

Observers 8

European Australian observations on
Chinese Australians

One of the Pieces of 8 series

from

Chinese Australian History
in
88 Objects

by Michael Williams



Introduction

For much of our evidence on Chinese Australian history – especially in the 19th century – reliance is necessarily on European observers and European records. A great deal of this material is patronising at best and stereotypical or even plain made up at worst. In general, such observation pieces often tell us more about the writers than those being observed – but this too is useful. Nevertheless, amid this diverse material can be found many instances of careful and interesting observation – even when it is patronising (and/or ignorant). Personal observation when sincerely given can provide much of value. Here is to be found a small selection of the great amount of such material to be found. The selections range from the comments of a naive English teacher to those of an experienced China consul, from eyewitness to the arrival of the first 150 Chinese gold seekers to pass through Bathurst in 1855, as well as the astonished spectator to a Chinese opera, not to mention the efforts of the authors of both *Mary Poppins* and *The Man from Snowy River*. Of course, the section would not be complete with the reports of those instant experts – the journalist and the travel writer.

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No 1: *My Chinese* by Margaret Egerton

This fictionalised account of a European Australian woman's interactions with a group of Chinese Australians in the late 19th century was one my first discoveries as I began researching Chinese Australian history in the late 20th century.¹ The strong likelihood of its autobiographical nature was later confirmed by another long-term researcher in the field Kate Bagnall when she recognised that the names of the children of the fictional "Rev Ah Sing" were in fact the same as the children of the real life Rev Young Wai.²



Margaret Egerton was thus one of those long and continuing line of Christian helpers in churches who provide English lessons to new arrivals in Australia in hope that they will also convert to Christianity.³ The article is however thankfully not much concerned with religion but rather with her observations of her English students and general remarks on Chinese people in late 19th century Australia. The writer is fully aware of the embedded sense of class, superiority of civilisation, and no doubt 'race' of

¹ This would have been for [Sojourn Your Native Land](#), M.Litt, 1998.

² K. Bagnall, [Golden shadows on a white land](#), p.84.

³ For a more robust form of Christian dealings with 'pagans' see, [Object No 2: Torn poster of a Chinese God](#)

her readers. The result is a subtle poking of fun at these pretensions, though by no means a rejection of the stereotyping of Chinese people in Australia upon which much of the essay rests. Nevertheless, *My Chinese* is worth reading for its many astute observations and mild ironies, even if the ending is perhaps a little too clichéd.

Having first read *My Chinese* some 25 years ago I am aware of how much my perceptions have broadened since. As a young researcher I was looking for fodder for my work and mostly saw this article in terms of its hints of relationships, levels of English and other such specifics. Re-reading it now I am much more aware of the subtle digs the writer is making at her own class and ‘race’, albeit while utilising a stereotypical view of her Chinese characters to do so. Margaret Egerton was writing for the amusement not education of her white audience after all.

The article tells us therefore – as many of these European observer articles do – more about the writers prejudices and attitudes than it does about the Chinese people being discussed. These European prejudices and attitudes are a significant element of Chinese Australian history, and one such significant element with which the article begins is the ‘missionary’. It is the narrators friend who wishes to learn Chinese so she can travel to China and convert people to her brand of Christianity.⁴ And it is from a convert to Christianity, now a minister in a Christian church, that they strive learn Chinese in exchange for teaching English to a class of Chinese market gardeners.

⁴ See [Chinese Christian Churches](#) and [Object No.82](#) for Australian missionary connections with China.

Before the lady can proceed to her class her husband presents us with some of the commonplace prejudices of his class and race regarding Chinese people and culture, including that it is ‘impossible of accomplishment’ for anyone to learn 40,000 characters. But his most fundamental objection is that they are ‘a dirty race’, and the would-be student/teacher is only allowed to proceed on a promise of taking all proper ‘sanitary precautions’. These precautions seem to be mostly of a perfumery nature and it is the subversion of these precautions that provides the story’s climax.

While her husband demonstrates the cruder prejudices, it is the narrators more subtle ones that are also challenged. Amazingly the first of these is the idea that Chinese people are ‘unemotional’. This is a prejudice that apparently began with missionaries in China who it seems found the locals insufficiently moved by what they had to say and put this down to a lack of emotional capacity. While this prejudice is easily disposed of by the obvious family emotions on display as they enter the Ministers home, another regarding music is left in place or even re-enforced. Though that the unmusicality could lie on the other side is hinted at.⁵

As an aside, we are given a dig at mansplaining to remind us that some things never change, before the origins of the writers sympathy for Chinese people in Australia are hinted at. The first is a vague objection to the poll tax – or perhaps that it is working

⁵ Attitudes to music were largely determined by Chinese Opera, common in Australia at the time. See *Smoking opium, puffing cigars, and drinking gingerbeer: Chinese Opera in Australia* where emotion is also discussed.

class people demanding this – that leads to an exchange of presents with her regular vegetable hawker. And the second is witnessing her father's defence of a Chinese person from a group of larrikins.⁶ Here the writer appears at her most naively unselfconscious as the account reeks of paternalism.

