Webs of Association: Examining the Overseas Chinese Social Landscape of Early Cooktown

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Abstract: Many studies of overseas Chinese have regarded ethnic or cultural identity as being the overarching principle structuring how overseas Chinese communities organised and defined themselves and how they were perceived and treated by outsiders. Overseas Chinese communities have been regarded as homogenous, inward-looking and impermeable. However, recent research, particularly in the realm of social and family history, points to more complex and diverse relationships. This paper, which is based on an historical archaeology doctoral thesis, proposes a different model based on social agency and network theory. Using the case study of Cooktown in Far North Queensland, where a large and thriving overseas Chinese community existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it shows how individual people, Chinese and non-Chinese alike, exercised their agency to create their own social worlds. These worlds consisted of networks or webs of association through which people obtained their material needs, accrued and exerted social power and continually defined their social identity. Ethnicity was only one among a range of influences on the nature of these networks; others included kinship, class, gender, political allegiance and business alliances. The networks fragmented ethnic groups as well as crossed ethnic boundaries, as Cooktown's rugged frontier environment fostered some very close connections of mutual support between Chinese and non-Chinese. Collectively these networks built a dynamic, multi-layered and nuanced social landscape.

Keywords: Cooktown, Palmer River, networks, agency, social power

Introduction

Many, especially early, studies of the overseas Chinese of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have utilised the analytical framework that emerged in the 1960s and remained the dominant theoretical model in sociology, history and archaeology until the early 1980s (Greenwood 1993: 377; Lydon 1999: 14–15). This framework was positivist and essentialist, viewing culture as a system governed by social processes that subsumed individuals as parts within a whole. Cultural processes work in a law-like fashion, producing patterns of social behaviour and material culture that can be measured and even predicted, while social groups, such as ethnic groups, are seen as discrete, clearly bounded entities (Hodder 1986). When this theory was combined with pre-existing stereotypes of the overseas Chinese as sojourners and tradition-bound people inferior to, and contained by, a more progressive and powerful West, rigid understandings of their society were affirmed. Overseas Chinese communities have been portrayed as conservative and homogenous collectives with limited social interactions and modes of life. These were people who had very little social power within the European colonial system, whose connections with the wider world were superficial and minimal, and whose behaviour was largely dictated by their ethnicity. Ethnicity, as defined by Barth (1969), is a psychological system of communication, interaction and self-awareness which people use to construct group and individual identity in relation to the appearance, behaviour and material culture of others. An ethnic group is an assemblage of people bound into a whole by certain shared physical and cultural characteristics that defines themselves as "us" and everyone else as "them" (Orser and Fagan 1995), and for the overseas Chinese this was seen as the dominant social unit in structuring society.

In recent decades the inadequacies of this perspective have begun to be demonstrated. The overseas Chinese have started to be repositioned as complex and fully interactive people possessed of as much social depth, agency and variation as any other group. This paper, which is based on a doctoral thesis (Rains 2005), applies such an approach to the settlement of Cooktown in Far North Queensland where an important overseas Chinese community existed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Agency and network theory

Contemporary studies (e.g. Couchman 1995; Fitzgerald 1997; Harvey 2000; Lydon 1999; Rains 2005; Williams 1999; Wilton 2001, Kraus-Friedman 2008; Smits 2008), particularly in the areas of history and ethnography, are showing that the overseas Chinese experience was diverse. Individual life histories challenge the old assumptions of sojourner disconnection with the wider world and indicate that the overseas Chinese recontextualised and renegotiated their social existence and identity as active participants within colonial society. Lydon (1999: 13), for instance, notes that the "culture encounter is inventive" and Chineseness possessed a "shifting, fluid character".

The notions of agency, social power and networking underpin much of this new wave of thinking. Human agency, whereby people are seen as more than passive respondents to the conditions of their existence but active in interacting with and manipulating their social world, is increasingly being recognised as a central driving force in social systems (Ensor 2000; Hodder 1987: 143). Inherent to the concept of agency is that of social power (Ensor 2000: 15; Paynter and McGuire 1991: 1). While social power can include a coercive aspect, whereby one agent compels another to fulfil a desire or need, it is generally understood in a broader sense as the capacity of people to make choices, transform their social and material conditions of life, realise goals and ambitions, and construct meaning (Giddens 1995: 263; Paynter and McGuire 1991: 6). Power permeates all social settings and relations, and all people have power (Hodder 1986: 66; Miller 1989: 65; Paynter and McGuire 1991: 6). In exercising agency and power, people build complex nets of connection and interaction (Carrithers 1992; Durkheim 1915: 426; Orser 1996). These networks are essential for establishing social identity and status, and exchanging resources and information. They vary with the individual and their particular background, outlooks and objectives.

Once the focus is on agency and social relationships rather than social totalities, a more fluid framework for analysis emerges. People connect with each other for many and varied reasons, and they maintain a wide range of social networks and identities. Ethnicity is just one locus for interaction or identification; others include class and gender. In terms of the overseas Chinese, this perspective moves the focus of analysis away from the homogenised, bounded overseas Chinese ethnic group to recognise a more dynamic and subjective situation.

