode, often taken as a trigger for democratic ideals in its forthright rejection of oppressive law and miss-government – was hardly an end-point to Chinese activism in the public domain. Nor were their social ambitions either hidden among the southern-Chinese village and clan organization that sustained their emigration, or contained within the borders of the residential ‘camps’ enforced in the 1850s. The camps themselves held diverse populations. Of the 5,000 at Ballarat in 1857, among a predominantly See Yup population were 600 longer-term residents, men from Fujian who stayed when their indentures were worked out; 700 came from Donguan city; and 150 from Shanghai. At Avoca twelve dialects were in use (VPRS 1189 P0000, Unit 502, File 587/445, 1957). At Beechworth were Hakkas, See Yup Chinese and men from Macao living in different camps.

The homogenising language of race became part and parcel of popular press reports in the 1850s, however. For the Melbourne Age ‘Chinese’ were grotesque, ungainly’ and ‘false, cunning and covetous in disposition’ (The Age, 24 June 1857).

Notwithstanding the mounting daily friction and occasional escalations in violence and the deaths and expulsions of 2,000 men in the notorious Buckland River riots of

1857, as the population expanded and spread across the land, it drew on a long history of petitioning Chinese imperial authorities at unfairness in local governance, and took recourse in the public meeting and march, and the petition or 'memorial', distinctive British-colonial means of seeking justice and change. When all else failed, Chinese resorted to passive resistance to onerous laws.

The handful of Chinese who had written their names into the Bendigo petition of 1853 hinted at things to come. As prominent agitators linked Chinese migration into their denunciations of colonial government policy, pioneering the use of race to garner support in Australian politics, Bendigo Chinese participated in the marches as the short-lived 'Red Ribbon' movement grew to attract crowds in the thousands (Messner, p 70). In mid-1859, Castlemaine's Chinese could muster several thousand of their own to take to the streets, and before dispersing they offered themselves up for arrest for refusing to pay the residence tax, but not before loudly cheering the Queen (Age, 26 May 1859). Under the banner, the 'United Confederacy of Chinese' co-ordinated protests spread Colony-wide. In May 1859, they presented their own petition of many thousands of names from across the gold fields to the Government. (Serle, 1963; Bendigo Advertiser, 12 May 1859). Theirs was not a passive withdrawal from public life to an inner world of the alien group, of secretive conversations in foreign tongues. By the time the racial law of 1855 was suspended in 1862, Chinese diggers also looked for security amid the local laws that weighed against them and they mounted the most-sustained political campaigning the Colony had seen.

Many other petitions came from shopkeepers and traders and residents of the towns and cities where they lived, and at times in tandem with their European neighbors as petitioners of all backgrounds looked beyond the racialised present to their future settlement. The Chinese population of the Ararat District fell in the space of a few years to 500 from a peak of 3,000 in 1859, and the punitive residual tax was partly to blame for a contraction that undercut local trade, property values and general prosperity. The tax also violated the Anglo-Sino treaty – the Treaty of Nanking of 1842, which protected Chinese in British possessions. 'Unwise and impolitic', it also was 'unjust' as it fell most heavily on those least able to pay it. Like the Bendigo Gold Petitioners of eight years earlier, residents sought a reduction to tax – a halving of the £4 levy. [See MMA, PRS 1189/523 - Folio 61/N4997 – 18 June 1861]. Another petition, in late 1859, written in Chinese characters, sought permission to import Chinese printing type and for Chinese teachers to run Chinese schools around Victoria [See MMA, VPRS 1189/523. Folio 60/N990. 31 January 1860]. By the early 1860s, Ballarat's settled population of store keepers and merchants along Main St added their voice to Europeans calling for an end gambling at Golden Point [See MMA, VPRS 1189/523 - Folio 63/D9999 - 26 November 1863].

Even as the 'camps' were formally abandoned, many of their residents continued there. Four hundred of several thousand Chinese at Bendigo lived at Iron Bark in 1871. Ballarat East was home to 700 and Chinese custom continued to support a range of distinctive services. Native-place fellowships and Chinese custom alone were insufficient to sustain longer-term settlement, however. As the flow of gold and the independent incomes it provided receded, for most, settlement involved interactions with markets for their labour and by 1871, 3,000 of the Chinese in Victoria lived away from the main gold districts. When William Young [Tsze Hing] surveyed the population for the Government in 1868, he found upwards of 800 engaged in seasonal

harvesting. Several hundred laboured for European miners. Another 150, former indentured shepherds among them, worked the shearing sheds. Chinese stores, several hundred spread across NSW and Victoria, could assist with loans and trade links into the wider community.