It is in her descriptions of her English students that we learn more as the individuals are introduced. The moonstruck Cum Lee and the student of medicine Paul Fee Lee, among others. All remain well within the stereotype of the humble, friendly market gardener and vegetable hawkers – no hint of the real Rev Young Wai students who become multinational businessmen – that most European Australians would have been familiar with.⁷ The difference between Cantonese and Mandarin is clear while the discovery of the tones necessary for adequate understanding in speaking comes rather late in her lessons.

The somewhat clichéd climax of *My Chinese* is the miraculous cure of the narrators neuralgia by a medical concoction she is too polite to refuse, despite her horror at the unhygienic way it is prepared. Overall, *My Chinese* is a reminder of the limits of mere politeness and toleration. The Chinese subjects of the story remain foils to allow the author to make subtle digs at her own class and Egerton is as disinclined (incapable?) of seeing past her own paternalism and prejudice as her readers. Not a stone throwing larrikin but a woman of her times just the same. Nevertheless, careful reading of such material can be of value,

⁶ Larrikins at this time being gangs of youths happy to beat people up and destroy property rather than the lovable rousers of modern imagining. One of the English students is often pelted with stones by larrikins.

⁷ See [No.79: Big Four and more in Shanghai](#). Also [No.36](#) & [No.39](#).

even if only in informing us better of the community mainstream from which much of our evidence for Chinese Australian history, at least in the 19th century, is forced to rely.

Margaret Egerton, [“My Chinese”](#), *The Cosmos Magazine*, Part I, 19 September 1896, pp.124-128, Part II, 19 October, pp.138-141, Part III, 19 November 1896, pp.192-196.⁸



Rev. John Young Wai and the Chinese Presbyterian Church in Foster Street (courtesy of Howard Wilson)

China-Australia Heritage Corridor

⁸ *The Cosmos Magazine* only ran from 1894 to 1899, though it did survive the arrest for fraud in 1896 of its originator, [Armand Jerome](#). Copies can be found in the [NSW State Library](#) among others. Apologies for the poor image quality – the issues are bound in volumes and the pages will not lie flat. If anyone cares to do a transcript, I am happy to host it.

No.2: The Man from Shanghae, J Dundas Crawford

As the various Australian colonies developed their anti-Chinese immigration attitudes and then laws, their British imperial overseers took a keen interest. In general, the imperial attitude was that such restrictions were a bad idea. Cheap labour was



best, and why offend governments such as the

Bob O'Brien, *What Ho, Crawford, Old Chap: an Anglo-Scot Interpreter (1850-1903)*, Dorset Enterprises, Wellington, 2004.

Chinese or Japanese? As part of this oversight the British Foreign Office sent out one of its people – James Dundas Crawford – who had some knowledge of the Chinese and even spoke Mandarin. Dundas Crawford was sent at a time when the Colony of Queensland was concerned as thousands of Chinese goldseekers were arriving at Cooktown and walking inland to the Palmer River goldfields. This was in 1877 and the report of his observations of Chinese activity in Queensland, NSW and Victoria was duly sent to the Foreign Office.

The report makes fascinating reading. It is not only a rare example of a wide-ranging investigation with many interesting comments but even rarer, it is written in a, for the times, objective and sensible manner. Despite this the Crawford report remains an underutilised resource. Historians have done what they all too often do with interesting material, plunder it for a quote or statistic relevant to their specific task and then leave the remains to languish in a footnote. It was in a footnote I found the Crawford report many years ago and intrigued I tracked it down in the copy of the voluminous British Foreign Office files kept in the National Library of Australia.

After reading it I did two things that I am repeating here. The first is to make the full report – it is only 33 pages long – available for people to read in its full Victorian glory (long sentences and patronising tone mostly). Secondly, I wrote an article that basically described the Crawford report and provided some context in the hope of encouraging its wider use as a source. While its wider use has certainly occurred, this aspect could perhaps be improved still.



Australasian Sketcher, 12 June 1875, p.8.

Why do I like the Crawford report so much? Mainly because in a period when there is virtually no Chinese voice to be found, Crawford's outsider view (outside the white colonial concerns of the colonies) provides us with the next best thing. At one point he spoke before a crowd of European miners in Victoria on behalf of Chinese miners 'urging their claims to be allowed to mine on the rush'.⁹ Yet while Crawford was by no means a modern multiculturalist, he does give us an analysis that is closer to the Chinese perspective than nearly anything else we get until the beginning of the Chinese language press in Australia some twenty years later. Furthermore, I think people should read sources directly rather than be reliant on the interpretation of academics – something modern technology now makes so much easier.

Enjoy!

