Constructing the Exotic: The Myth of Chinaman's Well

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ABSTRACT

It is often claimed that Chinaman's Well on the Coorong was built by Chinese goldseekers on their way to the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s. However, this belief is a persistent historical myth unsupported by evidence. There is no indication that Chinese people constructed the well, nor does its design resemble any recognisably Chinese style. This article examines the well's unusual construction, the lack of contemporary records attributing it to Chinese builders, and the later emergence of this narrative through oral tradition, archaeological speculation, and tourism promotion. It argues that the attribution arose not from historical fact but from a confluence of exoticism, stereotyping, and name-based assumptions, compounded by a broader failure to integrate Chinese Australian history into the national narrative. An alternative explanation for the well's origins is proposed. By tracing how an unremarkable site became a romanticised tourist destination, the article exposes how such myths contribute to the ongoing whitewashing of Australia's past and highlights the need for more rigorous and inclusive historical interpretation.

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Introduction

On a remote stretch of South Australia's coastline known as the Coorong, a series of official signboards describe an elaborate well-building project supposedly undertaken by Chinese goldseekers in the 1850s. How this remarkable fiction came to be presented as tourist history is a fascinating story in itself. More importantly, this extreme—though far from isolated—example of mythmaking in Chinese Australian history highlights ongoing issues in how Chinese experiences are treated: either as a parallel narrative to "mainstream" Australian history or, more commonly, as a source of exoticism and stereotype. In this context, exotic refers to the portrayal of Chinese individuals and culture as strange, mysterious, or fundamentally different from the presumed norms of white Australian society—romanticised or distorted in ways that emphasise otherness over understanding. Such portrayals erase historical accuracy and human complexity, reducing Chinese Australians to symbols or curiosities within a narrative that centres whiteness. This article examines the curious case of Chinaman's Well in this context, asking why such myths endure despite the sustained efforts of a generation of historians working toward a more accurate and inclusive account of Chinese Australian history.

Among the many episodes contributing to the often exoticised perception of Chinese Australian history, the 1850s walk from the small South Australian port of Robe to the Victorian goldfields has assumed near-mythic status.[1] Frequently likened to a 'Long March', this journey—marked by accounts of hardship, death, and contemporary

outrage over the discriminatory tax it sought to circumvent—has become the stuff of legend. Yet, despite its prominence, the narrative has largely been shaped by local historians whose enthusiastic retellings often prioritise anecdote and allusion over plausibility, consistency, or critical analysis.[2] As a result, while the arrival of thousands of Chinese goldseekers at Robe in the mid-1850s to avoid punitive taxes in gold-rich Victoria is widely known, the episode remains surprisingly under-examined in its historical complexity.

While the portrayal of the Robe walk as a 'Long March' ordeal imposed by deceitful ship captains can be firmly dismissed, numerous myths surrounding the Chinese walkers persist—particularly among local communities in western Victoria, if not more broadly across Australia. The journey from Robe, undertaken by a substantial number of goldseekers, was in fact a well-organised and widely recognised response that effectively circumvented Victoria's discriminatory legislation. Yet this historical episode remains burdened by a range of myths and stereotypes that go beyond the usual simplifications found in popular historical narratives. These myths can be grouped into three broad categories: those concerning the landing at Guichen Bay, those related to the conditions and character of the journey itself, and those attributing various infrastructure works in western Victoria to the Chinese travellers.[3] The third category, in particular, reflects an enduring fascination with the exotic, leading to speculative and often implausible claims about Chinese involvement in local construction projects.

The root of this exoticism—beyond the obvious influences of racism and Eurocentrism—lies in the whitewashing of Australian history that accompanied the White Australia policy. One consequence of this erasure is a reductive public understanding of Chinese Australian history, in which Chinese people are remembered almost exclusively as either goldseekers or market gardeners. Entire dimensions of their presence are routinely omitted: Chinese opera performances, temple construction, commercial enterprises, intermarriage and family formation, Chinese medical practitioners, links with Hong Kong, Christian engagement, the practice of bone repatriation, self-help societies, and participation in international finance.[4] In the absence of this broader historical context, implausible explanations—however fanciful—more easily take root and, through repetition, assume the status of common knowledge.

Exaggerated or untypical as the accounts of ill-treatment and hardship would appear to be, they at least are plausible within the historical context. Of quite another level of myth are the many stories that apparently still circulate in the regions and towns along the routes taken by the Chinese gold seekers. Usually concerning infrastructure projects, these accounts would have us believe that a rather startling range of constructions, ranging from wells to woolsheds to extensive stone walls, can be attributed to the Chinese walkers.[5] In all cases there are no contemporary confirmations of these stories, with their first appearance being at the earliest some four decades after the events. In many cases the dates cannot be made to coincide with the years when the walkers were walking, a narrow range after all, either 1856-1857 or 1862-1863. And in nearly all cases there are perfectly clear alternative explanations for the structures that do not require the employment of men anxious to get to the goldfields and unskilled in that kind of work.

One of the most persistent myths along the Robe to goldfields route is the idea that the Chinese walkers were constantly digging wells—or even that they built every surviving well in the region. This myth seems to be partly based on the mistaken assumption that the Chinese gold seekers were crossing untouched, untravelled land.[6] For example, in 1844—well before the Chinese arrivals—a survey team travelling down the Coorong recorded finding numerous wells: 'At about 5 miles [beyond Salt Creek] we came to a well of water … the well contains the best water for many miles'.[7] Some were of Aboriginal origin while others were dug by the various travellers: 'The whalers had a station (two huts) on shore, and had dug a well, in which there was good water'.[8] The surveyors themselves occasionally dug wells with ease, noting they had 'dug a well with water within a foot of the surface'.[9] All of this points to an established route with accessible water sources well before the Chinese goldseekers began their walk.