Just as Chinese brought up the rear of European campaigns of the 1850s, so, too, some Europeans joined with the Chinese protesters of the 1880s in their defence of the rights, social standing and productive social engagements of Chinese. They campaigned together to resist a ban on further immigration from China. More successful were the campaigns stretching into the new century to overturn threats of bans from the factories of the growing east-coast metropolises. In 1901 some 7,500 Chinese resided in Victoria, of a national population of some 33,000, and one in three lived close by the City in the 'Chinese Quarter of 'Little Bourke Street'. Four in ten were in the prime working age groups of 15-40 years of age. Upwards of half of them were not born when the gold fields were at their peak. More than one in ten were children, and the female population made up eight per cent of the whole. In this lopsided demography were the possibilities for enduring settlement. Their occupations were broad, with 70 medicos, law clerks and other professionals; 500 in domestic services; more than 850 engaged in commerce and transport, and as many in furniture making and other manufacturing, and 3,800 across the spectrum of primary industry occupations. Fewer than 1,200 remained in mining of any kind (Census of Victoria, 1901).

This diverse community and its organisations produced the Archway to welcome in the new nation in May 1901, a marker of commitments to their place of settlement while leading public figures actively sought amelioration of the new national immigration law that barred further migration and would curtail communal development for the next six decades [Yong, 1977; Jones, 2005]. Among the largest employers were the furniture factories of the Chinese Quarter, extending the reach of commerce to Lonsdale Street and Little Lonsdale Streets and the bordering suburbs. Like the Chinese at Sydney, they searched out market niches and specialty lines and their fortunes rose and fell with economic cycles. From its zenith (and that of the Chinese Quarter) at around 1912, the Melbourne trade fell away before as world war, the expansion of the low-waged European female and youth labor, and the spread of mechanization in the 1920s hastened a decline heralded by its aging workforce. When they ventured into the suburbs, fruit and vegetable wholesalers and retailers and growers initially fared well, though subsequent national censuses reveal an inexorable contraction in gardening from the 2,000 in 1901 and expansion into other lines of work.

Age had diminished the influence of the gold-fields generation but its founding institutions remained solid. The See Yup Society was preeminent among the clan and village-based groups advanced from their nineteenth-century roots, added to by the political associations formed as China itself underwent transformations of the 1890s. The See Yup Temple of South Melbourne, founded in the 1850s and built in its enduring form in 1866, was one centre of activity but 'Little Bourke Street' in 1901 was the cultural and commercial core. Here retailers, wholesalers, gambling houses and cafes, warehouses and merchant headquarters sat side-by-side with residences and an intermix of non-Chinese pursuits at the margins of the central city blocks. Only in the late 20th did the area seek and gain the name of 'Chinatown'.

The Chinese as a transitory settler has lingered long in Australian popular historical understandings of a population that fell to some 9,500 by the end of the Second World War. The year of 1901 brought new adjustments, new processes of settlement in Australia and new engagements with China. The Melbourne community developed its own public voice, the Chinese-language Chinese Times, which opened for business in 1902. Progress encompassed both settlement and movement. By the 1920s, the rate of annual travel to and from China had doubled since 1901 to a notional journey every four to five years. At some point in the late 1920s, female Chinese with one or two Chinese parents approached one quarter of the total, and by the early 1930s, their median age coincided with the accepted age for forming marriage partnerships. The long-standing practice of regular trips to visit the native village endured, but, so, too, the possibilities for familial stability within Australia were enhanced, and in the pre-war years, several hundred former residents returned to Australia in flight from occupying Japanese armies. This marks the slow revival in population numbers, added to by some 3,500 war-time arrivals, and in the 1940s began the flow of student arrivals from across the Asia-Pacific region who would number some 10,000 by the late 1950s. The revival of the resident Chinese-Australian population began some three decades before the end to the racialised constraints of the White Australia policy (Jones, 2005; Choi, 1975).

In the twenty-first century, Australia and Victoria, firmly linked to the Chinese diaspora from its beginnings in the 1840s, displayed the full breadth and depth of the escalating changes. More than 55,000 Victorians were among a total China-born population of 206,000, Australia's third largest overseas birth place grouping and one of its fastest growing. Yet, more than three-fold the number of China-born Victorians – 190,000 – declared a Chinese ancestry in 2006, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan and Singapore were prominent among the thirty or more countries of origin, and over half of them employed Chinese languages in the home, a figure close behind the Greek and Italian speakers, a dominant force in non-British migrant numbers after WW2.

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