⁹ [*Bendigo Advertiser*, 24 March 1877, p.3.](#)

[The Crawford Report, Shanghae 1877](#)

Great Britain, Foreign Office Confidential Prints: No.3742,
[Notes by Mr. Crawford on Chinese Immigration in the
Australian Colonies](#), J. Dundas Crawford, 1 September 1877.

[My write up on the Crawford Report](#)

Michael Williams, '[Observations of a China Consul](#)', *Locality*,
Vol. 11, no.2, 2000, pp. 24-31.

Corrections – a few years after I wrote my piece on the Crawford report a publication utilising many of Dundas Crawford's letters to his family allows some clarifications. This was: Bob O'Brien, *What Ho, Crawford, Old Chap: an Anglo-Scot Interpreter (1850-1903)*, Dorset Enterprises, Wellington, 2004.

- I discussed why the British sent Crawford. However, in a letter home he claims it was his idea. Certainly, he was disappointed the report did not lead to anything.
- I speculated about whether or not Crawford spoke Cantonese but in a letter to his sister he makes clear he spoke only Mandarin but that he was able to use this in Australia nevertheless as well as English.

Who was James Dundas Crawford?

His seems in many ways a sad story. His mother died when he was two, then he was shipped off to distant relatives before Eton at 7 years of age. His father went to New Zealand as a magistrate while he joined the British Consular Service. Not long after returning to Shanghai and submitting his report Dundas Crawford suffered a mental breakdown and spent the rest of his life living quietly in England before dying aged 52 in 1903.

See also [Noreen Kirkman, *Chinese Miners on the Palmer*](#) (Presented to a meeting of the Society 28 August 1986).

No.3: Amazing the yokels of Bathurst

Much of the history of Chinese Australia seems about hostility and racism, or attempts to subvert and overcome these negatives. But at one point in the history Chinese people were simply exotic arrivals from a foreign land. Before the (white) locals could begin adopting stereotypes or making up reasons to reject those who were different they were confronted with people who were different. There are hints of sheer honest amazement at Chinese culture and civilization piecing through the narrow assumptions of British/Christian superiority in some of the accounts of Chinese Opera in 19th century Australia.¹⁰ But



What stereotype is this?

outside these examples the dullness of a pervasive smug condescension holds sway.

Frederick Grosse, section of 'Arrival of Chinese immigrants in Little Bourke Street', *The Australian News for Home Readers*, 27 September 1866.

However, early in the NSW goldrushes the small, relatively isolated settlement of Bathurst, only a generation after it war with the surrounding Aboriginal peoples, found itself presented

¹⁰ For example, [Local Intelligence – Chinese Opera](#), *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, 7 March 1863, p.2, where the critic is both 'astonished and pleased'. For more on Chinese Opera in Australia see [Smoking opium, puffing cigars, and drinking gingerbeer: Chinese Opera in Australia](#).

with some 150 Chinese men walking to the nearby goldfields.¹¹ This well organised company were the cause of much excited for the locals and crowds of them came to the camping area to gawk at the newcomers. An account of this spectacle gives us some idea of how things were as two groups of strangers first met without yet any history of antagonism or the need to throw up self-justifying prejudices.

Our diggings promise to become the sites of a series of Chinese colonies. A few days ago a second batch of the sons of the Celestial Empire arrived in Bathurst, consisting, as nearly as we can guess, of about 150, and proceeded to the camping ground of their predecessors, where they pitched their tents, spread their mats, and commenced cooking — , favourite pastime apparently, which, together with eating, seems to swallow up the whole day. Amongst their number we perceived several rather ancient looking pig-tails, who, in all probability, have come to deposit their bones in Australia. Their canvass village has been a favourite resort for the townspeople, who have thronged in front of their tents to witness the novelty of their proceedings, amongst which the expert use of their chopsticks was not the least amusing. Their economical use of firewood was another circumstance which called forth the astonishment of the visitors, who saw that by digging small holes in the ground, with ventilation only in front, that about as much timber was consumed in boiling and stewing for 150 as

¹¹ See, [Stephen Gapps, Gudyarra: The First Wiradyuri War of Resistance — The Bathurst War, 1822–1824.](#)

would cook a meal for a single family, after our own fashion. There was the usual display of fans and purses, and other trifles for sale, but the exorbitant prices asked reduced their traffic almost to nil. On Monday last they struck their tents, and trotted off to the westward with their stock of domestic utensils, mats, and bedding, slung upon poles.¹²

There is little here of the fear and loathing or the heavy patronising tone that would become commonplace. On the other hand, there is also no hint that practices which, for example, would reduce the consumption of firewood to an extraordinary degree might be worth imitating. The arrival of this group is an interesting spectacle but it is not one that could impinge upon the habits and prejudices brought ready made from Europe. The scene is set for that ‘othering’ that would make up so much of subsequent Chinese Australian history.