Cooktown: A Frontier Community

In 1873 alluvial gold was discovered on the Palmer River in Cape York in Far North Queensland. This event initiated a massive migration of miners and business people into the region. The goldfield was in a remote region yet to be settled by non-indigenous people, and a looming supply crisis necessitated the establishment of Cooktown on the east coast as a service and provisioning centre (figure 1).

Cooktown grew as a town of merchants, artisans and publicans serving a highly dispersed and mobile inland population. It also functioned as the main export site for gold and other produce. Many people did not view the town as a long-term prospect and there was considerable squabbling between factionalised interests, which hampered the development of adequate infrastructure. However, by the mid-1870s Cooktown possessed a population of approximately 2400 and was the supply centre for an estimated 15,000 people on the Palmer (Ormston 1996: 2). It was a major revenue producer for Queensland through customs duties and gold exports, and between 1875 and 1877 it was also the colony's second busiest port (Ormston 1996: 2).
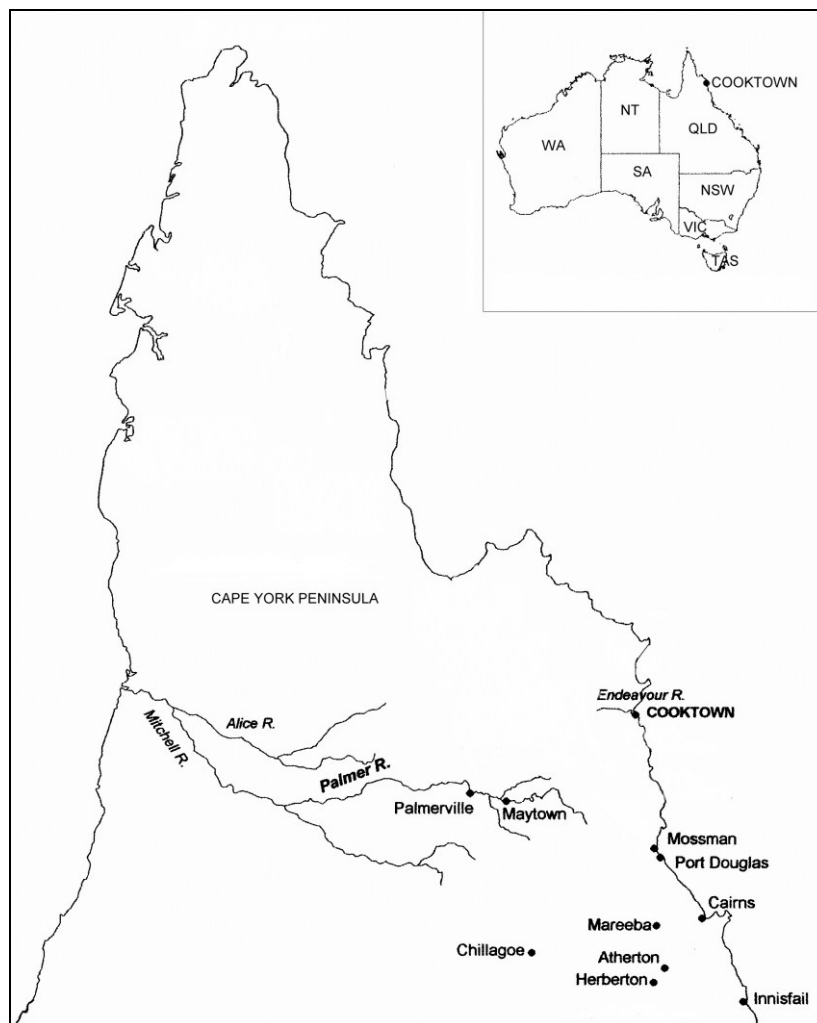
Figure 1. Location of Cooktown and the Palmer River

After the Palmer goldfield waned in the late 1870s, the town consolidated itself as a relatively prosperous regional settlement, relying on a diversified primary industry base, which included the development of other goldfields, tin fields, agriculture, pearling, beche-de-mer (*Holothuria spp.*) fishing, timber-getting and pastoralism. The Palmer also continued to produce modest amounts of gold, as well as tin, into the early twentieth century (*QPP* 1909 Session 3 v. 1: 730, 737; QVP 1894 v. 3: 883).

This prosperity could not be sustained indefinitely as the region's economy was characterised by a fragility common to nineteenth-century frontiers (Purser 1999: 119–20). These economies were notable for fickle, short-term investment, unsustainable levels of resource extraction, poor provision of infrastructure, and a dependency on distant markets for the sale of their commodities and the supply of necessary goods. Subsequently they were vulnerable to fluctuating global commodity prices and international share markets. For Cooktown, attracting sufficient amounts of investment capital had always proved elusive (Kirkman 1984; Ormston 1996: 4, 16–18, 138, 145). During the global depression of the early 1890s, Cooktown's vulnerability was revealed when it, as so many other regional centres, was crippled by falling commodity prices, bank and business closures and a decline in the volume of shipping (*CC* 8 November 1889: 2; 27 December 1889: 2; 11 March 1890: 2; Lawsen 1973: 40). At the turn of the twentieth century it was impacted again by depression times (Lawsen 1973: 38–9), as well as devastating cyclones in 1899 and 1907 and a large fire in 1919 which destroyed buildings within the main business district.