Captain Tolmer, who pioneered a gold escort route from the Victorian goldfields back to South Australia in 1852 on behalf of that colony's government, noted that a 'native says, water could be obtained by digging'. Just a day after he crossed the Murray and heading south east he reported seeing 'native signal-fires to the N.E.' and found 'two or three wells have been sunk' at his campsite. Though Tolmer himself used 'water-kegs' and had 'a pack-horse to carry water'—his observations make it clear that

Dunkeld Cistern, author photo, April 2022.

water sources were known and accessible.[10] In fact, numerous Aboriginal waterholes existed along the route, and long before the Chinese goldseekers arrived, many South Australians and other non-Chinese travellers had already used or dug wells across this landscape. Some of these wells were even established by government-employed sappers.[11] In particular, the stretch along the Coorong—between Adelaide and Robe—has quite a number of wells: 'Such sites include Chinamans Well, Sheoak, Salt Creek, Woods Well, Cantara and Coolatoo and Coconut Well … Both on the peninsula and along the inland side of the Coorong, there are many waterholes marked on old hundred maps'.[12] Not that the need for water or wells was non-existent or always easy. Speaking of the Coorong in 1856, for example, it was reported that: 'Numerous wells have been sunk with one result—salt, salt, salt'.[13] Neverthelss, far from being a waterless wilderness, most of the route had ample access to water—so much so that, in many cases, it was excessive rainfall, not scarcity, that caused the real difficulties.

All of which is not to say that the Chinese walkers did not dig their own wells—given the large numbers in their groups this is in fact probable—but there is nothing to suggest which ones nor that any of those that remain today are in any recognisable 'Chinese' style. Despite this, many wells are named Chinaman or Chinaman's Well, perhaps due to association with a market gardener of a later generation. Even more remarkable are the many stone or brick cisterns—which are for water storage and not wells at all—which are also often attributed to Chinese origin.[14] This is an attribution seemingly on the basis that these once common pre-galvanised tank structures of very English design are now as unfamiliar—as exotic—as the Chinese gold seekers. [15]

Remarkably, stories concerning various wells and even cisterns of an obviously much later date continue to persist. One well in particular, Chinaman's Well on the Coorong near Salt Creek, has achieved a remarkable status as a kind of fabricated tourist attraction. The well is of a unique design and the lack of evidence for who built it or even exactly when and why in this unusual style only adds to the mystery. This is a mystery the attribution to the Chinese walkers seems to resolve, as long as the Chinese walkers themselves are also seen as mysterious. In this instance Chinaman's Well even has an 'official' (i.e. government paid for) series of tourist signs declaring not only that the well was built by Chinese people but even detailing the supposed construction methods. All this despite there being no evidence beyond the name, and no plausible historical basis for the claim. This appears to be a good example of the not uncommon "name inspires a story which justifies the name" circularity of myth making.[16] It is also a good example of how exoticism compounds itself—two mysterious or unfamiliar elements, the Chinese goldseekers and an unusual structure, attract and reinforce one another in the popular imagination.

Chinaman's Well today, author photo, April 2022.

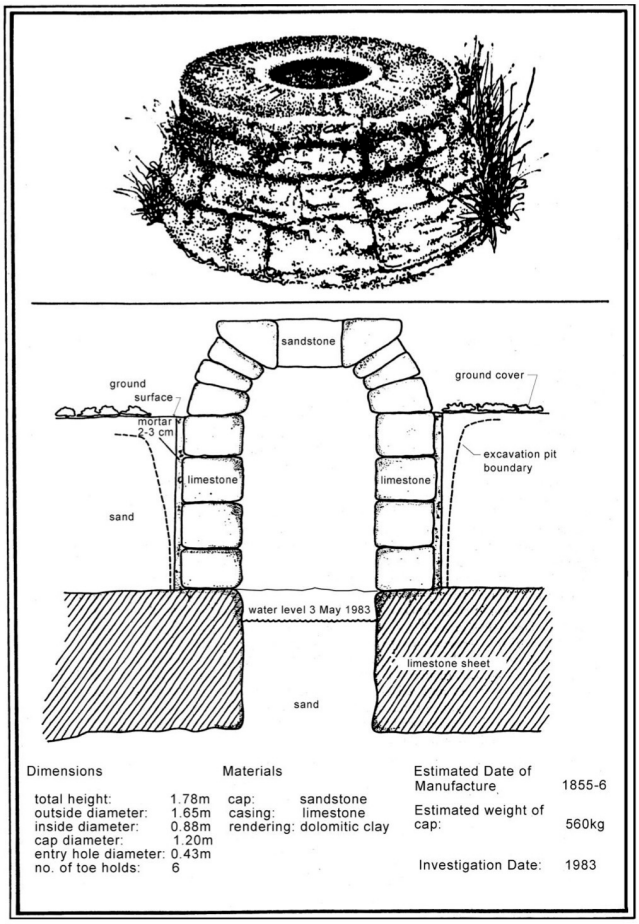
Nevertheless, the name Chinaman's Well—or Chinaman's Wells—appears relatively early in the 19th century. It is casually mentioned by government surveyor Todd in 1856 as 'a place called the Chinaman's Wells', suggesting it was regarded at the time as an ordinary well: likely just a depression dug into the ground, possibly reinforced with timber.[17] Alternatively, if it referred to the current stone structure, it was evidently so longstanding by then as to require no special comment. Yet if the well had indeed been constructed for—or by—the Chinese goldseekers in 1856, it would have been newly built and presumably notable. Around the same time, Private Ewens, stationed at Guichen Bay and frequently travelling the Coorong route, also referred in 1857 to several wells, including 'the Chinamans Wells', without indicating that this one differed in any way from others nearby.[18] These early references, while using the name, offer no insight into the nature or construction of the well and certainly provide no support for later claims about a Chinese origin.