See also [Bathurst 8](#)



¹² [Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal, 30 July 1856, p.2](#). Thanks to Juanita Kwok for spotting this gem quoted in her excellent thesis, Juanita Kwok, *The Chinese in Bathurst: Recovering Forgotten Histories*, Doctoral thesis, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, 2018.

No.4: A night at the Opera

Chinese Opera is one of those cultural forms that are both deeply embedded in its culture and generally perceived by outsiders as a most exotic and relatively inaccessible representation of that culture. Yet for well over 50 years ‘Chinese Opera’ (Pear Garden or Great Drama in Chinese) was performed regularly in Australia to such an extent that English language scripts were handed out and Chinese Opera related sayings were part of Australian slang.¹³ Subsequent ‘whitewashing’ of Australian history has erased the community memory of this entertainment as it has much else related to non-white Australian history.



CHINESE THEATRICALS IN MELBOURNE.

Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers (Melbourne),

16 July 1872, p.144.

¹³ For example, dogs at the 1928 Longreach Show were described as creating a “din, that a Chinese opera company would give half its life to accomplish”. *The Longreach Leader*, 2 March 1928, p.21.



“At a Chinese Opera,” *Queenslander* (Brisbane), 11 June 1904, p.41. By artist Hal Eyre.

Despite the long history of Chinese Opera in Australia there is very little evidence from Chinese people themselves and we are forced to rely on European accounts of these performances.¹⁴ As with other European observations of Chinese activity in Australia these accounts are a mix of ignorance, earnest description, stereotyping, fascination and patronising tones. However, the nature of Chinese Opera, representing as it does a ‘high’ cultural form had the

capacity to cut through some of the sense of cultural superiority that nearly always characterised 19th century European commentators. Thus, we have in these descriptions of Chinese Opera performance in Australia the closest these British/European/Christian/white (male) observers could come to admitting an ‘other’ culture might have something to offer or at least to acknowledging a near equality. Even if often

¹⁴ Some of the few are, *Tung Wah News*, 19 October 1898, p.4, *The Chinese Australian Herald*, 9 November 1894, p.5, and *The Chinese Australian Herald*, 6 February 1904, p.5.

The decorations and dresses displayed a high degree of barbaric taste, for although we could recognise the uncouth ideas of a wrongly but highly civilised people, there was nothing that would strike the most fastidious taste as being senseless or vulgar.¹⁵

In 1872 a Melbourne observer contrasted the insight opera gave into the upper echelons of Chinese culture unfavorably with their impression of the local Chinatown:

A visit to the theatre in the Chinese quarter is exceedingly interesting as the performance altogether gives a higher idea of the manners and customs of the flowery land than a cursory glance at Little Bourke street.¹⁶

In Brisbane in 1894, it was the stage that amazed and the:

greatest [set] change was the raising of a mountain which a fleeing warrior and his wife had to cross. This was done by three tables and half-a-dozen chairs piled on each other and surmounted by an artificial bough fixed to the back of a chair.¹⁷

A Chinese language newspaper published in Sydney reported in 1898 that Europeans spectators were common and on at least one occasion appeared in the cast.¹⁸ Moreover, a performance of “eight Western beauties” “dancing like swallows” appeared that same year. While a generation before in the Victorian goldfields

¹⁵“Local Intelligence – Chinese Opera,” *Ovens and Murray Advertiser* [Beechworth], 7 Mar 1863, 2

¹⁶ *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 16 July 1872, p.144.

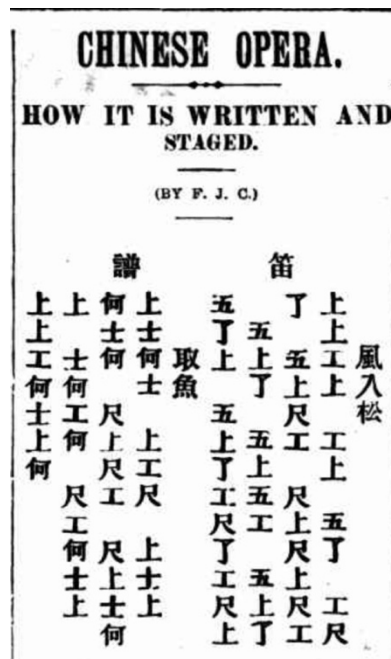
¹⁷ *The Telegraph* [Brisbane], 3 September 1894, p.5; *The Brisbane Courier*, 3 September 1894, 5.

¹⁸ *Tung Wah News*, 19 October 1898, p.4.

With faces fiercely painted, and robed in the floweriest of dresses, they strutted and ruffled their fans and wooden swords in a manner that brought down the house enthusiastically.¹⁹

This is just a small taste of the many observations of Chinese Opera as it was performed from Tasmania to Cairns and many places in between throughout 19th century and into early 20th century Australia. What is remarkable it not that it happened but that it has largely been forgotten that it happened.

