

The Things that Unite:

Inquests into Chinese Deaths on the Bendigo Goldfields 1854-65¹

Valerie Lovejoy

Abstract

Chinese migration to Victoria in the 1850s, which equalled the first entry into California and far exceeded later migrations to other Australian colonies, New Zealand and British Columbia, makes Victoria a particularly important area of study for overseas Chinese. Most historians who have tackled it make victims of the Chinese in their eurocentric stories of prejudice and violence. Without denying that European miners often demonstrated their prejudice or that Chinese miners were treated unfairly in many ways, dwelling on conflict and violence has limited consideration of the personal lives of the Chinese. One difficulty faced by historians who wish to recover details of the lives of Chinese migrants is the dearth of personal Chinese sources. The many accounts from ordinary Europeans about conditions on the goldfields, in letters, diaries or narratives that illuminate their lives has not been matched by equivalent Chinese sources. However, inquest records can give some insight into the living and working conditions of Chinese miners, as they provide an opportunity for Chinese witnesses to present their versions of the circumstances surrounding the death of a mate or a relative. This paper uses inquest records, reports from the goldfields and local records to explore the lives of Chinese miners on the Bendigo goldfield from 1854-1865, arguing that Chinese miners led full lives on the goldfields, supported in sickness and in health by strong networks of relatives and countrymen with whom they enjoyed their leisure time. They also communicated across boundaries, working alongside European miners, establishing personal relationships and experiencing similar frustrations in dealing with goldfields' administrators.

Article

On the evening of 1 May 1856, A'Tung had supper with his relative Ah Pou in their tent at the Kangaroo Gully Chinese village on the Bendigo goldfield.² Afterwards he changed his shoes and went out into the moonless night to visit his friend Ah Sing. As another friend was waiting for him to smoke opium, A'Tung stayed for just a few minutes to enjoy a drink of Chinese spirits with Ah Sing. Shortly afterwards, Ah Sing heard a great commotion. Other Chinese told him that someone had fallen down a deep mine shaft. It seems that A'Tung, who was tipsy when he left Ah Sing's tent, had fallen down the forty foot shaft on his way to the opium shop. The Chinese went to seek European help as the shaft belonged to some Englishmen. William Ingram went to the rescue. Many Chinese were gathered around the hole, their only light a burning taper. Ingram tied a rope around his waist and descended the shaft where he found A'Tung dead, bleeding from the mouth and nose. A'Tung's evening of pleasure had come to an abrupt end.³

From this short vignette, based on the inquest record of A'Tung's death, we learn something of A'Tung's networks and leisure activities as well as the nature of mining on the Bendigo goldfield in the 1850s. A'Tung had a relative with whom he shared a tent, and he also had friends. In his leisure time, he liked to drink and smoke opium with his friends. He lived, as he was compelled to do, in a Chinese village, together with his countrymen, but Europeans lived and worked in the same vicinity. An Englishman performed the difficult and dangerous task of bringing A'Tung's dead body from the shaft, which we know was forty feet deep and uncovered.

Episodes like this, recounted in inquests conducted close to the scene, capture brief moments in the everyday lives of Chinese goldminers that can challenge many preconceived ideas about the Chinese on the Victorian goldfields. Contrary to the widely held view of the poor Chinese miner, scratching out a living on abandoned fields, victim of European prejudice and hatred, isolated from friends and family, the story in these inquests is of ordinary lives being lived in extraordinary circumstances. It is not such a different picture from the lives of European miners. The Chinese miners go to work each day to mine for gold, and come home each evening to enjoy their leisure. Some are young, others are old, some are well, others suffer from illness, and all face the dangers of life on the goldfield. In most cases networks of relatives and mates surround them. Close by are other countrymen. When tragedy strikes they rush to give support. Europeans also work and live close by and some lend a hand in an emergency.

We have entered a phase in researching the history of Chinese in Australia that is marked by a desire to know who the Chinese immigrants were and how they lived. Ignored by early writers in their nationalistic 'white man's histories', the Chinese became a focus of attention only with the political swing to multiculturalism from the late 1960s, when historians began to recognise the role of the Chinese as the largest non-European group with the longest history of immigration to Australia. Historians sympathised with the Chinese, but they were treated only as foils to European hatred and passive victims of European prejudice. This approach denied Chinese agency, as Jennifer Cushman commented in her review of books written in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ Yet at the time, Kathryn Cronin's *Colonial Casualties* heralded a new approach with her complex picture of the interactions of Chinese and Europeans on the Victorian goldfields⁵ and CY Choi's demographic study, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia*, broke free of previous confinement by presenting the Chinese immigrants as a richly diverse people.⁶ John Fitzgerald's recently published *Great White Lie* explodes the myth of the Chinese victim with his focus on the struggle of Chinese Australians for their rights as equal subjects under the law.⁷

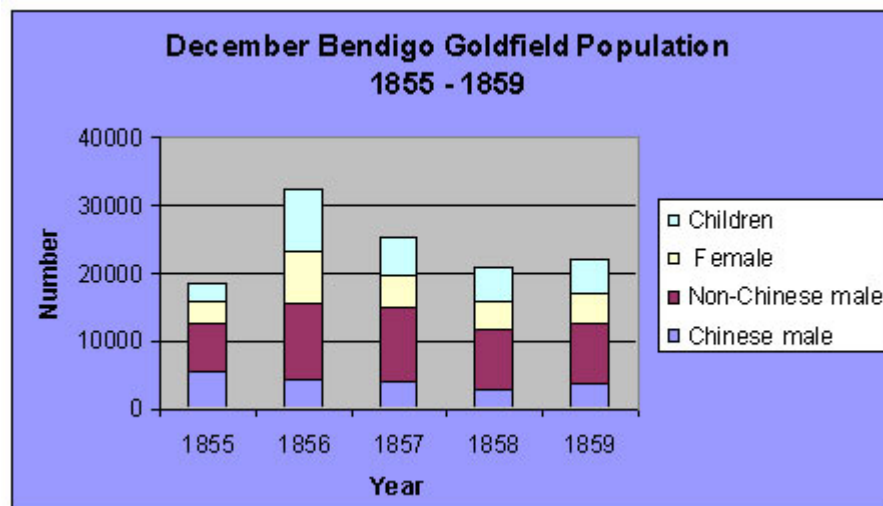
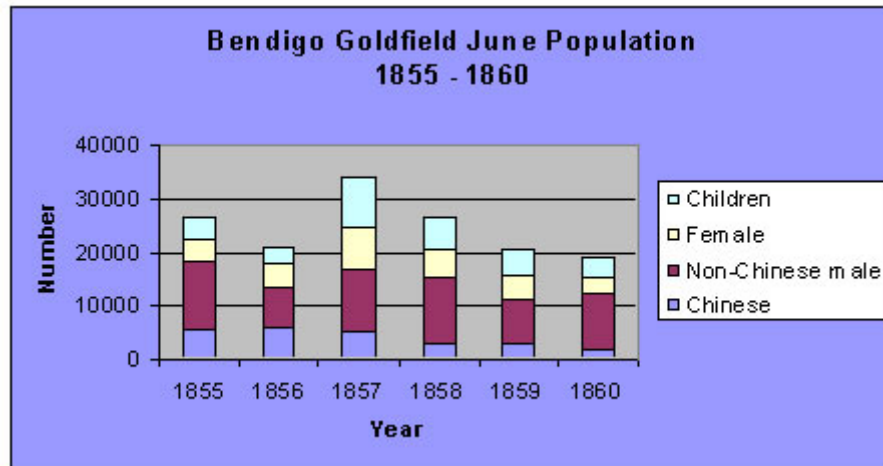
For the historian, turning to the regions can be a way of beginning to understand ordinary lives. Local records, such as inquests, hospital admissions, council correspondence, rate books and local newspapers can add considerably to the official archives. Keir Reeves' writing on the nineteenth-century Chinese of the Castlemaine district, and Amanda Rasmussen's emerging work on twentieth-century Chinese in Bendigo, make use of local sources to enrich our understanding of the central Victorian experience.⁸ Grimshaw and Fahey have also used such sources to give context to their demographic study of colonial Castlemaine families, allowing the reader to enter imaginatively into ordinary people's lives. They suggest that such an approach 'takes us away from the district's elite and begins instead with the personal experience of the "underside" of history'.⁹ The work of regional historians such as Jan Ryan, Cathie May and Shen Yuanfang is sympathetic with this approach.¹⁰