Cooktown's isolation was another contributing factor to its economic vulnerability. Transport systems between Cooktown, its hinterland, and its markets were always expensive and subject to disruption, inhibiting the competitiveness of the local enterprises. For all of its early history the town was reliant solely on the sea to link it to the rest of the world, which was not a problem when the town was a regular port of call for ships, but as its prospects slowly faded so did the shipping links.

For various reasons, therefore, by the early decades of the twentieth century, major investment and building activity had dramatically halted. Progressively many parts of Cooktown became abandoned.
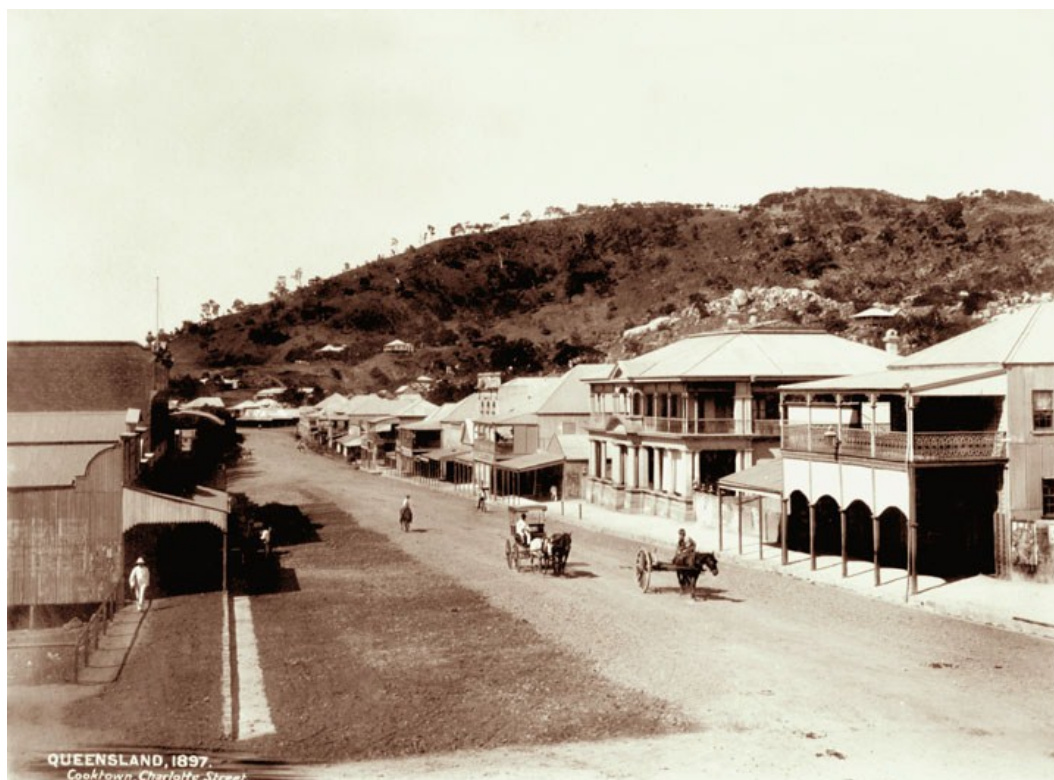

Figure 2. Looking north along the main business street in Cooktown, Charlotte Street, 1897

Queensland State Archives, Digital Image ID 2233

Threaded through this history of the town was the Chinese presence. In 1874, at the beginning of the gold rush, the Chinese population of Cooktown amounted to around thirty people who had travelled along inland routes from goldfields in central Queensland (Ormston 1996: 219). Reports of the area's wealth reached China quickly, however, and the large-scale recruitment of miners and workers was initiated by large Chinese merchant firms from 1875 (e.g. *CC* 27 March 1875: 2; *CHPRA* 27 March 1875: 2; Kirkman 1984: 171). The influx was so great that the European population soon discovered itself a minority heavily dependent upon Chinese services (Bell 1997: 11, 12; Hill 1907: 76; Palmer 1903: 170; St. George 1877). On the diggings in August 1875, for instance, the Chinese population was reported to be around 9000, while the European population stood at 5000 (*CHPRA* 18 August 1875: 2). In Cooktown itself, the Chinese population was smaller, with the 1876 census putting that for the township and environs at 1350, which represented 39 percent of the non-indigenous population (*QVP* 1876 v.2: 812, 819). The bulk consisted of "new chums", those who were new to the colony (*CHPRA* 23 February 1876: 2). Most were also reported to be young men in their twenties and thirties (*CHPRA* 8 May 1875: 2).

As the gold rush progressed, the local Chinese population of Cooktown averaged 300 permanent residents and 200 to 300 transients waiting to board ships back to China

or to move off to the goldfield (Ormston 1996: 220–1). After the gold rush peaked much of the Chinese population deserted the Palmer field, with the main exodus occurring around 1877 and 1878 (May 1984: 7; Ormston 1996: 327). The majority of people either returned to China or dispersed across the north (May 1984: 7), but others chose to stay in the district and take up other industries. During the 1880s the Chinese population of the township fluctuated between 300 and 500 persons and represented about 20 percent of the non-indigenous population (*QS* 20 May 1882: 2; *QVP* 1887 v. 2: 958; v.3: 301; *The Queenslander* (Supplement) 20 May 1882: 2). Even as late as 1886 the bulk of the Chinese population in the district still constituted men in their twenties and early thirties (*QVP* 1887 v. 2: 1256), indicating that new immigrants from China continued to arrive.