See also: [Smoking opium, puffing cigars, and drinking gingerbeer: Chinese Opera in Australia](#)



*Evening News (Sydney),
29 April 1904, p.7.*

¹⁹ *Mount Alexander Mail*, 16 November 1864, p.3.

No.5: Ah Wong meets Mary Poppins

Unsurprisingly Chinese Australian characters pop up from time to time in 20th century Australian literature and just as unsurprisingly these are usually stock characters – a cook, a miner, a gambler or a gardener, but rarely a father, husband or son and even less likely a mother or daughter.²⁰ As a result little is revealed about the motivations or intentions of such characters. This



is natural in works by authors who would have understood little, like most of their contemporary European Australians, about the motivations or intentions of their fellow Chinese Australians. People that most would not have felt, until deep into the 20th century at least, were in fact their fellow Australians.



P. L. Travers

Nevertheless, writers often write from personal experience and something can be gleaned from their observations even when sieved through prejudice and ignorance. One such example it may surprise to learn is by P. L. Travers (the Australian-born author of the Mary Poppins stories) who wrote an

²⁰ Cheon the cook in *We of the Never Never* or Ah Soon the vegetable hawker in Henry Lawson's *Ah Soon: A Chinese-Australian Story* for example. The great exception to this in Australian literature are the mothers, wives and husbands that appear in *The Poison of Polygamy* written by (not European) Wong Shee Ping.

interesting and for her times sympathetic account of her childhood association with a Chinese cook. Entitled simply *Ah Wong*, the story is not well known as Travers apparently produced it in a limited edition as a Christmas special in 1943 with the note: “This edition of *Ah Wong* is limited to five hundred copies privately printed for the friends of the author as a Christmas greeting.” A copy can be found in the [NSW State Library](#) however.²¹

The main character is Ah Wong, who takes care of the children of the family in rural Queensland that employs him, rejects their efforts to convert him to [Christianity](#), and saves all his money. Travers grew up in rural Queensland and in all likelihood her family employed such a cook or certainly she knew families who did. Travers, child or adult, was ignorant as to why Ah Wong might [save his money](#) so earnestly, merely believing that he was saving to return to China – “All their lives they have saved their money so that they may have enough to take them home”. A very low income and a very high passenger fare it would seem. In reality of course men such as Ah Wong were supporting their own [families in China](#), and if they grew old and were impoverished, they might receive assistance from [district-based societies](#) to pay their fare home. Though, unlike the ship Ah Wong takes seemingly full of only aged men, many younger men would also be [visiting family in China](#), likely returning to Australia with their [CEDT's](#) to work again after a few years.

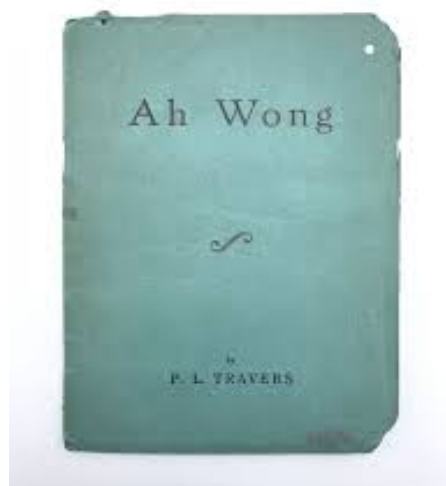
After the death of her father Travers moved to Sydney and wrote for various journals and newspapers. The second half of the Ah

²¹ P. L. Travers, *Ah Wong*, New York, High Grade Press, 1943.

Wong story has the girl from Queensland working as a journalist in Sydney where by chance she meets her childhood cook Ah Wong. Once again neither Travers or her journalist character has much idea of the motivations or life story of men like Ah Wong. What was known was the Chinese men traveling through the Port of Sydney [by ship to and from China](#) was common. That many by the early 20th century were old and that some returned to China for a final trip after a lifetime working in Australia would also have been general knowledge at the time. And this is what we are told Ah Wong is doing - taking ship in Sydney to finally return to China.

Only republished in 2014, *Ah Wong* is a fascinating addition to our [Chinese Australian literature](#).

However, while it can be categorised as “sympathetic” despite its stereotyping, this only highlights the limitations of



Christmas 1943

sympathy without knowledge. For Travers, Ah Wong can only be written as an amusing two-dimensional character with none of the insights her Mary Poppins characters display. As yet the closest to such insights apart from [The Poison of Polygamy](#) already mentioned is not a work of literature but of oral history – the recently published [South Flows the Pearl](#) is a fine addition to much need individual insight into Chinese Australian history.