While a number of wells of various types have acquired the designation "Chinaman's", what is unique about the well currently known as Chinaman's Well on the Coorong is well described in archaeologist Roger Luebber's 1995 report:

> The well is a round, dome-shaped structure which is capped with a heavy sandstone cover plate through which is cut a small entry hole. The well head stands a mere metre above the ground and was originally encased in a white pipe clay render. Curved blocks were cut in circles carved in layers of limestone on the shore of an adjacent Salt Lake and laid to form a cylindrical casing and shoulder. The thick sandstone cover-plate was also quarried in a similar manner and trimmed to form a tapered profile before being fitted to the well casing.[19]

And in greater detail from the same report:

> Well Design
>
> The well, Figure 6, consists of three architectural elements: curved limestone blocks which are assembled to form a perfectly shaped cylindrical casing of four courses below ground level, a dome-shaped shoulder of four courses, and a cover stone. A fixed taper in the shoulder blocks ensures a narrow symmetrical opening at the top of the limestone masonry unit. On the shoulder was placed a round, wedge shaped cover stone of marine sandstone, weighing an estimated 560 kg, which acts as a keystone to maintain the characteristic "beehive" profile of the masonry above ground. A perfectly round entry hole 43 cm in diameter cut through the cover plate permits draw water to be drawn and periodic maintenance to be carried out. There is no evidence of repair or restoration of the masonry fabric, and, except for two possible old carved initials, the masonry is free of graffiti. The base of the casing rests on a naturally occurring limestone sheet through which a perfectly round hole has been cut to allow ground water to flow up into the well sump. This limestone is identical to the porous masonry blocks used in the well and may itself be a conduit of groundwater through the site. Three sets of opposing toe holes have been cut inside the masonry shell and numerous shallow cut marks on the adjacent surface of the casing indicate either damage from cleaning or attempts to shape the masonry at the time of construction. A white pipe clay renders up to 5 cm thick seals the external casing surface below ground, and, judging from the large amounts of clay scattered



Chinaman's Well drawing, Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells*, p.2.

around the well, it probably extended over the entire masonry unit up to the cover stone. The render exposed by excavation, Plate 2, is very roughly finished, exhibits no tool marks, appears to be intact, and is still bonded firmly to the casing face. The overall height of the well above the limestone sheet is 1.78 cm and it is 1.65 cm in diameter (OD). Although seasonal changes in ground water may result in fluctuations in water level in the sump, the well's relatively small maximum capacity of about 650 litres suggests that it was designed for human consumption rather than general stock watering purposes.[20]

From this description it is apparent this well is unlike any other well not only in the area, or in South Australia but perhaps anywhere else in the world, including China and Europe. Being of stone or with a stone cap does, however, seem remarkably common on the Coorong and Luebbers found 'three had round or square casings which were made of stone or a combination of stone and concrete blocks, and each had a concrete capping stone'.[21] After inspection Luebbers concluded none of these 'exhibit design characteristics which would necessarily implicate Chinese manufacture'—meaning they were not of the same design as Chinaman's Well.[22] Ironically, this judgement relied on the assumption that the distinctive architecture of Chinaman's Well represented a typical "Chinese" design—thus using Chinaman's Well itself as the comparative standard.

At least two local histories have mistakenly illustrated one of these other wells as though it shares the same design as Chinaman's Well.[23] Another circular stone well without a cap, located at Kangaroo Inn, appears similarly aged but was in fact constructed within living memory to protect an existing water well.[24] These examples demonstrate how visual similarity alone has fuelled assumptions about historical origin, often without supporting evidence.

All of these wells have at times been considered Chinese in origin by some observers. Luebbers, however, also documents another well reputed to be of Chinese construction that, upon investigation, turned out to be 'a close facsimile of immigrant European wells', being rectangular and lined with logs.[25] In fact, wells dug by Chinese market gardeners in later decades—many of whom came from the same Pearl River Delta region as the Robe walkers—were typically described as 'shallow rectangular wells', with no records of elaborate round, beehive-shaped, or stone-capped constructions.[26] This makes the Coorong's Chinaman's Well all the more unusual. Given the distinctiveness of its design and location—north of Guichen Bay and therefore not even on the route taken by those who landed directly at Robe—and thereby attributing its construction only to those Chinese walkers who began their walk in Adelaide, does little to explain its design or clarify its origins. Instead, it merely displaces the mystery further, relying on a vague exoticism rather than plausible historical context.