Not all Chinese immigrants to the Cooktown–Palmer district were successful and there were business failures. However, overall the community enjoyed a high level of prosperity and influence, and in part this can be attributed to the region's close proximity to Asia and the discovery of better shipping routes through Torres Strait, both of which facilitated mass immigration from China. However, the Chinese also had advantages through their social organisation. Chinese firms made a rapid and determined push to exploit the goldfield and were able to overwhelm European efforts with significant capital and the deployment of large numbers of workers. After the gold waned, Chinese enterprise downscaled but continued to flourish. In the gold rush and afterwards the Chinese demonstrated a high degree of organisational capability, and this will be discussed later. European miners, meanwhile, tended to work as individuals and therefore had less support, readily abandoning claims that no longer paid highly (*CC* 6 June 1874: 3; 21 November 1874: 3; 15 September 1875: 2).

Apart from alluvial gold mining, the Chinese emerged as the main agriculturalists, fishers and extractors of alluvial tin. They were also important financers and buyers for the pearling and beche-de-mer fleets, ran some of the key stores, and became very active in the carrying trade. Chinese labourers, cooks and servants were widely employed by European businesses, households, selectors, hoteliers and road builders.

This prosperity was not sustained as the nineteenth century drew to a close, and by 1909 the Chinese population in the township was reported as consisting of 180 old Chinese and six children (QSA Item ID86452). By 1935 there was only one Chinese firm still active, which probably ceased trading in that year and was eventually dissolved in 1946 (QSA Item ID4696:4; Item ID17727; Item ID271433: 3). The last Chinese burial was of a ninety-year-old retiree, which occurred on 23 April 1943 (QSA Series ID17750).

The reason for this decline can be linked to both local and wider issues. As part of Cooktown's business community, the Chinese were of course impacted by the economic crises already discussed, and as Cooktown's viability faded so Chinese investment withdrew. In addition, the Chinese had to contend with the effects of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* and other discriminatory legislation that drastically curtailed the economic and social growth of overseas Chinese communities within the country.

Overseas Chinese Social Networks
An anti-Chinese lobby group formed in Cooktown and on the Palmer, and this expressed the same main concerns that were apparent throughout the country: an objection to the different Chinese value systems, a fear of being overrun by the vast population of China, and the perceived failure of Chinese immigrants to assimilate with white society (Curthoys 2001: 25; *CC* 20 June 1874: 2; 4 August 1875: 3; 7 November 1890: 2; 20 November 1890: 2; *CHPRA* 29 May 1875: 2; *CI* 9 June 1888: 2). Chinese attitudes towards their European neighbours are far less evident in the documentary record, although much has been discussed about the general outlook of the overseas Chinese; this has been regarded as heavily influenced by a sense of otherness arising from the tight-knit nature of their lineage groups and a sense of superiority developed through their own experience of urbanisation and imperialism (Hum Lee 1960, Lyman 1974; Yong 1977). Suspicions and resistances to foreigners, as well as traditional and conservative outlooks, were judged to have been heightened by diasporic experiences of ostracism.

Some contemporary observers, as well as later historians, have translated these views onto Cooktown's Chinese community (e.g. *CC* 20 June 1874: 2; 4 August 1875: 3; 7 November 1890: 2; 20 November 1890: 2; *CHPRA* 29 May 1875: 2; *CI* 9 June 1888: 2; Ormston 1996). Despite their wealth and industry, the Chinese were seen as outsiders who contributed little to the economy or local society. While some social differentiation was recognised, such as that between people from different parts of China or between merchants and labourers, in the main they were regarded as a single Chinese entity or bloc.

These views can be challenged by the application of social agency and network theory. The historical evidence from Cooktown suggests the presence of a diversity of social actors and networks.

One of those networks was based on what might be described as a broad Chinese ethnic identity, and there were instances in Cooktown of the Chinese community demonstrating cohesiveness. Two significant examples of this were the building of the Lit Sung Goong (All Sacred Temple or Temple of All Saints) (inaugurated in 1878) and the Chinese shrine (erected in 1887) in the Cooktown cemetery, both of which served the whole community. However, as often noted among overseas Chinese communities elsewhere, this sense of community was fragile. Although the population was dominated by Han Chinese, there were ethnic minorities such as Hakka and so Chinese ethnicity was not uniformly understood or expressed. Furthermore, ethnic identity construction was overlaid by other social groupings.

Family and Home District Ties

Arguably the most important of these other social groupings was the family or kinship network. Chinese business and social practice was largely centred on the family and drew on kinship values and collective strategies. Obligations to family were far more important than abstract understandings of belonging to a greater Chinese people, culture or nation. The presence of kinsmen was vital for the construction of social environments that not only provided security and mutual support, but also maintained the values and practices linking sojourners with their families back home. Where no direct kinship ties existed, fictive kinship was established, such as with people from the same home village or district (Lydon 1999:87). In Cooktown filial connections pervaded Chinese society, it being observed that within business networks 'a co-operative system obtains, and clerks are bound to their employers as often by ties of kinship as by self-interest' (Crawford cited in O'Brien 2004:143)

