

China's 'Century of Humiliation' and Chinese-Australian History

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Introduction

As much as anyone outside the Chinese-Australian community, Barry McGowan helped to change the way Australians think and talk about Chinese-Australian history. Building on the pioneering work of Janis Wilton and her *Golden Threads* project, Barry became a fervent advocate for linking community history with archaeology and, as I learned from our conversations, for encouraging a new generation of Chinese Australians to contribute their family and community histories to the wider Australian story. He was particularly concerned that the future of Chinese-Australian history should not be left to fly-in-fly-out tycoons from China seeking to colonise Australian history with China's historical grievances. We spoke about this some months before his untimely death in September 2018.

Barry McGowan's contribution

As a heritage consultant Barry felt an affinity with the archaeologists who turned the earth before him and with the miners who turned the soil a century before that again, some in search of gold, others tin. He went hunting for evidence of Chinese mining and agriculture at every site of settlement he could reach in the time allotted to him – not enough of it.

Few precious metals were uncovered from his work, but he did unearth findings that many consider precious. These findings compel all who come after him to look again at the oral, documentary and archaeological evidence concerning relations between Chinese, Europeans and Indigenous communities in colonial Australia.

Until recent times, the history of Chinese mining and agricultural settlements in Australia was subsumed and submerged under broader narratives of migration and nation-building, culminating in histories of the discriminatory White Australia policy of the first half of the 20th century.² Stories of actual people and families lost out in histories critical of White Australia and yet animated with graphic images of fiendish Tartars, flailing dragons, straggling octopuses, and lithographic prints of swooning white women and rampaging white miners, chasing people in pigtailed off their rightful claims. Either way, histories of families and communities and their business, mining and agricultural practices failed to win the attention they deserved.

Looking back over the history recounted in earlier studies there was no denying the evidence of racism they uncovered. Barry was certainly not one to deny it. But his own research told a more nuanced tale in which miners from China were shown to be living, eating, working, entertaining and being entertained alongside miners, tinkers and tradesmen from every corner of the globe on the colonial diggings. The high-sounding

¹ The author wishes to thank Sophie Couchman and Paul Macgregor for their constructive insights and corrections. All views expressed are the author's own.

² With the notable exception of Eric Rolls, among others.

speeches, lurid images and periodic riots that grabbed the headlines were only part of the history Barry's research uncovered.

Barry approached historical records in a similar frame of mind. His forays into newspapers, personal papers and archival records uncovered convincing evidence of the pioneering role of Chinese communities in Australia's pastoral and agricultural development, chronicled and footnoted in detail. For each piece of racist commentary in the rural and regional press of the period he was able to proffer a local counterweight; for every instance of palpably racist conduct he was able to point to numerous instances of fair and decent behaviour on the part of people from different backgrounds living and working together in the outback.

Taken together, the archaeological and documentary evidence Barry put together suggested that colonial Australia was neither as uniform nor as prejudiced as revisionist historians of White Australia had made it out to be. Revisionist histories had done valuable service in their time by questioning many of the assumptions underlying the White Australia policy. Barry was a historian for a later period, recovering the colours and contours of colonial Australia for people of a more confident multicultural Australia. In these histories, miners, agricultural workers and traders from China were not victims in someone else's story but heroes in their own. They helped to make Australia what it was to become in the 21st century.

Barry's Concern

I do not want to put words into Barry's mouth, but from our conversations I learned that he felt all Australians should be offered greater opportunities to discover Chinese-Australian history and that Chinese Australians should play a greater role in telling their part of the story to the rest of us. He was also concerned that Chinese-Australian histories should not be told as if they were stories about China transplanted to Australia.

I last caught up with Barry at a meeting in Sydney where he was considering an invitation to work on a new history project. A wealthy businessman was working to bring together a team of historians to draft a definitive history of Chinese Australia. The project coordinator was an established leader in the field and the team assembled was a solid one. Barry's concern was not with the project or the team but with the business donor, recently arrived from China, who behaved as if he were a representative not of Chinese Australians but of a resurgent China.

The donor was a senior figure in the Chinese Communist Party's peak United Front organisation in Australia, the Australian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China. In Sydney, he had led events in October 2017 commemorating 'Chinese victims from Chaozhou' allegedly killed in racist attacks on the Australian goldfields.³ His wealth and his Chinese passport were to his mind sufficient to place him ahead of the queue of Chinese Australians seeking recognition of genuine historical grievances, in his case on behalf of China.