It is the lives of 'ordinary people' that I intend to explore in this paper. Using inquest records, this paper presents a view of Chinese lives and relationships on the Bendigo goldfield in the years between 1854 and 1865 that challenges the view of Chinese as victim. Without wishing to deny

that European miners often demonstrated their prejudice or that Chinese miners were treated unfairly in many ways, I believe that dwelling on conflict and violence has limited insight into their personal lives on the Bendigo goldfields. The inquest records allow a unique opportunity to hear Chinese witnesses present their versions of circumstances surrounding a friend's or relative's death. Inevitably, we stand outside the lives of these Chinese goldminers, but inquests present a window of opportunity to see inside the tents and down the mineshafts, gaining a rare glimpse into the living and working world of individuals.¹¹

Figures 1 and 2 - Comparative Population June and December 1854-1860.

Graphs by Valerie Lovejoy based on information from PROV, VPRS 1189/P0 Inwards Correspondence, Fortnightly Reports from Sandhurst Goldfields. NB no figures available for December 1860.



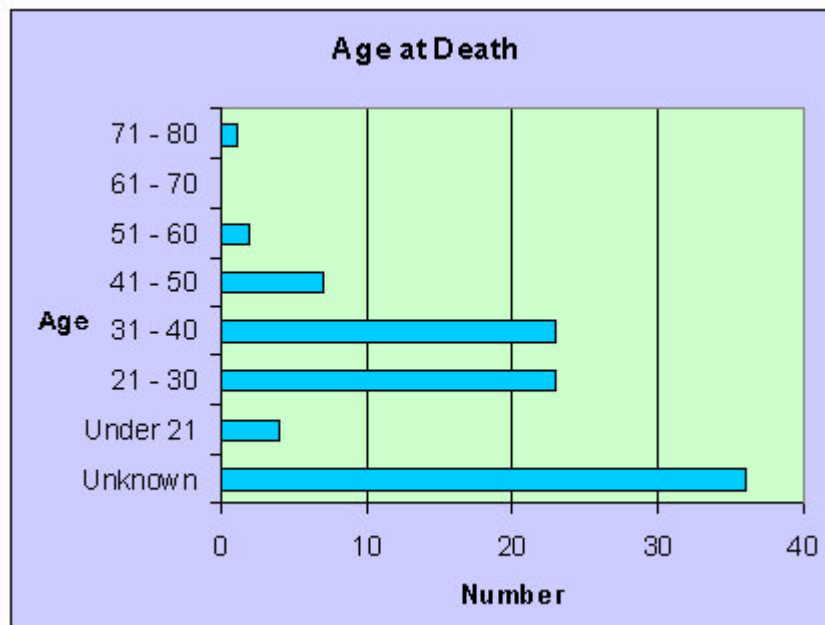
Inquest papers are held at Public Record Office Victoria in an uninterrupted series from 1840 to the present day.¹² An inquest file contains a statement of the verdict and details of the conduct of the inquiry, including witnesses' depositions and sometimes a police report. Under the *Coroners Act 1865*, the Coroner had jurisdiction to inquire into violent or unexpected deaths or deaths from illness where no doctor had been in attendance.¹³ In the nineteenth century the civic function of the inquest was reinforced by the intimate involvement of the community.¹⁴ It was held in a public place, often a hotel, close to the scene of the death. The Coroner gathered together a jury of twelve eligible men whose duty was to determine the cause of death and whether it had been the result of crime.¹⁵ The Chinese, not being 'natural born subjects' of the Queen were not eligible to serve as jurors. The Coroner was instructed to record the witnesses' evidence as first person narrative, their 'very words'. Though questions asked at the inquest shaped the responses of the witnesses, these questions were omitted from the reports. In Chinese cases the evidence is recorded through the filter of the Chinese interpreter. Inquests were normally held on the day of death or the day succeeding death; however, sometimes the absence of the Chinese interpreter necessitated a delay of proceedings. Despite these drawbacks, the researcher gains valuable

insight into the experiences of ordinary men and women from the inquest files.

Bendigo, in Central Victoria, was one of several centres of Chinese migration into Victoria in the nineteenth century. The Chinese came to join the search for gold, first arriving in large numbers in Bendigo in 1854, two years after the opening of the goldfield, when already the enormous potential of the alluvial field seemed to be waning. The years from 1855 to 1857 were years of peak migration to Bendigo, a time when Chinese miners formed from twenty-five to thirty-five per cent of the male population of around 17,000.¹⁶ When quartz mining began to succeed alluvial mining by 1860 and capital was needed to extract the gold, many European miners gave up their freedom to work for capitalists in large-scale mining operations. Chinese miners continued to occupy themselves in the overworked alluvial gullies, their numbers declining as their fortunes declined.¹⁷ Some were fortunate to return to their homeland, generally one of the four See Yap counties of Guangdong Province in South-East China, and some migrated to other states or countries, but many lived, worked, died and were buried in Bendigo.¹⁸

For the years 1854 to 1865, official records of ninety-seven inquests conducted into deaths of Chinese in the Bendigo district survive. All concern adult males, confirming the statistical records of the goldfields that the Chinese population was almost universally male.¹⁹ Using inquest and cemetery records, I have been able to ascertain the ages of sixty-two of the deceased, which range from eighteen to seventy-one, but three quarters of those who died were between twenty-one and forty years of age.²⁰ The average age of death was thirty-three years, while, like Europeans, the average age of those dying from illness was thirty-seven.²¹ Unfortunately, records were not kept consistently enough to provide further personal information, but we do know that some men had wives and children in China.²² Temporary separation of families was commonplace for Chinese from Guangdong Province. Migration of male workers to many South-East Asian countries was a response to the problems caused by a population explosion, poor seasons and civil war, in conjunction with the news of gold rushes in distant countries.²³