Through these direct, personal ties, people accessed communal funding and aimed to generate employment and profits for all family members. In turn they were linked to mutual support associations such as the same place societies, which were also modelled along lineage principles and held to their own dialect and customs. These cooperative networks were adaptable and resilient and well suited to coping with the unstable frontier conditions of the Cooktown–Palmer region, which included the cyclic downturns and the paucity of public infrastructure and capital investment. On the goldfields the communal pooling of earnings allowed the Chinese to take possession of large areas and maintain production over long periods (*CC* 6 June 1874: 3, 21 November 1874: 3, 15 September 1875: 2; Kirkman 1984: 178). In the area of agriculture, the supportive nature of the Chinese business system buoyed gardeners through difficult periods and gave them ready access to Chinese marketing and transport facilities. Historical evidence indicates that the large Chinese import–export stores, such as Wing On & Co., Sun Kum Fung, Gee Woh Chung, and Sun Tung Lee & Co., like their counterparts elsewhere, acted in a paternalistic fashion, being the main financers of Chinese immigration and acting as shipping agents, labour brokers, bankers and lenders of credit (*CHPRA* 23 February 1876: 2; 110; Kirkman 1984: 179–80; *QVP* 1890 v. 3: 279; 1896 v. 1: 109). Chinese family-based business networks therefore wielded considerable economic power within the region and, as will be discussed later, this translated into social influence.

Power relations operated within each family business network. These included the perpetuation and application of family ideologies (such as filial piety), the negotiation of social status of individual members, and hierarchies of authority (particularly along the lines of gender and seniority). Power relations also positioned family business networks in relation to each other. Some forged alliances, while others separated family networks as they competed for resources, especially if these groups did not share a close kinship or district of origin bond (Cronin 1982: 38).

One of those family networks was represented by the merchant firm Tommy Ah Kum. This was a prominent Cooktown business which became active in fruit dealing, storekeeping, beche-de-mer fishing, packing and carting, and pastoralism from the mid-1880s through to the early twentieth century (QSA Item ID4688; Item ID9158; ID21222; Item ID281155; *QPP* 1908 Session 2 v. 2: 709). The firm was a branch of a larger consortium comprising various family or lineage members dispersed between Cooktown, Thursday Island and China. In 1903 the partnership consisted of Lai Kum Tai and Lai Fook in Cooktown, Lai Foo on Thursday Island (trading as Kum Hun Chong & Co.), and Lai Yuing and Lai Sum in Guangzhou (Canton) (QSA Item ID4695: 8; *QPP* 1908 Session 2 v. 2: 600). In 1909 the Cooktown branch was restructured and became known as Tommy Ah Kum & Co. (QSA Item ID4695: 8, 15). In 1913 the name of Tommy Ah Kum & Co. was replaced by Lai Fook & Sons (QSA Item ID4695: 8, 26). The firm was now run principally by Lai Fook and traded through to 1923 (QSA Item ID4687 2 May 1923; Item ID4695: 26).

The land ownership history of Cooktown suggests a small number of other family or lineage networks achieved prominence within the Chinese community (Rains 2005: 153). These lineages were signified by the surnames of Lee, Leong (spelled interchangeably in the rates documents with Lee Ong, Long and Leon) and Chin (also Ching and Chung).

One of the most prominent members of the Chin lineage was Chin Ti Chack. From the late 1880s, he was the head of the importation and liquor wholesaling firm Gee Woh Chung, which was established in Cooktown in 1875 and had a branch in Hong Kong (*CC* 23 October 1875: 1; QSA Item ID4688). Chin Ti Chack took on a community leadership role, assuming the position of acting Vice-Consul to Cooktown (*CI* 25 April 1889: 2). He also consolidated his status through the old imperial bureaucratic system as a Mandarin of the fifth class, an honorary military title. In his capacity as official spokesman for the local Chinese community, he regularly liaised with the Town Council from 1890 until at least 1899 for permission to light fireworks on Chinese New Year (*CC* 17 January 1890: 2; QSA Item ID332189: 943; Item ID332190: 144, 242). In 1889 he also represented the Chinese community at the reception held on the occasion of the Governor of Queensland's visit to Cooktown (*CI* 25 April 1889: 2), and he met with Quong Tart, the celebrated tea merchant, who made a stopover in Cooktown while returning to Sydney from a trip to China (*CC* 17 May 1889: 2, 9 April 1889: 2). Chin Ti Chack's meeting with Quong Tart was conducted aboard the latter's ship where it was reported that they had discussions on the treatment of Chinese in Australia and recent anti-Chinese legislation. Chin Ti Chack remained based in Cooktown until he died at the age of fifty-two of unknown causes and was buried in Cooktown on 9 February 1901 (QSA Series ID17750).

