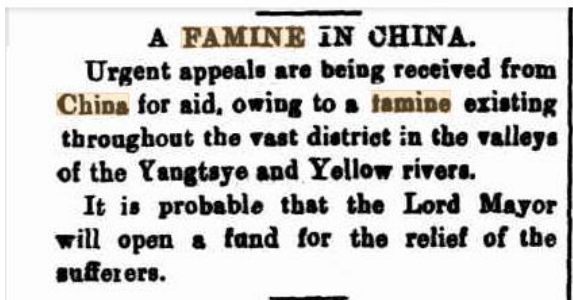




Adelaide and Melbourne responded. This first effort was not done in cooperation with the Qing government, however subsequent efforts were. Around this time, the Qing government was threatened by domestic rebellions and western invasions and was incompetent in saving its subjects from starvation.

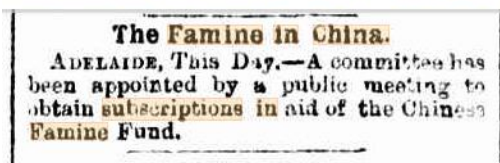
[The Kadina and Wallaroo Times \(SA : 1888 - 1954\) / Sat 12 Jan 1889 /](#)



Thus, when the rivers flooded again in 1889, a public meeting at the Adelaide Town Hall was presided over by the new Governor of South Australia, His Excellency the Earl of Kintore. Through church groups, councils and several prominent citizens including Yett Soo War Way Lee<sup>2</sup> who had arrived in Australia in 1874 and by 1889 was a wealthy Adelaide merchant married to Annie (nee McDonald), a local woman of Scottish descent, and with an established family, a committee was formed – the Chinese Famine Fund – to appeal for subscriptions.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the inclusion of a Chinese speaker at the meeting

[The Australian Star \(Sydney, NSW : 1887 - 1909\) / Fri 26 Apr 1889 /](#)



inspired this special recognition or perhaps it was the recent visit by the Chinese Commissioners, whatever the reason the Adelaide committee was

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<sup>2</sup> For more about Way Lee, Yett Soo War see Australian Dictionary of Biography entry, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/way-lee-yett-soo-war-9015>

<sup>3</sup> THE FAMINE IN CHINA – MEETING IN THE TOWN HALL The Express and Telegraph, Thu 25 April 1889 page 2

a rare instance of direct contact with the government of China at that time.



Chinese businessman Yett Soo War Way Lee attending a reception at Government House – courtesy of the State Library of SA SLSA B 54024

The sum of £1,010, 15 shillings and sixpence was soon raised and forwarded to China through the British Consul at Shanghai.

The efforts were rewarded with this plaque by the Qing Guangxu (光绪) Emperor<sup>4</sup> as a token of his gratefulness and friendship to the Adelaide Council. The tablet is covered in gesso and gilded in gold leaf embossed with fauna and flora.

From upper left to lower left, left to right, it reads ‘光绪十五年六月 穀旦立 爱地来筹劝苏皖赈捐董事 雅鉴’ and translates to *Set on a good day in the sixth month of the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu, for the perusal of the Adelaide Committee of Raising Relief Funds for the Jiangsu and Anhui Provinces.*

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<sup>4</sup> 1871-1908

On the right-hand side, it indicates the actual person who gifted this plaque – Zeng Guoquan (or Tseng Kuo-Ch’uan 曾国荃<sup>5</sup>), the Qing Dynasty Minister of Commerce in the coastal provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong. The thinner lines state the rest of his titles ‘太子太保兵部尚书兼督察院右都御史总督江南江西等处 地方提督军务粮饷操江统辖南河管理两淮盐政一等威毅伯’ -- *the Grand Tutor to the crown prince, the Secretary of the Army, the Right Minister of the Inspectorate, the Governor of Jiangnan and Jiangxi, etc., the Local Admiral, the Manager of Military Grain of the south of Changjiang River region, the Administrator of Salt of the region of north and south of Huai River and the First Class Earl Wei Yi.*

The block on the upper centre of the plaque, which appears to be a Manchu seal at first glance, turns out to be a painted copy of the seal, perhaps made by a non-Manchu reader as there are mistakes in the rendering.

It is worth mentioning that in 1889 there was also a fundraising committee in the United States to help relieve the burden of the Jiangsu and Anhui populace, and Zeng Guoquan also sent a plaque to America on behalf of the Qing emperor to express his gratitude.<sup>6</sup>

Zeng Guoquan was the ninth brother of a prominent Chinese statesman Zeng Guofan<sup>7</sup> (曾国藩). During the 1850s and 1860s, Zeng Guoquan served in the Xiang Army as an

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<sup>5</sup> 1824-1890

<sup>6</sup> Junwei Cao, ‘近代中国利用侨资的一些情况’, *财经研究*, vol.139, no. 6, 1993, p.47.

<sup>7</sup> 1811-1872

important assistant to his brother to counter the Taiping rebels<sup>8</sup>. When conquering the capital of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Nanjing, Zeng Guoquan was notorious for his massacres of the city populace as well as the robbery of a large amount of treasure in the city. In 1867, he was appointed to attack the Nian Rebellion<sup>9</sup> with Li Hongzhang<sup>10</sup> (李鸿章), which ended with failure and forced retirement. However, Zeng returned to politics in 1875 and enjoyed a soaring career until he died in 1890.

The plaque was kept by Adelaide Council after its arrival, however, it remains unknown how the plaque ended up in an antique shop. Fortunately, it was purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1978 and transferred to the History Trust of South Australia in 1986. It has been well-kept in the Migration Museum since the transfer and remains at the museum. While some may question the decision to transfer this valuable object to a museum focused on migration, others believe the plaque has reached a proper destination as the institution values the historic significance of the object and records the important relationship between the Chinese diaspora and their home country.

Despite the mysterious history, the plaque memorialises the benevolence of a group that consisted of representatives of the Chinese diaspora and Australian people, as well as the gratefulness of an emperor who was unable to protect his country and subjects.

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<sup>8</sup> A massive rebellion and civil war between the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty and the Han, Hakka-led Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in China.

<sup>9</sup> An armed uprising took place in northern China from 1851 to 1868.

<sup>10</sup> 1823-1901, a Chinese politician, general and diplomat of the late Qing dynasty.

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