Figure 3 - Ages of Deceased Chinese Examined by Coroner's Inquest in Bendigo 1854-65.
Graph by Valerie Lovejoy based on information from PROV, VPRS24/P0, Inquest Deposition Files

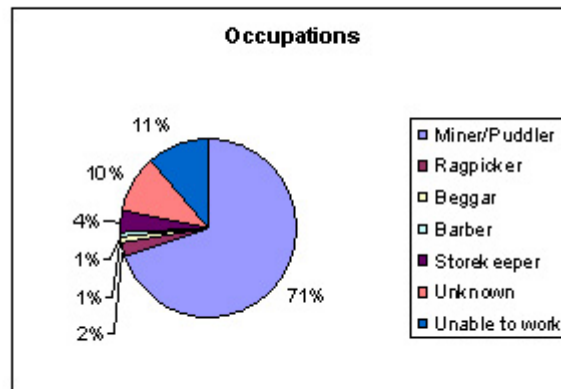


The overwhelming majority, (seventy-one per cent), of the deceased were miners or puddlers,²⁴ but eleven per cent were unable to work because of illness. The occupations of ten per cent were unknown or unstated in the records. The numbers of occupations represented in the inquest statistics for these years is extremely limited, which reflects the reason for the large-scale Chinese migration to Victoria in the 1850s.²⁵ Mining was an extremely hazardous occupation.

Mining accidents accounted for thirty-two per cent of the deaths investigated by inquest in this period while only fifty per cent died from ill health.²⁶

Figure 4 - Occupations of Deceased Chinese Examined by Coroner's Inquest in Bendigo 1854-65.

Graph by Valerie Lovejoy based on information from PROV, VPRS 24/P0, Inquest Deposition Files



Of course Chinese deaths from mining accidents were far more likely to be subject to inquest than deaths from ill health. For example, of the 110 adult male deaths investigated by inquest in the Bendigo district in 1857, the sixteen Chinese (fifteen per cent) were significantly under-represented.²⁷ (In December 1857 the Chinese made up twenty-eight per cent of the male population of 16,660 on the Bendigo goldfields.²⁸) Of the forty-one mining deaths investigated, however, a roughly proportional eleven (twenty-seven per cent) were Chinese. Mining accidents in that year accounted for a staggering sixty-eight per cent of Chinese deaths investigated by inquest in comparison with forty-four per cent of European male deaths.²⁹ Even so, in 1857 the mortality rate from mining accidents for both Chinese and Europeans was less than one per cent of the male population.³⁰

Working Conditions

Deaths from mining accidents reflected the dangerous working conditions. Falls of earth from collapsing embankments were by far the most frequent mining accident. (Twenty-six of thirty-one deaths from mining accidents were caused by earth falls.) Like Europeans, the Chinese usually worked their alluvial claims in pairs, most commonly mining in shallow shafts of about ten to twelve feet in depth. While one partner was occupied driving or digging out the dirt, the other remained at the top of the hole, pulling up the washing stuff and taking it to the nearest water to wash out the gold. The partner on top was usually the lucky one. Frequently he would observe a threatening collapse of earth and warn his mate, but usually the warning came too late to save the miner beneath. In a typical case, Nam Quin was driving in his twelve foot deep hole on 20 September 1856 while his mate Wye Bing remained on top pulling up washing stuff.³¹ Wye Bing saw earth falling from the side of the shaft and cried out to warn Nam Quin, sending down a rope. Before Nam Quin could grasp it another earth fall buried him. Wye Bing estimated that about three quarters of a ton of earth had fallen on his mate. It took one and a half hours to dig Nam Quin out of the hole, by which time he had been suffocated by the earth fall.³²

Even if a miner did not suffocate immediately, the time it took to dig out the victim meant that death was almost certain. If a miner survived the accident he was likely to die from injuries to his spine that left him paralysed. Of the twenty-six deaths resulting from falls of earth between 1854 and 1865, six survived the initial accident but died within a few days. In the case of Min Yok, who was admitted to the Bendigo Hospital in January 1861 after an earth fall, Dr Atkinson, the superintendent, found that he had fractured his spine so badly there was no hope of recovery.

Min Yok lived for eleven days after the accident.³³

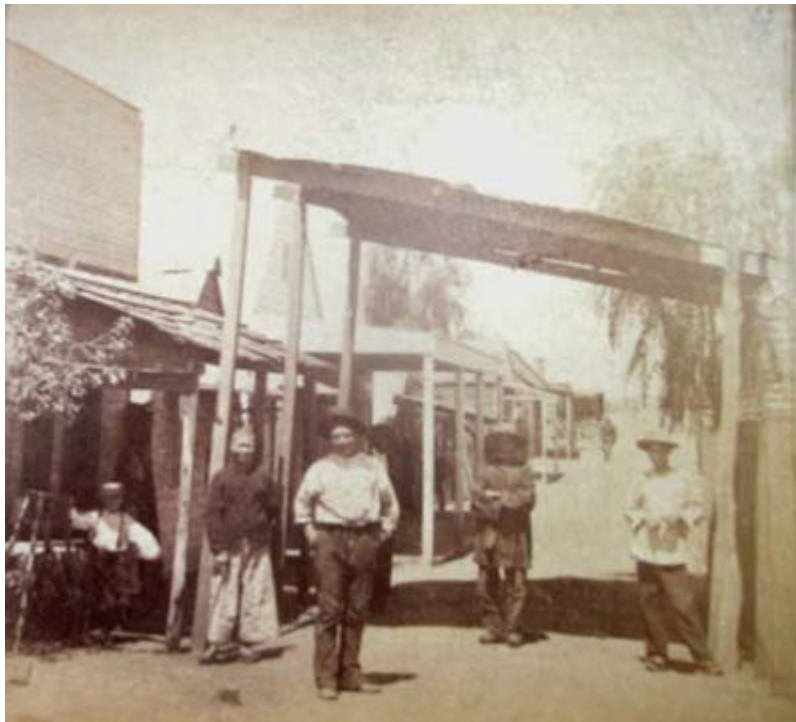
The close proximity of mining claims meant that undermining and earth collapse were frequent occurrences. Many of the claims the Chinese worked in were old, abandoned by European miners and made dangerous because of worn or insufficient timbering, undermining or rain. Sludge, the waste created in separating the gold from heavy clay through cradling or puddling with water, was such a problem on the Bendigo goldfield that by 1857 it was making mining increasingly difficult for all miners.³⁴ Every available unused hole or drain was filled with slime, and sometimes, when an earth fall took place, a flow of sludge followed. Drowning and falling into shafts accounted for other deaths. The alluvial ground was well dug over and formed a rabbit warren of open shafts, some of them very deep.