Figure 3. Chin Ti Chack. John Oxley Library negative no. 31552

The historic processes of migration and economic development meant that the presence or importance of the broader coalitions that were the same place, or district, societies varied across Australia. In nearby Cairns to the south, whose Chinese population had strong historic connections to Cooktown, the community was dominated by the Chungshan (Zhongshan) district group, with smaller numbers of people from Sze Yap (Siyi) and Sam Yap (Sanyi) (May 1984: 64). While in 1877 most of the new arrivals to the Palmer were reported to have been from Chungshan (Crawford cited in O'Brien 2004: 161), overall in the Palmer–Cooktown area most people were Sam Yap and Sze Yap dialect speakers (McCarthy and Kostoglou 1986: 4; QSA Item ID271433: 5), and the majority of the key merchants were Sam Yap (Cronin 1973: 4). The influence of each group, however, remains unclear. James Dundas Crawford (cited in O'Brien 2004: 161), a Cantonese-speaking Scot who visited Cooktown and the Palmer in 1877, was of the opinion that at this time the mining captains overseeing the organization of teams were mostly veterans from other Australian and American goldfields who had originally come from Macao (the Portuguese-controlled territory adjoining Chungshan). The Lee surname, which was associated with one of the first major Chinese stores, Wing On & Co., has also been demonstrated by May (1984: 65) to have had a close association with the management of the Chungshan district association in Cairns, and in northern Queensland the Chungshan district group had a strong association with the building of Lit Sung temples (May 1984: 76; QSA RSI926/1/10:4). These observations suggest that, despite their numerical inferiority, there was a strategic placement of Chungshan people within Cooktown's Chinese leadership. It is possible that within Cooktown, political and economic power rested in the hands of a coalition of the Sam Yap and Chungshan groups. The basis of this alliance would have been the close geographical and linguistic ties between these two regions (Lydon 1999: 88). May (1984) also notes that Sam Yap people, despite their wealth, constituted a small, dispersed group in northern Queensland and that this position generated dependency on other groups.

Lineage or district of origin rivalry in the Cooktown region appears to have been strongest during the gold rush, when large numbers of people were competing for limited resources. Because of their wealth and sophistication, the Sam Yap merchants were reported to have perpetuated a traditional contempt towards the rival Sze Yap group

(Crawford cited in O'Brien 2004: 127), and native district tensions may explain some of the reports of violence between "Cantonese" and "Macao" Chinese on the Palmer (Cronin 1973: 6). However, Cronin (1973: 6) states that, despite the prominence of Sam Yap families among the wealthy merchants, no Chinese group actually managed to monopolise any key industries within the district. It is probable that, as with Cairns, the rivalry between district and clan groups was not acute and usually put aside during festivities and community discussions (May 1984: 65). In fact most conflicts tended to occur among people within these organizations as they interacted with each other on a more frequent basis (May 1984: 65). In Sydney, for instance, personal animosities could arise within the extended clan network as a result of failure to uphold reciprocity or through the arrogance that could develop with business success (Lydon 1999: 80). In Cooktown, lineage discord was evidenced in 1876 with the dissolution and bankruptcy of Wing On & Co. which was a partnership between two local men, Lee Gong and Lee Liy, and the Sydney merchant Sun Kum On (*CHPRA* 16 February 1876: 3).

Class-Based Networks

Another factor influencing network formation was class. Despite a strong ideology of kinship, class divisions were present within traditional Chinese society as the majority of people were agricultural labourers deriving their income from land rented from rich institutions and private landlords (Leong and Tao 1915: 40-41). There was, however, a high degree of flexibility in Chinese class structuring (Smith 1899: 267). Avenues appeared for class mobility, especially through business enterprise or the public examinations, which gave entrance into the bureaucratic sector.

The extent to which class consciousness manifested itself in overseas communities is contested. May (1984: 69) argues that in the Cairns area, Chinese society was almost entirely devoid of traditional class divisions as it was in continuous flux as people moved between localities or economic fortunes shifted. Furthermore, class was eroded by the ideologies of egalitarianism and frugality upheld by mutual aid societies, the virtual absence of the traditional bureaucratic, or mandarin, sector, the shared peasant origins of most people, and the rapidly rising prosperity of the merchant class (a traditionally low status group) (Lydon 1999: 117; May 1984: 69).

Despite the lack of a rigid class structure, there was a clear power hierarchy in Cairns (May 1984: 70–1), modelled in part on the authority system of the indigenous Chinese village, where leadership was exercised by an officially elected headman, usually from an influential local family, as well as an advisory council of natural leaders selected on the basis of age, public standing and wisdom. In Cairns the functions of both leadership types were merged into a body of natural leaders among whom some traditional virtues, such as age and family background, were less important. More important was wealth, business acumen, and the capacity to lead the Chinese community, particularly in its dealings with Europeans. Fluency in English and a high level of Westernisation therefore emerged as valuable traits. Because of the emphasis on business success, there was a close connection between class, leadership and occupation. Merchants, successful gardeners and other entrepreneurs constituted the apex of overseas Chinese society. Throughout Australia these capitalists dominated the important clubs and associations structuring so much of sojourner life and used them to promote their business interests and ensure that the funds they advanced to their compatriots were repaid (Cronin 1982: 33).

The historical evidence from Cooktown and the Palmer River points to the existence of a similar system of status and authority. In Cooktown Crawford (cited in O'Brien 2004) and others (e.g. *CHPRA* 8 May 1875: 2) observed that during the gold rush period this system demonstrated a relatively severe level of authoritarianism. Some merchants actively recruited gangs of workers, mostly poor agriculturalists, and controlled them through the use of so-called "headmen" or "foremen". However the majority of the merchants did not directly involve themselves in the organisation of the mining teams, instead preferring "to act as banker for mining captains, as registrars of mining-guilds,

and charterers of immigrant ships, or camp purveyor" (Crawford cited in O'Brien 2004: 143).