³ No Chaozhou victims are identified. See "澳洲华人各界举行纪念淘金潮华人死难者集体公祭活动" [Chinese Australians from all walks of life convene collective commemorative activities mourning the deaths of victims from Chaozhou on the goldfields], 澳洲中国和平统一促进会 [Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China] website, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190918004946/http://www.acpprc.org.au/schinese/jinqi/2017/GJ31Oct17.html>, accessed 30 April 2019,. Also http://au.fjsen.com/2017-10/31/content_20322930.htm 30 October 2019

The donor's behaviour also suggested that a foreign mode of historical writing – China's national humiliation narrative – was being imported into Australia to overwrite local historical memories. According to the official humiliation narrative current in China, people of Chinese descent the world over fell victim to racist humiliation in the 19th century because the Qing dynasty was too weak and corrupt to protect them, and they would be susceptible to similar humiliations again in the 21st were it not for interventions by wealthy business people and powerful government officials from a resurgent China.

Barry had spent a good part of his working life showing that Chinese Australians were anything but passive victims and were in fact active agents in their personal stories and community histories. He was no apologist for White Australian racism but he sensed that the kind of history he wanted to tell would have little place in the donor's project.

Century of Humiliation

Allow me to digress. The pattern of history Barry found worrying is a fragment of a larger body of history that has been emerging from China in recent years. The dominant style of historical thinking behind these works is captured in the official phrase used in China to describe it – the 'Century of Humiliation' (百年屈辱史 *bainian quru shi*).

According to this humiliation narrative, from the 1840s to the 1940s the people of China were helpless victims of foreign imperialists until rescued from humiliation by the timely intervention of the Chinese Communist Party. A more recent addendum to this story, now making its way into Australia, suggested that Chinese overseas were similarly powerless victims of racism and bigotry, awaiting a benevolent and powerful People's Republic to rescue them from humiliation, much as their compatriots at home had been liberated by communism in 1949.⁴

This humiliation narrative is China's big history project for the 21st century. It serves as the underlying framework for all public history and approved history lessons in schools and universities throughout the country.⁵ Critiques that question the historical evidence or challenge the assumptions underpinning this narrative are branded 'historical nihilism' and barred from publication. Zhongshan University's Professor Yuan Weishi learned this the hard way in 2006 when he was prevented from republishing an earlier historical reflection

⁴ A recent volume commemorating two centuries of Chinese settlement in Australia heaves close to this humiliation narrative, arguing that Chinese overseas were relegated to a debased position in Australia because the Qing was incapable of protecting them but now that "China is rich and powerful" it followed that "the Australian mainstream is unable to dominate this growth and rise". The volume ends with the claim that "the current problem is not that Chinese are taking gold to China but that China is investing too much capital in Australia". David H. Lung, *A Comprehensive Chinese Australian History* (Chatswood, NSW: New Century Publications, 2018), pp. 67, 201. For historical background on the humiliation narrative in contemporary China see Paul A. Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley CA: California University Press, 2009).

⁵ The rise of the Century of Humiliation narrative and its role in distorting modern Chinese history is the subject of John Fitzgerald, "China's Anti-Fascist War Narrative: Seventy Years On and the War with Japan is Not Over Yet", *AsanForum* 3, no. 6 (November–December 2015), <http://www.theasanforum.org/chinas-anti-fascist-war-narrative-seventy-years-on-and-the-war-with-japan-is-not-over-yet/>.

on the role of foreigners in modern China in the widely read newspaper supplement *Freezing Point*.⁶

In his article Professor Yuan challenged the claims, the assumptions and the purpose of the party's national victimisation narrative. What worried him most was the purpose. Students taking history course in China's schools in the 21st century, he maintained, were being fed a diet of 'wolf's milk' blended from fact and fiction especially formulated to nourish unbridled hatred towards Westerners. More worrying, the strategy appeared to be working. By selectively focussing on two or three notorious incidents involving foreign transgressions in China, and misrepresenting them historically, authorised school history texts were breeding anti-foreign resentment among a new generation that could erupt in xenophobic violence on the scale of the Red Guard generation of the 1960s or, to push the analogy earlier still, akin to the brutal anti-foreign violence of the Boxer uprising of 1900.

Commemorations of Boxer violence against Westerners and Christians have also been revived in recent years. Addressing the National People's Political Consultative Conference in Beijing in March 2019, a senior official in the party's Three-Self patriotic Christian organisation endorsed the common saying that 'for every new Christian there is one less Chinese national' (多一个基督徒就少一个中国人 *duo yige jidutu jiu shao yige Zhongguoren*) and pointed to the precedent of anti-foreign violence by the Boxers in 1900 as a valiant effort to stop the spread of Christianity in China.⁷

Not far from Beijing, the graphic story of Boxer attacks on unarmed Christians is celebrated in garish style at the local history museum. The official history museum of Baoding, a city of over ten million people, commemorates the city's role in stemming the spread of Christianity over China's Century of Humiliation. One hall of the museum is dedicated to the patriotic heroism of local Boxer braves who massacred nuns and Christian believers who were alleged to have killed infants to feed their religious rites. Along the walls, stark mural paintings of nuns dumping the limp bodies of children inside the grounds of their orphanage sit above explanatory notes accusing the sisters of infanticide and other crimes. The historical exhibition culminates in an honour roll identifying local Boxers who slew domestic and foreign Christians in the massacres of 1900. Boxer leader Zhou Laokun is singled out as a national hero, as the exhibitors put it, for 'angrily slaying' the Catholic prioress.