Luebbers at least attempts to provide a rationale for the construction of a well, suggesting that 'the arrivals in Adelaide were deliberately setting up a strategy to facilitate the arduous trek overland, and this included plans to build a water supply for the expected influx of their Victoria-bound compatriots'.[27] However, this explanation raises more questions than it answers. Why would such a well be constructed in a relatively well-watered area, along a route where a telegraph line was simultaneously under development? Why are there no comparable wells further back along the route from Adelaide, where the need would presumably have been just as great? And most curiously, why construct it in such an unusual and labour-intensive style, one not associated with either Chinese or European design? These questions only deepen the mystery rather than resolve it.

The first assumption made by Luebbers and others is that the well referred to in 1856 as being located 'at a place called the Chinaman's Wells' is the same as the distinctive stone structure known by that name today. However, an earlier reference from 1852 to 'limestone wells' in the same vicinity suggests that such a well may have already existed prior to the earliest possible date of Chinese involvement—1856.[28] Maclaren's 1852 report stating that 'I caused it to be built around with limestone' is particularly suggestive, as is another noting that 'sappers built around it with limestone.'[29] Given that the area is known as the Limestone Coast, and that many utilitarian wells were constructed from this abundant material, it is plausible that the well in question predates the arrival of Chinese goldseekers. These earlier wells typically followed a straightforward design—round or square shafts sunk vertically, with no superstructure above ground and certainly no capping stones. They were generally intended for both human and animal use, with water raised by a whip

system—something not possible with the current structure of Chinaman's Well. This casts further doubt on the attribution of the existing structure to Chinese construction.

When Chinaman's Well is perhaps referred to some twenty years later, in 1876, it and several other wells nearby, despite its supposedly unique style, are merely mentioned as 'the wells [that] had been put in thorough repair' by the 'Commissioner of Crown Lands'. There is no hint that anything distinguishes this well from other nearby wells.[30] Another report in 1876 is obviously referring to a stock well and not a stone construction when it says, 'Chinaman's Well, Wood's Well, and the well at McGrath's Flat all required repairing and fencing round to prevent the sheep trampling them in and consequently filling them up'.[31] Luebbers also quotes a number of references to Chinaman's Wells in this period, including one referring to the quality of the water but none make mention of anything special about the well itself.[32] Again Luebbers quotes repair at the end of the 19th century of a well at Chinaman's Wells that is obviously a whip well for livestock.[33]

Was a stone well yet to be built? In fact, the first recorded description of a well that actually identifies a stone well or makes any note of its special features comes only in 1933:

> One of the strangest is Chinaman's Well, between Salt Creek and Stony Well, and about 40½ miles from Meningie. The top of this well has been carved out of stone with an egg-shaped top so that rabbits cannot topple into it, drown, and foul the water.[34]

There is no mention here of the well actually being built by Chinese people and in fact the first mention of this as an explanation seems to come as late as 1962. This is when a newspaper article by H.A. Lindsay describes the well and makes an appeal for information. The problem with such appeals being that someone is bound to jump in. In this case a person described as a 'missionary' born in China declares the well to be of a Chinese style. Given the vacuum in knowledge about the well by that stage many were all too ready to accept this. However, it is interesting to note that Lindsay, does not accept that the walkers would have spent time constructing such a well in 1856 and instead postulates a random Chinese mason building the well at a later date and under government contract.[35]

Despite his scepticism about the 1856 date, Lindsay was all too ready to accept the missionary's tale. In reality, the woman, Miss R. M. Arnott Rogers, who so positively identified the well as of Chinese style was the daughter of missionaries. Miss Rogers was born in China, in Sichuan and left when she was 9 years of age and was in her 50s when recalling her well technology. Apart from the fact that Sichuan is very far from the Pearl River Delta, where the Chinese goldseekers originated, and has a very different geography, it does not have wells remotely like the one on the Coorong, apart from being round and lined with stone. They are neither capped nor built with a beehive structure. The two most distinctive features of Chinaman's Well are therefore not explained.

Having been early named 'Chinaman's Well' it is an easy jump for some to assume it was actually built by Chinese people. Though apparently this was not done until the 20th century. Though why anyone passing through on their way to the goldfields would stop at this one point in a 400 km walk to build such an elaborate well is a mystery in itself.[36] Not to mention the fact that the location is not lacking in wells or sources of water. Another basic question is: Is there anything particularly 'Chinese' about this well?

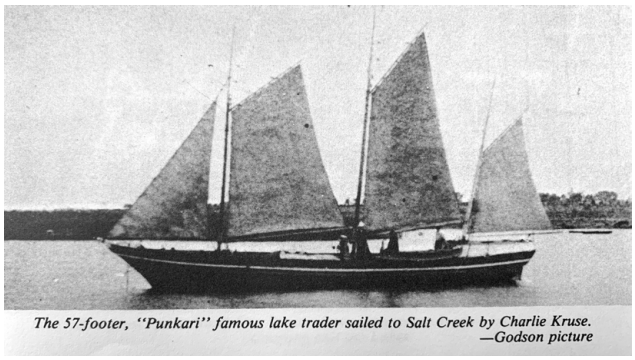
In the ordinary course of things this is where the myth should have remained: a local story believed or not without much evidence either way. The missionary story of the 1960s in fact seems to have been forgotten but the tendency to equate exotic with exotic remained—the well is different, Chinese people are different, therefore the one built the other. It is at this point that archaeologists in search of an historical explanation arrived on the scene. And once more some 'China experts' are on hand to back up the need for an exotic explanation.