Crawford (cited in O'Brien 2004: 182) mentions an individual named Chukum, who appears to have been, at least briefly, the lead Chinese capitalist in Cooktown in 1877, but there were other leading personalities such as a doctor, Kong Chung, the various court interpreters (e.g. Louis Fon Sing and Samuel Asheu), and the wealthiest merchants, market gardeners, hoteliers and packers (e.g. Lee Liy, Chin Chang, Chin Pack, Wong Hing, Sea Wah and Leong Mun). These were the heads or representatives of family corporations which, by their early land acquisitions, appear to have already been considerably wealthy when they first appeared in Cooktown. Many within the elite had also been working in Queensland for many years prior to arriving in Cooktown, and so were well acquainted with colonial conditions and had strategic local contacts.

The existence of this elite clique introduced a paradox within the overseas Chinese social order, because it could only flourish by maintaining monopolies on resources and exploiting lineage and district members, a situation that ran counter to the Chinese social ideals of brotherhood and egalitarianism. To some extent the contradiction introduced by such exploitation would have been countered by systems of reciprocity. Merchant and worker were bound together in a set of mutual obligations that ensured that elite status was in part earned through acts of paternalistic benevolence and subject to public criticism. Nevertheless, this "dual aspect of benevolent concern and economic exploitation" (Cronin 1973: 7) has been considered one of the cardinal sources of tension in overseas Chinese society.

It is tempting to polarise the Cooktown Chinese community between elite and worker, but such a simple dichotomy would not recognise the diversity of social statuses which actually existed. Between the two class extremes lay a continuum of petty traders, artisans, and clerks and other hired employees of the large merchants. By the time of Cooktown's establishment the old-style coolie labourer was disappearing, although there was arguably not much difference between an indentured worker and a heavily indebted "free" migrant. More importantly, though, was the fact that this was a society with a strong self-made element and many opportunities for socioeconomic advancement through business entrepreneurialism.

Interactions Beyond the Chinese Community

Social networks and power negotiation also worked to break through racial barriers. Making money was the primary focus of both Europeans and Chinese in Cooktown and so was the basis of many rivalries but also interconnections. While the predominant view has been that the Chinese and European economic systems in Cooktown and elsewhere in Australia were largely independent of each other (*CHPRA* 26 April 1876: 2, 17 May 1876: 2; Kirkman 1984: 191; Lydon 1999; May 1984; Ormston 1996: 153), closer analysis of the Cooktown situation indicates considerable interdependence derived largely from the historical positioning of Chinese and European socioeconomic networks into specialised spheres of influence. Commerce was the one area in which both Chinese and Europeans were heavily involved, but elsewhere a level of specialisation occurred, with European businesses dominating pastoralism, reef mining and large-scale timber-getting, while the Chinese obtained pre-eminence in gardening, fishing and alluvial mineral extraction. In the area of commodity importation, European networks dominated such items as hardware, alcohol and large livestock, while the Chinese were the main shippers of fresh produce and Asian goods (*CC* 16 May 1874: 2, 8 May 1875: 2; Cook Shire Council Archive day book, Robins Family Butchers, 1894–1895, day book, James Savage, 1895–1900). These patterns should not be read as evidence of economic separation, for Chinese and Europeans consumed and traded a wide range of products, some of which were sourced through their own networks while others were not. Collectively the economic voids in each community meant they were dependent on each other for particular commodities and services.

Ormston (1996: 319) asserts that the Europeans in Cooktown who benefited from the Chinese were not the majority of small traders but a select number of people who had positioned themselves as facilitators of Chinese enterprise. However, the Chinese economic contribution has to be viewed from a broader perspective. Chinese paid heavily into local and state coffers through duties and license fees, while Chinese accounts with European firms could be substantial (CSCA day book, James Savage 1895–1900: 157, 165). The Chinese actively utilised the town's postal service, railway, port facilities and banks (*CC* 1 November 1889: 2; *CHPRA* 9 October 1875: 2; *CI* 20 March 1889: 2; Crawford cited in O'Brien 2004: 123; QSA Item ID94890; *QVP* 1890 v. 3: 279, 1896 v. 1: 109). Furthermore, Europeans, as the principal landowners of Cooktown, benefited extensively from the Chinese through the collection of rents, payment of rates and the improvements made to land (e.g. *CC* 28 May 1889: 3). Chinese businesses also employed non-Chinese domestics, hawkers, labourers and cooks (*CI* 15 August 1888: 2, 22 December 1888: 2; QSA Item ID9161).

In order to make a living, Chinese had to negotiate a complex colonial bureaucratic and legal system, and many individuals and firms regularly called on the town's police, courts and solicitors, particularly when their systems of internal governance failed or when Europeans were involved (e.g. QSA Item ID9159; Item ID9164). May (1984: 71) notes that within sojourner communities some of the traditional leadership roles and support infrastructures were transferred to European merchants, lawyers and institutions. In Cooktown one specific instance of this relationship occurred in 1876 when a group of Chinese residents enlisted a solicitor, Mr O'Reilly, to draw up a petition to Parliament to protest an increase in the rice tax and miner's licence (*CHPRA* 2 August 1876: 2, 27 September 1876: 2).