Living Conditions

It is apparent from evidence given by witnesses [or from surviving records] that Chinese miners worked hard, from sunrise to sunset, on their claims,³⁵ but after the working day was over, they retired to a community of fellow Chinese. From April 1855, when a Chinese Protectorate was established in Bendigo, until 1861, when the system began to break down, most Chinese lived together in several separate settlements.³⁶ One description of Chinese villages on Back Creek and at White Hills, shortly after the introduction of the Protectorate, reveals a well-ordered and self-sufficient community. The villages were:

...built in large squares, consisting generally of forty to fifty tents with wide streets between each square. The village at Back Creek consists of two of these squares and at the White Hill of three or four. A thousand men must be located at the latter place ... They have their own stores -- butchers, bakers, carpenters, coopers and blacksmiths' shops. Cradle making seems to be carried on to a large extent ... Fruit and confectionery of a somewhat equivocal appearance are everywhere exposed for sale. Their dwellings have a cleanly and comfortable air about them, though they are hardly fitting residences for more civilised beings...³⁷

Ironbark Chinese Village,
nineteenth-century
Bendigo (precise date
unknown).
Photograph courtesy of
Dennis O'Hoy



The Chinese residents generally lived with one or more relatives or mates in a calico tent, with the sleeping quarters separated from the kitchen. Tents were situated very close together, and

relatives or friends frequently occupied neighbouring tents. A rare accidental death illustrates several aspects of Chinese living conditions. On 10 March 1857, A'Jim, who resided at Spring Gully, was visiting his friend Lee Hing Quy at Ironbark Village. Lee Hing Quy gave his bed to A'Jim and made up a bed for himself in the kitchen in front of the tent. He forgot to tell A'Jim that he had a loaded pistol underneath the pillow. A'Jim took out the pistol and was fiddling with it when it accidentally discharged. Hearing a cry from the tent next door, A'Jim went in to investigate. The tent housed four men, two of whom were sleeping in the same bed 'heads and points'. The bullet had wounded one man in the foot, and also penetrated Chang Yik Low's skull, killing him instantly.³⁸ One witness told the jury that all the men had known each other from boyhood.

This inquest reveals a picture of a supportive community. It shows the generosity of Chinese towards their own countrymen. A'Jim had given up his bed for his visitor. The Chinese, although they lived in villages, did not live under harsh restrictions, but were free to pay social calls and stay with their friends. The crowded living conditions are illustrated by the close proximity of tents and the men sleeping in the same bed. Lastly, the predilection for loaded pistols for self-protection and protection of their precious gold, applied equally to Chinese as to European.³⁹

Health

Half of all Chinese inquests conducted on the Bendigo goldfields from 1854 to 1865 were on people deemed to have died from natural causes: illness or disease. Heart disease was the primary cause of death, followed by lung and intestinal diseases. Heart disease was usually of long standing, and frequently complications such as lung congestion, which remained untreated, shortened the life of the victim.⁴⁰ Heart disease often afflicted even those who were very young. A'Cock, a native of Amoy, was only twenty-five when he died suddenly in June 1857 from an attack of pulmonary apoplexy brought on by heart disease.⁴¹ Some historians have suggested that elders of Chinese villages chose their young fit male family members to send to the goldfields, yet the inquest evidence shows that older and unfit men formed part of the cohort.⁴² Of the sixty-two known ages, the average age of deaths from natural causes investigated by inquest was thirty-seven. The prevalence of disease of long standing, (in eighteen inquests this is specifically mentioned), suggests that some Chinese were unwell over a long period of time, and some, like A'Theam, had been unable to work since their arrival at the goldfields.⁴³ In some cases the debilitating conditions of the sea voyage from China, or the journey overland to the goldfields from Melbourne, Adelaide, Guichen Bay or even Sydney, made necessary by Victoria's restrictive legislation, may have exacerbated an already present disease and resulted in fatigue from which the victim was unable to recover.⁴⁴

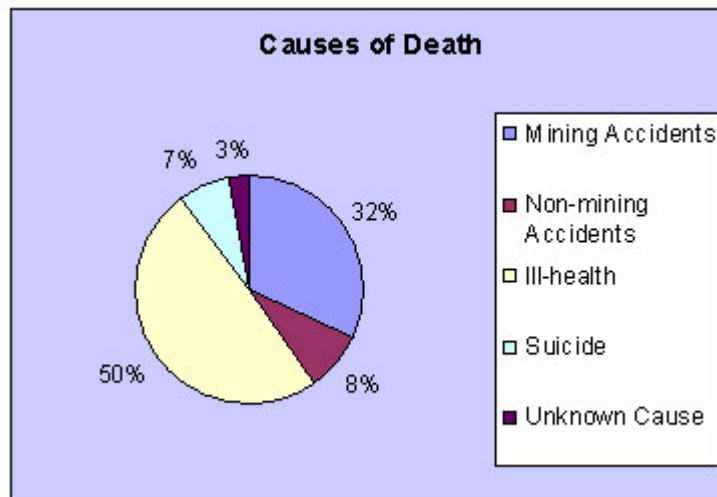
Many of the Chinese smoked opium, which was legal and readily available. Opium relieved pain and relaxed mind and body, but taken in excess was an addictive drug that could exacerbate illness.⁴⁵ Opium smoking is sometimes mentioned in the inquest records as a contributing factor to death, but in only one instance is it blamed as the sole cause.⁴⁶ In the case of Ah Choy, who died of ulceration of the bowel in 1863, Dr Atkinson concluded that his habit of smoking opium excessively would have 'favoured any disease that attacked the body'.⁴⁷

The inadequate living conditions of some Chinese also hastened their deaths from illness. When William McEwen, surgeon, was called to Golden Gully to perform the post mortem on He Lun, he was horrified to find his emaciated body lying on the ground in a 'small, thin calico tent', unfit for anyone suffering from tuberculosis to reside in. He Lun was 49 years of age.⁴⁸ Inadequate nourishment and lack of medical attention because of poverty sometimes caused unnecessary deaths, outraging juries who blamed the uncaring Chinese or the authorities who did not

intervene.

Figure 5 - Causes of Death in Deceased Chinese Examined by Coroner's Inquest in Bendigo 1854-65.