The first such report is that of William Snoek who in the early 1980s was commissioned to undertake an archaeological survey for the SA National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Service wished to build a 'visitor interpretative centre' for the Coorong National Park focused on Chinaman's Well. The well having become an informal tourist site since 1966 and the Lindsay articles apparently.[37] According to this report the area had quite a bit of use starting with a soak that perhaps originally attracted travellers, the well, a 'stock through system', and a 'domestic eating house building complex'. The site was on the Adelaide to Melbourne telegraph line and

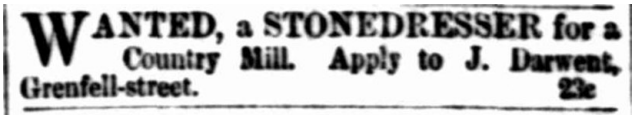
main route between these cities until 1877, and may have been a 'horse changing station for the stage coach service' as well as an 'eating house'.[38] The passing along this route of Chinese gold seekers is noted and most tellingly that the well is 'in the Chinese style'. The evidence for this last is not given apart from a reference to 'Chinese archaeologists'.[39] Even so Snoek only says the well 'may have been' built by Chinese gold seekers.

Snoek also cites 1864 as a significant year when 'a great deal of public support for the development of navigation through The Coorong' was active and a house was built by 'Joseph Darwent, a prominent Adelaide shipping agent' as a speculative venture.[40] If the supposed 'Chinese style' of the well is put to one side, then this period would seem the most likely for anyone to build an elaborate domestic well at this location. Apparently at least one house was already available for rent in 1864.[41] A house, described in Luebber's archaeological report as being 'made from local limestone, lime-rich mortar, and pipe-clay', and 'finished with dressed stone', has many features similar to the well itself.[42] In addition, in that same year at least one ship was regularly 'navigating the Coorong for 15 miles above Salt Creek to Chinaman's Wells for nine months in the year'.[43] While another observed that: 'In winter boats could go to Chinaman's Wells, 10 miles above the Salt Creek'. Chinaman's Wells is mentioned in this report as the furthest from Adelaide it would be possible to go via water[44]

If the well is not in any recognisable Chinese style, its nevertheless unique style still requires explanation. A major feature of the well is the millstone-like capstone which was clearly quarried and shaped nearby. The reference to Joseph Darwent leads to an advertisement he placed around this time for a 'stone dresser' for


The 57-footer, "Punkari" famous lake trader sailed to Salt Creek by Charlie Kruse.
—Godson picture

Coorong boat, *Coorong pilot: lower Murray lakes and Coorong, South Australia,* Ronald Baker, Fullers, Adelaide, 1982, p.5.


WANTED, a STONEDRESSER for a Country Mill. Apply to J. Darwent, Grenfell-street. 23c

Stone dresser (Advertisement), *The Express and Telegraph*, 28 January 1867, p.1.

the purpose of constructing a 'Country Mill'.[45] While previous to this he had advertised a flour mill with house for rent.[46] Could Darwent have employed this same skilled stoneworker - and the well at Chinaman's Well is nothing if not an example of skilled stonework - to construct a well also? This is speculation but is it any less plausible than a Chinese stonemason?

The most thorough report on Chinaman's Well is that by Roger Luebbers who having accepted that the well is Chinese then makes strenuous efforts to interpret all the evidence as pointing that way. For instance, when referring to the comments by Raglass of 'limestone wells' before 1856, he dismisses this on the basis that there is no reference to Chinese.[47] Luebbers seems to forget that the link to "Chinese" as well builders is to be proven and if the 'limestone wells' are the same wells not yet named 'Chinaman' then this link fails. Luebbers also accepts oral evidence passed from one aged story teller to another of actually seeing Chinese people building the well. The original source would at best have been a child at the time.[48] Without corroboration such a story cannot be treated as reliable evidence. This story is further confused by accounts of a Chinese gardener that is said to have had a plot near the well at a later period.[49]

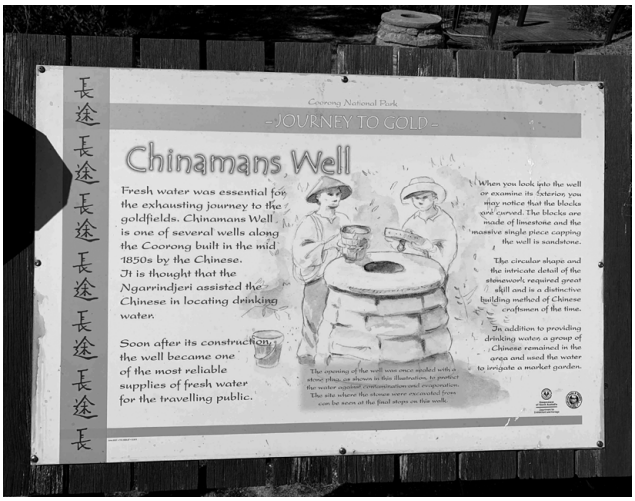
The most startling evidence, that must still be categorised as 'oral history', comes from three 'Chinese officials visiting Adelaide in 1983'. They were supervisors of an exhibition of the Entombed Warriors and inspected the well 'over a picnic lunch'. Described as 'archaeologists directing excavations', presumably in Shaanxi, the three are also described as 'authorities on the design and stylistic characteristics of Chinese architecture in rural China'. Despite Shannxi being a northern province, they apparently felt the well was 'typical of those used in Southern China over the last three centuries.' They were unable to offer a 'detailed explanation of construction techniques' however.[50] It is perhaps right that this evidence remains categorised as "oral history" as no well remotely resembling the well at Chinaman's Wells has been found in China and local Chinese experts have been as mystified as anyone else around the globe.[51]