No. 6: A white women in Chinatown

One of the most widespread leitmotifs in Chinese Australian history is the perception of Chinese people as a mysterious group whose



communities and activities needed to be ‘interpreted’ by special investigations or self-appointed experts. Thus, an article in the [Sunday Times 16 August 1896](#), entitled “A TRIP TO CHINATOWN” is merely one of a long series of similar efforts by sensation seeking newspapers. Only its subtitle, *The Dens Described by a Lady Journalist* hints that this one might be different. This however proves a false hope and not only is the article typical of its kind but its relentless sexism encourages the possibility that it was in fact written, or at least heavily edited, by a male pretending to be a female.

Regardless of the gender of the journalist this account of a visit to Chinatown is typical of the observations and judgements made about Chinese people living in Australia around the turn of the 20th century. *Dens Described by a Lady Journalist* runs through nearly every cliché in the European Australian guidebook of Chinese Australians. Thus, we get a ‘Chinatown’ right from the get go, murder, gambling, the need for a police escort, dismissive remarks about religion, opium smoking of course, vegetable hawkers and cleanliness, politeness, exotic cooking, mixed race,



and to justify the ‘lady journalist’ angle, that great dread, the supposed Chinese desire for, and corruption of, white women.

A ‘Chinatown’ with its ghetto connotations rather than what it was, simply a poorer area of

Sydney with a concentration of Chinese people and businesses, but nevertheless very much inhabited by non-Chinese people. The ‘Chinatown’ concept at this time having been imported from San Francisco and bringing a ready-made sense of the exotic. On arrival under police escort in this ‘exotic’ Sydney location – the streets near the then Belmore Markets (now the Capitol Theatre) – a murder is immediately alluded to. Though this crime appears to be merely for the purposes of adding atmosphere as it is unrelated to anything that follows.

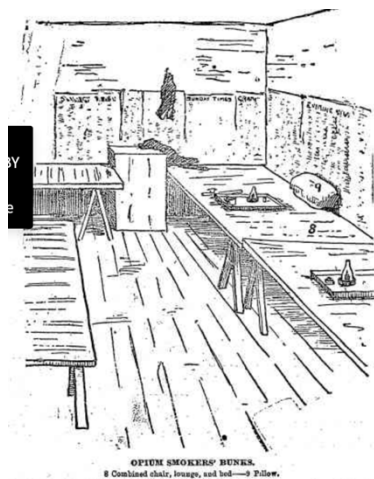
Next a [gambling shop](#) is briefly visited to add more colour to the investigation, though no mention is made of the fact that such places had a high proportion of European customers. After this a ‘Joss’ is described – that is a temple or at least a shrine to a [Chinese god](#) – in the kinds of dismissive terms that came effortlessly to late 19th century Christians. This is all preliminary to the arrival at an opium den, which while very much [legal at this time would soon cease to be](#) so. Legal or illegal such ‘dens’ held much fascination for newspaper readers and like gambling were often frequented by non-Chinese. In fact, two such non-Chinese customers are cited, including one who is allowed to make a prophesy that ‘an advance of civilisation’ would see

opium 'classified with tobacco smoking'.

Gambling and opium cover the two main vices attributed to all Chinese people at the time. These vices could be easily denounced as 'wrong' by those readily inclined to make such judgments while reading a newspaper. More difficult to evaluate was the success of Chinese people at selling vegetables to those same readers, their well-known politeness when doing so, the deliciousness of their food, and the tendency of [white women to marry them](#) and produce children of mixed heritage. All these are dealt with in a manner typical of the period, including damming with faint praise and the introduction of carping asides. Thus, the recognisably 'fine cabbages and cauliflowers' are kept in conditions that makes the writer 'thankful for the efficacy of boiling water'. The politeness is perhaps due to simplicity. While the cooking is undoubtedly 'nice' and 'dainty' looking but only leads to 'hastily swallowing a eucalyptus lozenge'. Finally, to 'a rather striking-looking woman, a half-caste Chinese with a suggestion of Semitic origin' is attributed what cleanliness is apparent.

It is the appearance of this woman of Chinese/European heritage that sets off a puzzled denunciation of mixed relationships. It is well known apparently that 'they [Chinese men] prefer Europeans speaking generally' while that they are 'most kind and considerate' is dismissed rather weirdly 'as but the outcome of the Asiatic philosophy'. It follows from such a flawless argument that any association with 'white women' must be 'prolific of the utmost degradation'. The prejudiced ranting and confusion of emotion with logic carries on for a while more but

to no better effect until the journalistic investigation reaches its denouement when a real live white women or girl in this case is found in the clutches of the Chinese.