Graph by Valerie Lovejoy based on information from PROV, VPRS 24/P0, Inquest Deposition Files



The most outstanding examples of neglect are of those who were assumed by other Chinese to be suffering from leprosy. In these cases it is apparent that the Chinese were afraid to approach the ill person, believing the disease to be contagious. In every case, the post mortem revealed that the dead person had not in fact been suffering from leprosy, but from other diseases. When Ah Fee became sick, Ah Quoy, a storekeeper at Ironbark village, collected a subscription among the Chinese and had Ah Fee's tent placed outside the village, because the Chinese believed he had leprosy and feared contamination.⁴⁹ Ah Fee refused to go to hospital, and his only visitor was his countryman Hock Pen who placed wood and water outside his tent weekly. He died from pulmonary consumption in October 1864, but it was four days before Hock Pen found his body.⁵⁰ The concerns of the Chinese mirrored fear in the European community that leprosy existed in the Chinese villages.⁵¹

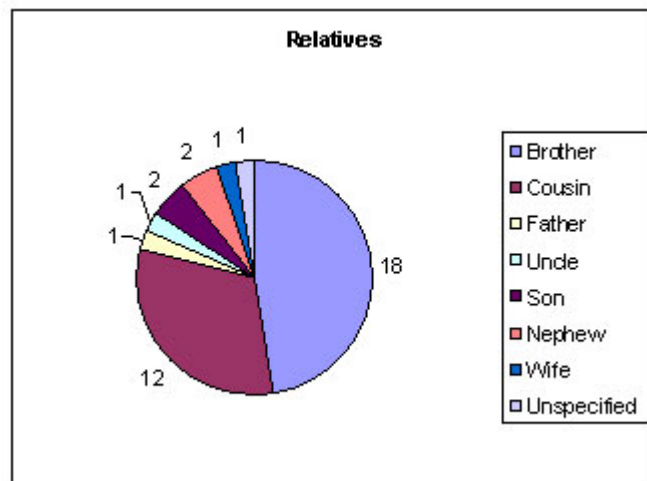
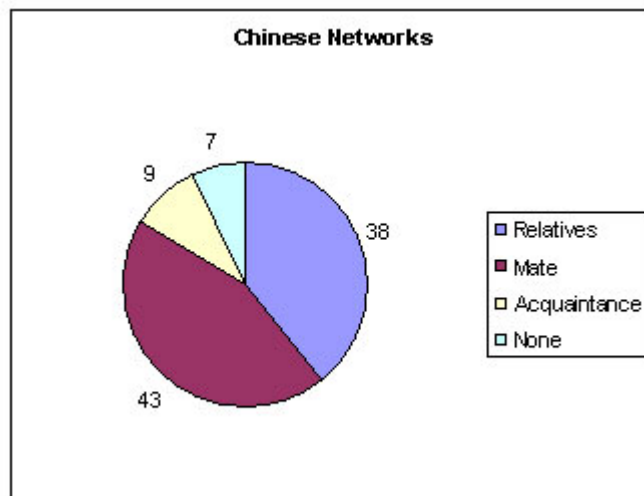
Among the most poignant cases of death on the Bendigo goldfields are the suicides, which reveal a little of the mental health of the deceased. Seven per cent of deaths investigated by inquest were believed to be suicide. In most cases the death had been carefully planned. In two cases the Chinese man had placed a stick or a piece of bamboo across a mining hole and hanged himself by the neck. Other miners were alerted when they saw a straw hat, a jacket or a pair of shoes lying neatly beside the hole. In only one case was a possible motivation provided. At the inquest of Un Fun Chaw, aged thirty, in June 1855, his brother, Un A'Cheug, said that Un Fun Chaw had been only three months in Victoria and one week residing with him in Peg Leg Gully. According to Un A'Cheug his brother 'fretted very much at not being able to get any gold'.⁵² Of all the inquests these suicides raise most vividly the realisation of the loneliness and despair of some Chinese on the Bendigo goldfields.

Networks: Relatives, Mates and Countrymen

Yet most of the Chinese were not alone. Though they lacked female companionship the inquest records suggest that they did have strong kinship and clan networks. Forty-three witnesses described themselves, through the interpreter, as 'mates' of the deceased. As with European miners, the terminology denoted a working partnership. Sometimes these had been recently dissolved, suggesting that Chinese were free to make their own working arrangements. Of the forty-three mates, twelve also had relatives who worked with them. Forty witnesses at inquests were relatives of the deceased.⁵³ Some of the deceased had wives and children in China. For example, Yau Lit, who died of old age in July 1862 aged seventy-one, was married with a wife, five sons and two daughters in China. The inquest record gives no indication why a man so

elderly should have migrated to Australia, although in 1860, his year of migration, Qing attitudes opposing emigration were relaxed in China. ⁵⁴ We do know he did not come alone but accompanied by his son and nephew. ⁵⁵ Only seven of the ninety-seven men were clearly alone in the world, while all others had acquaintances who had known them in China or had met them on the goldfields and who knew them well enough to be checking up on them if they were ill.

Figures 6 and 7 - Chinese Networks in Deceased Chinese Examined by Coroner's Inquest in Bendigo 1854-65. Graphs by Valerie Lovejoy based on information from PROV, VPRS 24/P0, Inquest Deposition Files



The records reveal that a Chinese person who had relatives, mates or countrymen to care for him in his illness, received greater attention than someone who was alone. Relatives usually lived together in the same tent or next door to each other. Even those who did not live in the same area would turn to relatives in time of sickness. A'Liem, a miner in Bendigo, had relatives in Castlemaine, so when he became sick, they sent a cart for him, took him to live with them, and looked after him until he died. ⁵⁶

People from the same district or village also assumed a duty of care, consisting of kindnesses such as supplying the sick person with food, or money to buy food, or taking them into their tent. For example, Sing Oy had come to Bendigo four years prior to his death at Ironstone Hill from tuberculosis in October 1865. ⁵⁷ He had worked as a miner for three years but, for twelve months prior to his death, had been unable to work. Witness Ah Ching told the jury, 'we used to send him provisions when he didn't come in to us for mealtimes. He had plenty of clothes and bedding - we saw to that as he was a Canton man like ourselves and we always help each other.' ⁵⁸ Storekeepers often took the lead in collecting subscriptions from the sick person's countrymen. A'Chong, who kept a store at the Chinese village at Ironbark, collected subscriptions from Chinese to support Sing Oy in the last days of his illness. ⁵⁹

Occasionally Chinese were neglected on the goldfields because no one felt responsible for their welfare. When Tuk Sing died on 9 August 1864 in his tent at the Ironbark Chinese Village, he had been ill from consumption for three or four months without any medical attendance and unable to work.⁶⁰ According to his only friend, witness Ah Fong, Tuk Sing used to walk about and ask any Chinese he met for money to buy food. Despite Ah Fong's statement that he had brought rice and other Chinese had sometimes sent assistance, the coroner considered Tuk Sing had been neglected as he found him greatly emaciated with no food at all in his stomach or intestines.⁶¹