Despite all these reservations, Luebbers comes to an extraordinary conclusion based on his firm assumption that the well is Chinese in style:

> The construction of the well at Chinamans Well can be dated with confidence to pre-September 1856 and almost certainly coincides with the landing in South Australia of Chinese gold seekers following legislation in Victoria to restrict Asians from working the lucrative Victorian alluvial goldfields after mid-1855. While neither the exact date of construction nor its social context is recorded, circumstantial evidence suggests that it was the first wave of celestials landing either at Adelaide, or possibly Victor Harbour [sic], which built the wells rather than those that disembarked at Robe when its port facility came on line. Given the scarcity of potable water, Chinese travellers through the Coorong would have difficulty surviving without resorting to local knowledge. It seems most likely then that the Asian visitors were paying Ngarrindjeri land owners for use of their water with metal coins and tokens that were reported by Robert Edwards.[52]

This last reference to payment is a case of speculation piled on speculation – Edwards merely says that the coins found 'may have been payment' for guides or food and water or they 'could have been lost'.[53] Luebbers continues to build his fanciful conclusions, though with a major caveat at the end:

> There is prima facie evidence suggesting that more than one well was erected at Chinamans Wells and in addition, the Chinese also built wells at Magrath Flats, Woods Well, and Stony Well. If the force of this testimony is taken as fact, then it must be concluded that the Chinese planned to build an elaborate network of wells to provide a reliable supply of drinking water to a large migration population that was soon to visit the area. The only testimony detailing any specific use of the well by Chinese people indicates that the site was not used at any time for habitation, although it is possible that a Chinese employee at John Gall's Cantara Station may have maintained his personal garden at the well in the late-1890s. The exact relationship of Chinese to the well, its construction details, and the possibly [sic] that substantial Chinese involvement took place was not established by the historic research. Once constructed however, the site as a place name has remained an important landmark until the present day.[54]



Fantasy as history, author photo, April 2022.

Luebbers does recognise the role of others in the same area and says that: 'Darwent's commercial ventures involving transportation of passengers and cargo via overland and sea routes suggests that the development of Chinamans Wells was a part of a larger plan to cash in on economic growth in the Southeast of South Australia'.[55] Why Luebbers does not consider it was Darwent who might have built the well is another mystery. Perhaps the issue lies in the structure's unique—or exotic—design, which does not match expectations of colonial infrastructure. Darwent is not sufficiently exotic or "other" to sustain the romanticised narrative that has grown around the well while the "Chinese" do.

Several years after Luebbers' report, perhaps around 2001, the South Australian National Parks picked up on the Chinamans Well myth and took it a major step further. They not only began declaring the well was Chinese made but designed a series of elaborate signages which, in the absence of any restraint imposed by evidence, allowed the artist's imagination free rein. This signage includes every cliché and stereotype about Chinese gold seekers that could be imagined.[56]

All this may well have been a passing fantasy later regretted as the National Parks of South Australia's *Coorong Self-Guided History Trail* pamphlet produced more recently makes no mention of Chinese builders of Chinamans Wells. Instead, this government department's version of history, which nevertheless bravely states that the 'well was built in about 1856', refers only to a 'soak' 'thought to have been established by the Chinese to supply the travelling public with fresh water and vegetables'. This vague

statement—for which there is also no evidence—is then followed by a non-committal (as to actual builders) description of the well itself.[57]

Certainly, researchers such as Penny Paton and H.A. Lindsay did not think this was a Chinese built well.[58] An account quoted by Paton that the well predates the arrival of Chinese gold seekers would appear to be the most plausible. Its name deriving from the subsequent use of the well by a party or parties of Chinese walkers, with perhaps a group that was ill remaining for a longer period so that the name stuck.[59]

The main issues are that the well is not of any known Chinese (or any standard) design, coupled with the fact that the Chinese walkers spending time and energy on its construction is implausible in the extreme. Most fundamentally, if the date for the well is wrong, with a well reported in 1852—'limestone wells'—this would be before the earliest possible date of Chinese involvement—1856.[60] That the well took on the name 'Chinaman's Wells' around the time of the walkers is possible, with some walking from Adelaide that far via the Coorong before turning inland. At this date, however, with no contemporary remarking on its design, it is extremely improbable that the well was of the same construction as the one touted by SA National Parks today.

All of which leaves the mystery of who did build the well and why in this seemingly unique style. That it was a domestic well, as opposed to one for stock, is obvious from the design. The location is near a well-used route, and a number of residences are reported. The manner of carving out the rounded stone that became the cap is similar to that used to make British millstones. That a mason skilled in millstones but not in wells made Chinaman's Well could explain its unique design. That it was constructed when hopes were high for a Coorong water route that did not continue would explain its relative obscurity and the lack of wear on the lip. This is the simplest explanation, and thus the safest and most plausible, if not the most interesting or exotic. Just not the stuff the dreams of tourist sign artists are made from, unfortunately.