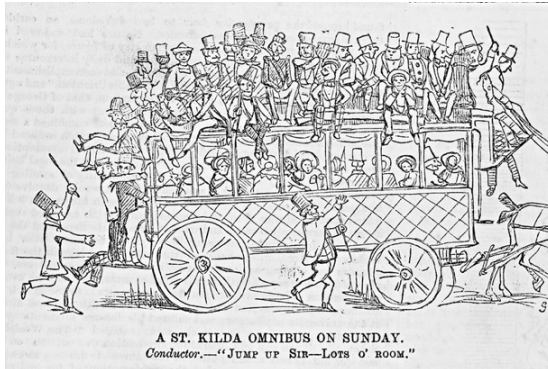


The readers are obviously not ready for any realistic account of the vulnerability of young women in their society and instead are presented with a foolish girl whose loving family will take her back in a heartbeat. All that is necessary is a few words from a gruff but kindly

policeman and a 'women who understand women' and her escape is assured. Any support or assistance shown by the Chinese man is mere entrapment and so the basic goodness and sanity of white society is maintained. The readers of such articles were presumably titillated and shocked enough to feel safe in their world while not actually learning anything to disturb their prejudices. If there is anything wrong in the world it must be the fault of the Chinese. Such writing was common and served to reenforce the stereotypes and justifications for the then evolving [White Australia policy](#). It would be nice to feel that such pitiable journalism was the preserve of the late 19th century only but anyone who still reads newspapers, let alone more modern forms of media, knows this is sadly not the case.

The Sunday Times.

No. 7: To the goldfields by Omnibus



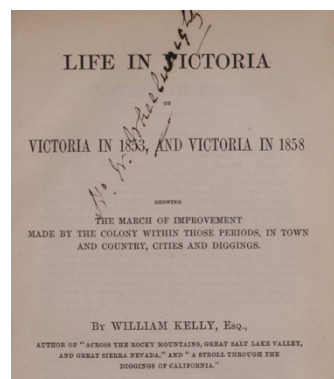
Among the many stereotypes of people of Chinese origin in Australia that existed a common one was that they were extremely frugal

and could and did live off earnings that anyone else (usually meaning white men) would starve on. This stereotype fitted well with the idea that Chinese workers were “unfair” competition and hence it was justified that they be discriminated against in various ways. As is usual, once equipped with a stereotype observers and writers for newspapers would complacently spot and repeat circumstances that confirmed the stereotype.

Rarer was the objective observer who reported what they actually saw even when it contradicted the received wisdom. One such case was William Kelly who made his living from travelling the world and writing books describing the exotic locations he had been to. And in the middle of the 19th century there were few such places more exotic as far as his English based readership was concerned than the goldfields of the new colony of Victoria. He made a number of interesting observations concerning the numerous Chinese people who had joined so many others from around the world to seek their fortunes by seeking for gold, but one of the most interesting was his observations as to the use of omnibuses:

I have already shown that they do not practise self-denial at their board, and as a proof that they are equally liberal in their personal expenses, I have only to state that it is remarked that the omnibuses and public conveyances which ply about Sandhurst and in the Bendigo district are largely patronised by Chinese; in fact, it would be safe to wager, as one of these vehicles is approaching that one-third of the passengers are of Celestial origin. The same average, I am satisfied, would be tolerably correct with regard to the coaches running to Melbourne. I know I have been several times up and down the line, and on every occasion I had from three to six Chinese fellow passengers. On one of the journeys, occupying the box seat, the driver called my attention to the circumstance "that while we frequently passed parties of European diggers on their way to the town, toiling along under heavy swags, we never saw one solitary instance of Chinamen returning on foot" and such, he informed me, is invariably the case.²²

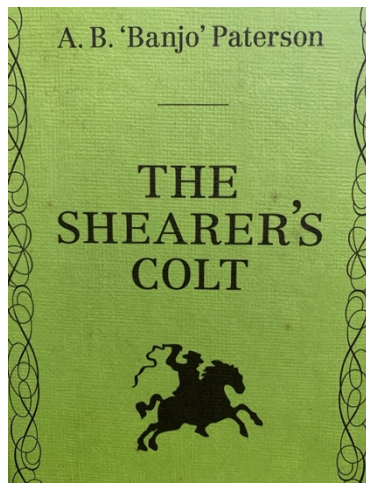
Just why Chinese people were more inclined to take public transport than others it is impossible to say at this remove. Here it is important to note that not all sources are equal and much that we read in newspapers and books past is no more reliable than what appears in the media today. Reliance must be had on one's own judgement and it needs to be left to the reader to judge if William Kelly is more or less reliable.



²² *Life in Victoria* by William Kelly, Esq. Note: Sandhurst = Ballarat

No. 8: Jimmy the Pat

Characters of Chinese heritage appear in many works of Australian literature, all too often as cooks or gardeners with little personality and less background. They serve, like Ah Wong (see No.6), as stereotypes rather than character studies. There are many reasons for this ranging from the very power of those stereotypes to inhibit real knowledge to the gradual whitewashing of Australian history throughout the 20th century that simply deleted much of the role of Chinese Australians from it.