Examples of neglected Chinese are relatively rare. Indeed, when the jury on the Tuk Sing inquest suggested that someone authorised by the government should officially inspect the villages to see that similar cases did not occur, Superintendent Chomley of the Bendigo Police replied that this was a 'very exceptional case. It is unnecessary for police to hunt up Chinese villages to find sick people. The Chinese can get admitted into hospital when they wish, the same as Europeans.' Quoting the example of an Englishman found dying of disease in an unroofed hut, Superintendent Chomley stated that the Chinese were looked after much better by their countrymen than the English. He observed that 'the jury may as well recommend that the tents of all Englishmen should be inspected'.⁶² Victoria's Chief Commissioner of Police, Frederick Standish, a former protector on the Bendigo goldfield, to whom the case was referred, concurred with Superintendent Chomley's judgement in a brief note attached to the inquest record.⁶³ While the remarks about the lack of impediment to hospital admission were true in theory, they obscure the difficulties the Chinese experienced in dealing with European institutions.⁶⁴

Relationships with Europeans

Some of the frustrations the Chinese experienced in their dealings with police, doctors and the coroner can be explained as misunderstandings engendered by communication difficulties. In matters of health particularly, the coroner frequently commented that death need not have occurred had medical intervention been sought at an earlier stage or indeed at all. There is no doubt that Chinese were reluctant to call on European doctors, though the rules of societies such as the See Yap Society encouraged them to do so.⁶⁵ Used to Chinese medicine which used food, herbs, moxibustion or acupuncture to restore balance and harmony to the body, many sick Chinese probably did not trust the allopathic approach of European doctors.⁶⁶ However, the reason most often given at the inquest was being too poor to afford medical help. A'Theam had been sick for the seven months following his arrival in Victoria, but had never been attended by a doctor. He died of pneumonia and pleurisy and the coroner judged that if A'Theam had received proper medical attention he would have had every chance of recovery. His cousin A'Cee explained that a doctor hadn't been called because they had no money.⁶⁷

Chinese doctors were present in the villages, and were often the first port of call,⁶⁸ but they also were expensive, and appeared to defer to European doctors in cases of serious illness, perhaps because European doctors had easier access to the hospitals. When his brother A'Gee suddenly took ill soon after his arrival in Bendigo in 1857, A'Nye called Chinese doctor Lun Fat who found the patient very hot and thirsty. Lun Fat advised A'Nye to call a European doctor.⁶⁹ A'Nye had no money and had first to look for his countrymen to collect a subscription. Lun Fat administered traditional medicine to relieve A'Gee's thirst, but A'Gee died a few hours later of acute peritonitis. Lun Fat recognised that this was a serious case requiring immediate hospital treatment, but was powerless to facilitate admission.⁷⁰ Self-medication was common among the Chinese, who regarded food as medicine, in preference to dealing with any doctors.⁷¹ Opium was freely used as a pain-killer, while Chinese tea, congee (rice porridge) and soups were fed to the ill for nourishment. In Tuk Sing's case, the coroner found small puncture marks on his chest which he concluded had been made to relieve pain.

Although in theory no discrimination was practised by hospital authorities, in practice the Chinese experienced difficulty gaining admission to hospital. In earlier years, some inquest witnesses claimed that they did not know there was a hospital let alone how they could access the system. The jury, alarmed by the ignorance of A'Theam's mate in 1855, urged authorities to inform Chinese 'as to how they are to act in all cases where means do not allow them to procure proper medical attendance'.⁷² In October 1857, in response to unease about the access of Chinese residents to health care, the Chief Secretary suggested that a voluntary contribution should be remitted monthly to a doctor who would contract to provide medical attendance to the Chinese.⁷³ The idea was opposed by both the Chief Medical Officer, William McCrea, who asserted that the Chinese 'are as intelligent and capable of taking care of themselves as other people',⁷⁴ and Chinese Protector Frederick Standish who replied that Chinese residents would be unwilling to contribute, as they had subscribed £100 to the Bendigo Hospital in 1856 but still experienced difficulty in gaining admission.⁷⁵ Hospital records show that there were few Chinese admissions before 1860.⁷⁶

The case of Ah Choy reveals the shortcomings of an admissions system that was difficult to manage.⁷⁷ When Ah Choy became ill in March 1863, A'Chong, a storekeeper at the Ironbark village, called Dr Atkinson who gave him a certificate of admission to the hospital, but when A'Chong got to the hospital he was told it was full. He was supplied with a certificate of admission to the Benevolent Asylum, but the superintendent there told him he needed a doctor's certificate. A'Chong went back to Dr Atkinson who supplied one. The Asylum superintendent then agreed to admit Ah Choy. When Ah Chong returned to fetch Ah Choy, he found someone had taken him in a cart to see Dr Boyd. On his way to Dr Boyd's, A'Chong met the cart on its way back to the Asylum. When Ah Choy was lifted out of the cart he was dead. A'Chong had done everything he could, but the time taken to negotiate the system may have resulted in Ah Choy's death. Of course difficulty with gaining admission was not the only reason for the low number of hospital and asylum admissions. Lack of faith in hospitals is exemplified in records by the Chinese patients who absconded and in the inquests by those who refused to go to hospital in the first place.⁷⁸

The relationship between the Chinese and the police does not seem to have been any easier. Police attached to the Chinese Protectorate were responsible for collecting the levies as the Chinese headmen had been sacked for inciting a riot early in the life of the Protectorate.⁷⁹ Many Chinese tried to avoid paying the residence fees that were forced upon them in addition to the miner's right. The Chinese had emphatically rejected the unfair tax, vigorously petitioning the government on the subject in 1856 and in 1859.⁸⁰ The vast majority of court appearances for Chinese from 1857 to 1865 were for not possessing a residence license. For example, in 1857, of a total of 236 Chinese convictions, 163 were for not possessing a residence license, and forty-eight were for breaches of village regulations.⁸¹ In March 1860 Nun Pon, who was forty years old, died from pulmonary apoplexy while escaping from the police who had entered the Chinese village at Ironbark to search for Chinese with no residence tickets. Nun Pon had joined a group of Chinese who were running away from two police on foot and a mounted constable.⁸²

In many cases communication difficulties made an inquest necessary. For example, Dr O'Donnell, who arrived after Ah Tat had died in May 1863, refused to issue a death certificate because he said that 'the Chinese speak English so imperfectly it is impossible to ascertain the cause of death'.⁸³ Interpreters were present at inquest proceedings. Ah Look, an interpreter and Chinese Christian, assured the coroner at Ah Tat's inquest that he knew the value of an oath taken on the Bible. He swore to the accuracy of his translation and the honesty of the witnesses.⁸⁴ Post-mortems were frequently performed because no doctor had attended the

deceased person during his illness. For mining accidents, coroners tried to find a European witness to help overcome language problems and in such cases no post-mortem was carried out. By 1863 post-mortems were performed more frequently on Chinese, but by this time a far greater percentage were dying from illness than from mining accidents.⁸⁵

The inquest records also give an appreciation of personal relationships between the Chinese and Europeans. Historians have highlighted animosity expressed in organised protest meetings, petitions and riots, while neglecting more mundane relationships. The inquest records, dealing with everyday relationships, show evidence of compassion and the sense of a common humanity that transcended language or cultural barriers. Europeans often took the initiative in rescue operations. When Hang Liu's body was thrown from a dray he was driving in Bridge Street in October 1858, Edward Jones, a Bridge Street chemist saw the accident from the door of his shop. He rushed out with a glass of water and went for the doctor, while other Europeans found a piece of board to serve as a stretcher and carried Hang Liu into a nearby hotel.⁸⁶ Kindness to strangers, especially those in destitute circumstances, is also evident in the inquests. When his countrymen moved from Poverty Gully to Eaglehawk Gully, A'Yut was left behind. Thomas McElwain, a carrier who lived nearby, found him very ill. A'Yut complained of pains in his stomach and had swollen hands and feet. Once they had made his acquaintance, A'Yut occasionally visited Thomas and Mary McElwain's tent where they gave him food to eat.⁸⁷ The evidence suggests an overriding sense that in matters of life and death, it was one human being's duty to help another.