The focus here on the Chinaman's Well myth is a detailed case study from a wide range of myths and stereotypes, whereby much is often attributed to an exotic element on the historical landscape. The tendency to see Chinese Australian history as parallel to—rather than an integrated element of—what is still a largely whitewashed Australian history is just part of this. This story of the Chinaman's Well is perhaps unique in enjoying a perfect storm of factors that has seen the myth elevated from the level of local folklore to an archaeological report to a tourist stop complete with signage. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that only a profound exoticism could allow such a fanciful edifice to be built on such shallow and indeed contradictory foundations. Could such an attribution be made of Scottish immigrants? Would any history of Irish immigrants in Australia be constructed in isolation and with so little regard for the history of their British immigrant neighbours? Would any structure be declared of a certain type solely on the basis of randomly visiting academics of an entirely separate specialisation? That all this and more could be done when the subjects are Chinese points to a continuing problem with what can be broadly seen as the whitewashing of Australian history and the tendency to exoticise Chinese Australian history. While much has been done to challenge this pattern, much more remains to be done.

About the author
Michael Williams is a graduate of Hong Kong University, 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, which traces the history of peoples from south China's Pearl River Delta around the Pacific Ports of Sydney, Hawaii and San Francisco and *Australia's Dictation Test: The Test it was a Crime to Fail*, Brill, 2021. Michael has taught at Beijing Foreign Studies and Peking Universities and is a former Adjunct Professor at Western Sydney University. His website: Chinese Australian History in 88 Objects was shortlisted for the 2022 Premiers Digital History Prize. Michael is currently developing a national database of Chinese Australian history called: Scattered Legacy / 澳華僑海集珍.

Endnotes

1. According to one account it "must be one of the epic events of Australian history", Horsfall, David, *March to Big Gold Mountain*, Red Rooster Press, Victoria, 1985, p.1. And more recently a dance event in Adelaide called it "The Long Walk", Rebecca Wu, "Oz Asia Review: The Long Walk", *Glam Adelaide*, posted October 26, 2022, <https://glamadelaide.com.au/ozasia-review-the-long-walk/> accessed July 2025.
2. Examples are: Ellen Mary Cawthorne, *The Long Journey: The Story of the Chinese Landings at Robe during the Gold Rush Era, 1852-63,* Hansen House, S.A., 1974; Wilf Sprengel, *Robe's Chinese invasion, 1857-1863*, Naracoorte, Hansen Print, 1986; Golden Dragon Museum, *The Walk from Robe*, Bendigo Chinese Association Museum, 2001; Fiona Ritchie, *Guichen Bay to Canton Lead: The Chinese Trek to Gold,* District Council of Robe, 2004. Most recent is Liz Harfull, *Guichen Bay and the Chinese Landings,* District Council of Robe, 2017, a decided improvement but focused on Robe only. The two exceptions to the dearth of academic studies are Margret Rendell, 'The Chinese in South Australia before 1860', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch,* vol.54, 1953, pp.22–33 & Gordon Copland, *Event driven transitory migration the case of the Chinese migration through South Australia between 1854 and 1864,* Honours Thesis, Finders University, 1998. Perhaps the fact that Rendell's is a largely straightforward account, nearly devoid of reference to the usual exaggerations and myths, and describing the history as merely having 'a certain interest in itself', explains its near absence as a source.
3. For a detailed examination of these aspects of the Robe walk see, Michael Williams, *Every Requisite for a Campaign upon the Gold-fields: Organisation, Victimisation and Mythmaking of the Walk from Robe,* Ashfield, NSW: ChideStudy Press, 2024.
4. For more on these aspects of Chinese Australian history see, Denis Byrne, Ien Ang & Phillip Mar (eds), *Heritage and History in the China-Australia Migration Corridor,* Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2023.
5. Ritchie, *Guichen Bay to Canton,* repeats most of these myths. For a systematic debunking of these infrastructure myths see, Williams, *Every Requisite for a Campaign upon the Gold-fields*, pp.142–212.
6. In fact, the first Adelaide to Port Philip overland trip was in 1841. *South Australian Register,* 3 July 1841, pp.2–3.
7. Thomas Burr and G. Grey, 'Account of Governor G. Grey's Exploratory Journey along the South-Eastern Sea-Board of South Australia', *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, no. 15, 1845, p.165.
8. Burr and Grey, 'Account of Governor G. Grey's Exploratory Journey', p.171.
9. Burr and Grey, 'Account of Governor G. Grey's Exploratory Journey', p.173.
10. *South Australian Register*, 16 March 1852, p.3.
11. *South Australian Register,* 3 July 1841, p.3, on the Coorong 'the native wells are numerous'; *Adelaide Observer*, 3 April 1852, p.2, 'wells established on the-overland line to Mount Alexander'; *South Australian Register,* 16 March 1852, p.3, 'survey party … were sinking a well'; L.J. Blake, *Gold Escort*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1971, pp.31–34, 'by establishing definite water points, had made the route available for all overland travellers', p.34, quoting Maclaren's survey in 1852; and in early 1852, 'the native well' and 'another well', Oliver Ragless, & Margaret Ragless, *Oliver's diary: an 'andkichef of eirth [sic].* Investigator Press, Hawthorndene, South Australia, 1986, p.17.
12. Penny Rudduck, *European Heritage of the Coorong: A general survey of the sites of Early European Heritage of the area now comprising the Coorong National Park and Coorong Game Reserve*, National Parks and Wildlife Service, May, 1982, p.31.
13. *South Australian Register*, 11 June 1856, p.4.
14. 'Underground tanks were a typical component of nineteenth century rural properties in Victoria', David Moloney, David Rowe, & Pamela Jellie, 'Former Robinson Water Tank, The Bullock Track', *Shire of Melton Heritage Study,* Volume 5, 2006, np.
15. Three times while tracing the walk – at Robe, Harrow, and Dunkeld – were "wells" said to have been built by Chinese, all were cisterns. Author's personal communications, April 2022.
16. The so-called "Chinese Wall" at the Grampians near Dunkeld is another example.
17. *Adelaide Observer*, 25 October 1856, p.7.
18. Ewens accompanied Todd on his survey of the telegraph route the previous year and they probably saw Chinaman's Well at the same time. Private journal of J.R. Ewens, 6 April 1857, Robe Historical Society.
19. Roger Luebbers, *The Archaeology of Chinamans Wells and Hacks Station, The Coorong, South Australia,* report to Department of Environment & Natural Resources, Adelaide, 1995, p.iv.
20. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.38.
21. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.43.
22. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.43.
23. Horsfall, *March to Big Gold Mountain*, p.28 and Alexander Barrowman, *Old days and old ways,* A.H. Barrowman, Robe, South Australia, 1971, p.40.
24. Personal communication to the author from local landowner Roger Andre, April 2022.
25. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.44.
26. Z. Stanin, "From Li Chun to Yong Kit: a market garden on the Loddon, 1851-1912", Paper in special issue: Active Voices, Hidden Histories: The Chinese in Colonial Australia, *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol. 6, 2004, p.30, including references by others of 'square' wells.
27. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.18. Many would not have walked so far in any case turning inland at Mosquito Plains (now Naracoorte) just as others took coastal steamers direct to Robe.