It is well established that the Boxers massacred foreign nuns along with a thousand and more local Chinese Christians in and around Baoding in 1900. The rest of the exhibit is a historical fabrication of the kind that passes for official public history in China, expressly to incite vengeance against Westerners.

⁶ Yuan Weishi 袁伟时, '现代化与历史教科书' [Modernisation and historical textbooks], 冰点杂志 [Freezing Point magazine], 11 January 2006, <https://web.archive.org/save/http://edu.people.com.cn/GB/1055/4016350.html>, accessed 30 April 2019.

⁷ Commissioner Xu Xiaohong 徐晓鸿委员, 我国基督教必须始终坚持中国化方向 [Christianity in China must uphold Sinitisation from beginning to end], 人民网 [People's Daily online], 11 March 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190918005936/http://lianghui.people.com.cn/2019cppcc/n1/2019/0311/c425500-30970122.html>, accessed 30 April 2019. See also Ben Blanchard, "China Official Says West Using Christianity to 'Subvert' Power", Reuters, 11 March 2019.

A Modest Proposal

Barry and I got to talking. A great deal of fine historical writing had been coming out of China in recent decades, contributing to more finely nuanced accounts of modern Chinese history, not unlike Barry's contributions to Chinese-Australian history. But in the post-reform period the mood had shifted appreciably, particularly in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics under Party General Secretary Xi Jinping. Now it was the Century of Humiliation all the way down.

In this setting, there appeared to be a growing risk that Chinese-Australian history could be subsumed and submerged into China's grand humiliation narrative, much as it had once been swallowed up in the story of White Australia, and once again lost from view. The White Australian narrative had been bad enough but at least it was bad Australian history. If the story of Chinese Australia were to be reduced to a subplot of China's rise to wealth and power, Chinese Australians could again be caste as hapless victims, although this time in a story about China.

We had no intention of getting in the way of the businessman's project – Australia is a free country – but we got to thinking what we might be able to do as archaeologists and historians to balance the kind of history likely to emerge from a project of this kind. We felt we needed to reach a larger audience than the standard archaeology or history monograph. With the help of a leading member of the Chinese-Australian community in Sydney, we drafted a proposal to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for a new style of documentary history on Chinese Australia. A copy is appended below.

Barry signed off on the proposal on 20 June 2018, not before suggesting a final correction with characteristic impatience for status and humbug. He asked me to amend the title on the signature block from 'Professor' Barry McGowan to 'Dr' Barry McGowan. "I haven't reached the exalted rank of Prof just yet," he wrote.

Vale Dr Barry McGowan.

Australian Stories Through Chinese-Australian Eyes

A number of extraordinary stories of courage and resilience among early Chinese settlers in Australia have featured on Australian television and print media in recent years, generally cast against a background of goldfield violence, the White Australia Policy and other forms of discrimination.

Often missing from these stories is what we might call the ordinary life of Chinese Australians as they experienced it themselves. Much of this is still preserved in archaeological records, in archives, in photos, in old Chinese-language newspapers and in family histories – including records of businesses, families, communities, churches, charities, debutantes, picnics by the seaside, racing, the arts and photography, and the everyday social and cultural lives enjoyed by Chinese Australians alongside other Australians of their era.

In rural Australia immigrants from China mingled freely with Europeans and provided the bulk of the labour force for pastoralists needing to clear their land. Many Chinese Australians were highly regarded in their local communities, not least for their generosity towards local charities, including their charitable support for local hospitals. There was often a considerable show of affection at the funerals of long-term Chinese residents, or on their departure for China. They were also to the forefront in enlisting in the armed forces in World War I and World War II. Some of these men fought at Gallipoli, of whom a number were highly decorated.

In recent years, Australian archaeologists, archivists and historians – many of them Chinese Australians themselves – have uncovered a trove of inspiring stories of Chinese-Australian families, businesses and communities that have never made their way onto the screen or the web. Taken together, these stories present a diverse and in many ways more inspiring picture of Chinese-Australian life than the grim portraits often refracted through the prism of White Australian racism. This rich Chinese-Australian story, told by Chinese Australians, is a story yet to be shared with the Australian public.

A team of community leaders and recognised researchers would be happy to work with the ABC to explore production of a series of programs on the everyday lives of Chinese Australians, through their own eyes, from the 1840s to the present day.

Given the times in which we live, the community leaders feel that there is a pressing need to tell a new and interesting story to fellow Australians about the histories and experiences of their communities. Our team of archaeologists, archivists, historians and community leaders would be delighted to assist by presenting a range of stories and supporting materials for consideration.