Occasional working relationships are evident in the sphere of business. In February 1856, John Browning, a farmer, took a load of rice to Long Gully for his neighbour A'Hong, a refreshment tent keeper from Ravenswood. A'Hong also hired a horse from Browning to ride into Bendigo. He died from 'a violent blow to the abdomen, consistent with falling off a horse'.⁸⁸ In mining there are no such examples of Chinese and Europeans working together, but it is evident they mined in close proximity. Even when the Chinese were separated into encampments, Europeans were living and working close by. Europeans responded quickly to calls for help and removed dead bodies though the time needed for this difficult task was often measured in hours, not minutes. When Chong Hing disappeared in a hole full of sludge, between twenty and thirty Englishmen assisted in getting him out of the hole, a task that took an hour. Patrick Franklin was one who went into sludge nearly to his own depth to find the body and tie a rope around the dead man.⁸⁹ Language barriers were overcome by sign language.

One inquest provides a rare example of a relationship between a Chinese man and a European woman.⁹⁰ On the afternoon of 12 December 1862, Ah Shong visited Anne and Martha Reid's store and asked if he could stay and rest. Anne agreed and showed him to a back room where he drank her ginger beer and 'something else out of a bottle that he said was brandy'. The post-mortem revealed that the something else was opium. Ah Shong was still there at ten o'clock at night and when Anne told him it was time to leave he asked to stay the night. Martha Reid gave up her bedroom for Ah Shong and slept with her sister. During the night, discovering Ah Shong in convulsions, the sisters moved him to a warmer room and bathed his hands in vinegar and water before going to find a Chinese person who spoke English. The responsibility of care for the sick man was thus handed to the Chinese, who called the doctor. Ah Shong died the next morning from brain congestion caused by the introduction of a large amount of opium into his stomach. Underlying the obvious kindness shown to the Chinese man is the possibility of a personal friendship or relationship.

Associations between European women and Chinese men were severely frowned upon by both

Europeans and Chinese. Yet European women lived in the Chinese villages as companions and occasionally wives. The only example in the records studied of a marriage between a European woman and a Chinese man shows stark evidence of prejudice in the Chinese community against the European wife. Ah Sown, a storekeeper of Jackass Flat, had married fifteen year old Louisa, a native of Hobart, in 1862.⁹¹ Ah Sown died in March 1864 of liver disease and gallstones, but after the inquest a large number of Chinese approached the coroner requesting an inquiry into the death. They expressed 'great disquiet and fear' that Louisa, who they pointed out, was the daughter of an old Tasmanian convict, had poisoned her husband.⁹² The Coroner could find no evidence to support their allegations. The post-mortem clearly showed that Ah Sown had not been poisoned. Louisa Ah Sown was found to have followed all the doctor's instructions, cared for her husband in his illness and regarded him with fondness as 'a good husband who supported her comfortably'. While prejudice existed about the formation of relationships between European women and Chinese men, this prejudice was mutual, and despite its existence, occasional relationships were formed and successful marriages took place.

After the inquest - the funeral

At the completion of the inquest, the body of the deceased became the responsibility of the closest relative. If married, the marriage partner took responsibility, but if, as in most cases, the person was unmarried, the task fell to the closest male relative. In the absence of relatives, subscriptions were raised among the deceased's countrymen to pay for the burial. We know that in death as in life the Chinese living in Bendigo generally took responsibility for caring for their countrymen who were mostly buried in 'common' graves. In these cases, although the Chinese had not purchased a license of interment which gave ownership of the plot, they had paid a fee to open the grave.⁹³ Although the Cemeteries Act of 1854 mandated free burial for the poor, it was rare for Chinese to be buried in paupers' graves.⁹⁴ Clan societies also mostly took responsibility for organising the funeral though sometimes European funeral directors were responsible.⁹⁵

Robert Bruce, Chinese Rites at the Graves of their Countrymen, in Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers, 10 September 1872.

La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria



The burial register of the White Hills Cemetery, the favoured resting place of the Chinese,⁹⁶ reveals that interment generally took place on the day of the inquest or the following day.⁹⁷ Many Chinese must have hoped that if they had the misfortune to die, they would eventually be exhumed and their bones returned to their families in China for permanent burial. The evidence from cemetery records shows that for most in Bendigo this was a vain hope as only a small proportion of Chinese were exhumed.⁹⁸

Descriptions of funeral processions and actual burial ceremonies are rare, but in September 1865, the *Ovens Advertiser* reported the funeral of Loy Ty, who had hanged himself at the Chinese Village at Spring Creek.⁹⁹ About two hundred Chinese mourners attended, paying up to three pounds to charter every buggy in the district. In contrast to European custom, white is the colour of mourning in China, and the mourners all wore white hatbands.¹⁰⁰ From the buggy next to the hearse, paper money was distributed along the road, to benefit the soul of the departed. At the graveside rice, pork, chicken and other foods were placed in and around the grave on which lighted candles were burning. At one part of the ceremony, the assembly knelt down in prayer.¹⁰¹ For Chinese in Victoria, we have enough evidence to suggest that, although simplified in form, burial ceremonies retained their importance, reinforcing the Chinese belief in the connection of the living and the dead, and the material and spiritual world, and the importance of continuing Chinese cultural practices.

Chinese Funeral Procession, nineteenth-century Bendigo (precise date unknown). Digitally created at the Golden Dragon Museum. Copyright © 2001 Bendigo Chinese Association Museum



Conclusion

Inquest records provide a rare opportunity to gain a personal perspective on the living and working conditions of the Chinese as well as relationships between Chinese and Europeans on the Bendigo goldfields. In some respects they show us that the things that united these first generation goldseekers were greater than the things that divided them. The Chinese worked alongside Europeans and in similar ways on the Bendigo field. They used the same tools, experienced the same dangers, the same frustrations and the same successes. Their lives and aspirations were not so very different. Whether they were English, German, American, Maori or Chinese, all dreamed of making their fortunes, all were migrants living in a harsh environment far from their homelands, and all relied on networks of friends and family to support them.