28. Ragless, *Oliver's diary*, p.18.
29. *Adelaide Observer*, 3 April 1852, p.2 and Blake, *Gold Escort*, p.33.
30. *Border Watch,* 18 October 1876, p.3.
31. *Border Watch,* 12 July 1876, p.3.
32. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.13.
33. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.14.
34. *The Mail,* 2 December 1933, p.1.
35. H.A. Lindsay, 'Who Did Build the Chinaman's Well?', *Sunday Mail*, 23 October 1965, p.44; 'Mystery of Well', *Sunday Mail*, 30 October 1965, n.p.; 'In a well, the wisdom of the East', *Walkabout*, 6 April 1966, n.p.
36. As one researcher expressed: 'it seems to be an over investment of time and energy for transient gold seekers'. Gordon Copland, *Event driven transitory migration the case of the Chinese migration through South Australia between 1854 and 1864,* Honours Thesis, Finders University, 1998, p.78.
37. Snoek, W., *Archaeological report of Chinamans Wells, the Coorong National Park*, South Australian Department of Environment and Planning, 1984, pp.1–4.
38. Snoek, *Archaeological report of Chinamans Wells*, p.1.
39. Snoek, *Archaeological report of Chinamans Wells*, p.7.
40. Snoek, *Archaeological report of Chinamans Wells*, p.2 & Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.10. For example, Southern Argus, 8 February 1868, p.2.
41. *Adelaide Observer,* 30 January 1864, p.1. In an aside, the son of the John Gall who advertised this house for rent demonstrated a 'bucket pump' to the visiting Prince George (later George V) in 1881 at Chinamans Well. Though presumably this was a stock trough, rather than the capped well under discussion which was not mentioned. *The Advertiser*, 7 August 1941, p.9.
42. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells*, p.v.
43. *Adelaide Observer*, 6 August 1864, p.6.
44. *Adelaide Observer,* 2 July 1864, p.3.
45. *South Australian Register,* 28 January 1867, p.1.
46. *South Australian Register,* 15 March 1864, p.1.
47. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.13. For the Oliver Raglass comment, see Raglass, *Oliver's diary.*
48. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells*, p.16.
49. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.16.
50. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.17.
51. Author's personal correspondence with various China-based specialists.
52. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.25.
53. Robert Edwards, "Chinese coins from an Aboriginal camp-site on the Coorong, South Australia", *Australian Numismatic Journal,* Vol. 17, No. 3, July-September 1966, pp.102–105.
54. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.25.
55. Luebbers, *The archaeology of Chinamans Wells,* p.25.
56. See, <https://www.walkingsa.org.au/walk/find-a-place-to-walk/chinamans-well-historic-site-journey-to-gold-walk-coorong-national-park/> accessed July 2025. This material is repeated in a pamphlet from Walking South Australia entitled, *Chinaman's Well Historic Site Journey to Gold Walk*, 2020? Attempts were made by the author to determine the government office responsible for the signs but after having been passed from section to section around South Australia could find no one willing to take responsibility nor search through files to determine the origins of the signage.
57. Department of Environment and Water, *Coorong Self-guided History Trail,* Chinaman's Well, < https://cdn.environment.sa.gov.au/parks/docs/coorong-national-park/coorong-self-guided-history-trail.pdf?v=1610572419> accessed July 2025.
58. H.A. Linsay, 'Who did build Chinaman's Well?', p.44.
59. Penny Paton, 'Chinamans Well', in D.C. Paton, *At the end of the river: the Coorong and lower lakes,* ATF Press, Hindmarsh, South Australia, 2010, pp.40–41.
60. Ragless, *Oliver's diary,* p.18.