In *The Shearer's Colt* written by Banjo Paterson in 1936 but set perhaps in the 1890s we have a similar stock Chinese character called Jimmy the Pat. Banjo Paterson is most well-known for his poetry but he also wrote a couple of novels and in this one Paterson introduces his character with such a focused blast of

stereotypes and generalisations that it deserves mention as a classic of the genre.

This list of Jimmy's career highlights also tells us what a white Australian of Paterson's generation knew or thought they knew about Chinese Australians:

"Don't you make any mistake," he said, "this is a wonderful chap, this Chow. He started with nothing—just a coolie—but he was a big, powerful bloke and could mix it with anybody. He was in the ring for a bit, what d'you

think of that—a Chow in the ring! He could take a punch too, let me tell you. ‘My face all same iun,’ he’d say. Then he took on running fan-tan and pakapoo joints, and he got to be a big man, because if any of the larrikin crowd got playing up Jimmy could knock him cold. Then he started smuggling opium and working it back to the blacks and Chows up in the Territory—heaven only knows what he made out of that. Then he started importing Chinese coolies from Canton with false identification papers, and he made these coolies work as slaves for him in Chinese gardens, until they had paid him big money. He owns a couple of stations on the quiet. And then, dash me, if he doesn’t start bookmaking!”

“I’ll tell you something,” he said, “Jimmy’s a very solid man and gives thousands to charities. But there’s hardly a fan-tan shop or an opium joint in Queensland but what Jimmy’s got a finger in it. There isn’t a criminal in Queensland but what would do exactly what Jimmy told him and do it at the double. I think that he took up the bookmaking so that he could travel about and keep an eye on all sorts of crooked jobs. Anything from fan-tan to murder. I don’t put anything past Jimmy. His right name is Kum Yoon Jim, but the boys call him Jimmy the Pat. They call all Chinamen ‘Pat.’ The larrikin crowd only call him that behind his back. He’ll hit any one that calls him Pat to his face. Tough on the Irish, isn’t it, when a Chinaman, will strike a man for calling him ‘Pat’! It ought to be a compliment.”

What Banjo Paterson has done here is compress into a single paragraph and a single person a great many of the elements of Chinese Australian history as perceived by European

Australians. Thus we have the ‘coolie’ or labourer (see [No.59](#)), gambling (see [No.73](#)), opium (see [No.24](#)), and false papers (see [No.1](#)). The idea of a Chinese boxer may well have come from the real life Rud Kee who worked with Jimmy Sharman for over 50 years. ‘Pat’ as a slang term for a Chinese person was common in the early 20th century, especially in sporting circles.²³ While finally, Paterson’s grandfather Robert Barton likely had some indentured workers from Amoy (see [No.59](#)) on his Bathurst property in the 1850s.²⁴

Banjo Paterson was not being especially racist when he created Jimmy the Pat but he was drawing on the half-knowledge and stereotypes of his generation that would have made his readers readily accept this character. Yet Jimmy the Pat while a ‘bad guy’ is also a strong character who dominates his world. Paterson does not hesitate to do this as his generation did not necessarily see Chinese Australians as the unrelenting victims that another two generations of whitewashing would try to make the norm.

For a less stereotypical view try:

[*Bew Chip’s Register*](#)

[*South Flows the Pearl*](#)

[*The Poison of Polygamy*](#)



²³ [*Sydney Sportsman*, 18 February 1920, p.1, Pinching the Pats. A CHINAMAN'S LUCK.](#)

²⁴ For the reference to both Rud Kee and Robert Paterson the author thanks Dr Juanita Kwok.

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About Chinese Australian History in 88 Objects

This simple yet effective website showcases 88 objects from the history of the Chinese in Australia. It ranges over 200 years of migration history, illuminating political, social and economic aspects of the Chinese presence in the colonies and then Commonwealth. The objects come from both private and public institutions, each one including some discussion of its use and meaning in the past but also its curation and resonance today. Including bureaucratic forms and cafe menus, temple bells and even entire houses, this website provides readers with immediate access to a still overlooked part of the nation's formation.

The website is attractively designed and extremely easy to use — a reminder of the importance of thinking through universal accessibility to communicate with as wide an audience as possible. Its focus on the everyday stimulates users to think about the deeper histories and futures of other objects, both in Chinese–Australian history and in the history of other migrant groups. This beautiful portal promises only to grow richer as it finds more topics for investigation.

NSW Premiers Digital History Prize judge 2022

About the author

Michael Williams, Adjunct Professor at the Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture (IAC), Western Sydney University, is a scholar of Chinese-Australian history and a founding member of the Chinese-Australian Historical Society. He is the author of *Returning Home with Glory* (HKU Press, 2018) and *Australia's Dictation Test: The test it was a Crime to Fail* (Brill, 2021). His website: Chinese Australian History in 88 Objects was shortlisted for the 2022 Premiers Digital History Prize. Michael is currently working on a history of the Robe goldfield walkers entitled: *Every requisite for a campaign upon the gold-fields*.



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