There is no doubt that the Chinese preferred to live and work together as did different groups of Europeans and that working relationships were as uncommon as personal relationships. Yet the inquest records reveal a shared humanity that saw Europeans readily respond to Chinese in distress, whether by accident, illness or poverty. In emphasising the prejudice against the Chinese, it is easy to lose sight of these everyday individual connections that tell a different story.

While the Chinese were 'protected' their freedom was more affected by the scrutiny of government than by prejudice from individuals. But all miners, both Chinese and European, experienced difficulty in dealing with unfair taxes, expensive doctors, and hospitals which were difficult for the poor to access. While the existence of prejudiced attitudes and acts should not be ignored, treating the Chinese as victims obscures the detail of their lives. Inquest records, one of the few English language sources that allow Chinese miners to speak of everyday events, make a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the lives of the first Chinese immigrants.

Endnotes

1. I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Anita Jack, Russell Jack and the late Joan Jack of the Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo, Carol Holsworth, Volunteer Research Officer at the Golden Dragon Museum, David Lloyd, Librarian, Bendigo Health Care Group; the staff at Public Record Office Victoria and the staff at the State Library of Victoria, in allowing me access to their research facilities to prepare this article. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Quong Tart and his Times, held at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 1-4 July 2004.
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18. G Serle, *The golden age: a history of the colony of Victoria 1851-1861*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1963, p. 331.
19. Reports to the Chief Commissioner of the Goldfields from Sandhurst Goldfields Resident Warden, 1853-1863, PROV, VPRS 1189/P0, Units 86-107; 451-537.
20. A O'Donohue & B Hanson, *Where they lie: early burials on the Bendigo Goldfields 1852-1870*, Maiden Gully, 1993; White Hills Cemetery Burial Register, 1858-1880; Bendigo Cemetery Burial Register, 1858-1880. Microfilm. Goldfields Library Corporation, City of Greater Bendigo. Accessed at the Golden Dragon Museum Bendigo.
21. J Bomford, The Chinese on the Bendigo goldfields, Honours thesis, University of Melbourne, 1974, p. 22.
22. Between 1857 and 1862, of 34 inquests, 10 deceased were married, 8 were single, 1 was a widower and 15 were unstated.
23. L Pan, *Sons of the yellow emperor: the story of the overseas Chinese*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1990, pp. 43-57.
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25. *Bendigo Independent*, 10 November 1869.
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27. Inquests held in the Bendigo district, 1857. Digger Inquest Index. Accessed at PROV.
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29. Inquests on miners in the Bendigo district, 1857. Digger Inquest Index. Accessed at PROV.
30. Bomford, The Chinese on the Bendigo goldfields, p. 22.
31. Inquest, Nam Quin, 20 September 1856, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1856/617.
32. *ibid.*
33. Inquest, Min Yok, 9 January 1861, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1861/12.
34. Report of the Royal Commission appointed to enquire into the best method of removing the sludge from the gold fields, *Victorian Parliamentary Papers*, 1859-1860, vol. 3, no. 7.
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38. Inquest, Chang Yik Low, 10 March 1857, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1857/247.
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44. Inquest, A'Oun, 28 August 1856, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1856/528.
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46. Inquest, Ah Choy, 6 March 1863, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1863/206.

47. [ibid.](#)
48. Inquest, He Lun, 26 September 1855, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1855/498.
49. Inquest, Ah Fee, 10 October 1864, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1864/803.
50. [ibid.](#)
51. *Bendigo Advertiser*, 25, 27, 30 March 1857, reports from Castlemaine and Ballarat.
52. Inquest, Un Fun Chaw, 30 June 1855, PROV, VPRS 24/ P0, 1855/313.
53. 18 brothers, 12 cousins, 3 sons, 3 nephews, 1 father, 1 uncle, 1 wife, 1 unspecified relative.
54. R Skeldon, 'Migration from China', *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 2, winter, 1996, p. 434.
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56. Inquest, A'Liem, 17 July 1860, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1860/642.
57. Inquest, Sing Oy, 4 October 1865, PROV, VPRS24/P0, 1865/820.
58. [ibid.](#)
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60. Inquest, Tuk Sing, 9 August 1864, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1864/619.
61. [ibid.](#)
62. [ibid.](#)
63. [ibid.](#)
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75. Letter F Standish to Resident Warden Panton, PROV, VPRS 1189/P0, Unit 502/ 57/A7469.
76. Bendigo Gold District General Hospital, Admissions Registers, Books 1& 2, 1857-1866. Number of Chinese admissions per year: 1857-3, 1858-4, 1859-5, 1860-8, 1861-7, 1862-6, 1863-9, 1864-8, 1865-11.
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[82.](#) Inquest, Nun Pon, 8 March 1860, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1860/209.

[83.](#) Inquest, Ah Tat, 19 May 1863, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1863/460.

[84.](#) *ibid.*

[85.](#) Of 16 deaths in 1857, 9 post-mortems were performed. Of 16 deaths in 1863 and 1864, 13 post-mortems were performed.

[86.](#) Inquest, Hang Liu, 19 October 1858, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1858/898.

[87.](#) Inquest, A'Yut, 30 July 1855, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1855/379.

[88.](#) Inquest, A'Hong, 11 February 1856, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1856/106.

[89.](#) Inquest, Chong Hing, 20 October 1855, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1855/554.

[90.](#) Inquest, Wong Ling Tze, alias Ah Shong, 9 January 1863, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1863/36.

[91.](#) Inquest, Ah Sown, 3 August 1864, PROV, VPRS 24/P0, 1864/214.

[92.](#) *ibid.*

[93.](#) 'White Hills Cemetery Sandhurst - Rules and Regulations', *Victoria Government Gazette*, 1857, pp. 660-61; 'Back Creek Cemetery Sandhurst - Rules and Regulations', *Victoria Government Gazette*, 1858, p. 66.

[94.](#) *An Act for the Establishment and Management of Cemeteries in the Colony of Victoria*. 17 Vic. no.12, 23 March 1854; White Hills Cemetery Burial Registers, 1858-1880; Bendigo Cemetery Burial Registers 1858-1880.

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[96.](#) Up to 1865, White Hills Cemetery (161), Junction/ White Hills Burial Ground (145) Back Creek/Bendigo Cemetery (20), Kangaroo Flat (3 but Book 1 lost). O'Donohue & Hanson, *Where they lie*; White Hills Cemetery Burial Register, 1858-1880; Bendigo Cemetery Burial Register, 1858-1880. Microfilm. Goldfields Library Corporation, City of Greater Bendigo. Accessed at the Golden Dragon Museum Bendigo.

[97.](#) White Hills Burial Register 1858-1880.

[98.](#) C Holsworth, 'Exhumation records from the registers of the Bendigo Cemeteries'. Accessed at the Golden Dragon Museum Bendigo. White Hills Burial Register 1858-1880 records 31 exhumations in 335 burials between 1858 and 1880.

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