The Chinese community had little direct political influence on municipal affairs. Its involvement was hindered by internal wrangling and a voting system that disqualified most Chinese rate payers because they were not naturalised British citizens or were business entities rather than individuals (Ormston 1996: 221–2, 257). However, the heads of certain Chinese social networks were highly influential in local government at an informal level, and this influence stemmed mostly from business and personal links to some of the key European leaders (*CI* 6 2 May 1888: 2, 6 June 1888: 2, 8 August 1888: 2). These people included European commission agents, carriers, artisans, landlords, hoteliers, bankers, police, civil servants and government officials (*CI* 9 June 1888: 2, 15 August 1888: 2, 23 January 1889: 2). A close, mutually beneficial bond developed between members of the Chinese elite and the town's pro-Chinese faction. In many respects the two cliques shared a common bond of wealth and community leadership.

For the Chinese, these key European commercial figures were important not only as buyers, sellers and agents, but they often sat in the local courts where Chinese cases were heard and business and other licenses were issued (*CC* 19 June 1875: 2, 10 September 1889: 2; QSA Item ID4688). Some, such as W. H. Bailey, the editor of the pro-Chinese *Cooktown Herald*, and the interpreter, James McHenley, actively campaigned to improve public perceptions of the Chinese (*CC* 15 September 1875: 3; *CHPRA* 23 June 1875: 2). The Chinese also called on their European friends to witness marriages and act as witnesses and character referees in court cases and naturalisation applications (e.g. QSA Item ID6831).

The support the Chinese received from their European allies was not consistent. In pursuing their own interests members of Cooktown's pro-Chinese clique could ally against the Chinese when necessary (e.g. QSA Item ID299967). These instances were exceptions, though, because the incentives for good relations with the Chinese were many. Arguably the greatest benefactor of the Chinese was the Jewish auctioneer, commission agent and long-serving mayor, John Davis. From 1874 until his death in the late 1890s Davis acted on behalf of the Chinese in many areas, including as landlord and trustee for the temple site (CSCA Rates book, Municipality of Cooktown, 1893–1894:11). His eminence in the Chinese community was highlighted in 1889 when it was claimed

during a municipal election that he could call on the support of a large number of Chinese votes (*CI* 26 January 1889: 2).

While many of these economically driven relationships between Chinese and Europeans may have been short-term and utilitarian, long-term partnerships and friendships also arose. And at all levels people learned from each other through these intersections and participated in cultural exchange. It is probable that these connections were made all the more critical because of Cooktown's enduring frontier conditions. Economic downturns impacted on the entire community irrespective of ethnicity (e.g. *CC* 25 September 1875: 3, 27 September 1889: 2, 21 March 1890: 2). In order to do business, Chinese and Europeans, while they may have aspired to maintain formal distance and independence from each other, in actuality had to build interpenetrated webs of association. Indeed, it is arguable that from the 1890s, as the important shipping links diminished, Europeans and Chinese became ever more enmeshed as they strove to maintain the settlement's viability. The prevailing attitude in Cooktown was tolerance of its important Chinese community, while critics labelled it "half mongol" and looked on with alarm and abhorrence at the co-existence of its Chinese and European citizens (*CI* 6 June 1888: 2).

A figure who demonstrates the high level of social engagement that could exist between Chinese and Europeans was Jimmy Ah Foo. Jimmy Ah Foo came to Cooktown in 1874 from Charters Towers (for a full account of Jimmy Ah Foo see Rains 2011). He dabbled in various enterprises, but his main activity was hotel keeping. This industry, as well as his marriage to a European woman, Evelina Vessey, engaged him widely in European circles (figure 4). When he left Cooktown in 1877, he and his growing family moved around central Queensland, becoming well known and celebrated identities. Many of the family's business and social networks were with fellow (European) hoteliers and business people, the local Methodist congregation, and the European families that the children later married into. Through these social networks, Jimmy became heavily influenced by European culture and outlooks and developed a lifelong commitment to residing in Queensland – which stands in contrast to the stereotype of the Chinese sojourner. In order to ensure the acceptance of himself and his family within the racist climate of the day, he exercised agency by adopting a strategy of assimilation. By conscious decision, Chinese traditions and heritage were not passed on. However, Jimmy did not entirely abandon his past, for alongside his "European" identity he maintained his Chinese identity and social networks. He did business with Chinese stores, leased property to fellow Chinese and, at times, acted as community benefactor and protector. The family also maintained close friendships with a few Chinese families such as the Young Sings, who were also veterans of the Palmer River gold rush. Eventually Jimmy died an elderly man in 1916 in the care of his Westernised family and was given a Christian burial in the Protestant section of the Longreach cemetery.

Relations between Aborigines and Chinese in the district were also multifaceted. Initially there was hostility between the two, as the indigenous population engaged in a fierce campaign of armed resistance to foreign invasion, which included Chinese immigrants (Ormston 1996: 116–18). However, by the end of the 1870s most Aboriginal groups had been displaced from their old territories and were economically dependent upon the local townships (Ormston 1996: 133–34). In 1907 the Aboriginal population in the district consisted of 300 men and 200 women, over half of whom were concentrated around Cooktown, where they occupied fringe areas (*QPP* 1907 v. 2: 1267). To both Chinese and Europeans, the Aboriginal populace was a valuable resource. Chinese and European men engaged in sexual relations with Aboriginal women, and both Aboriginal men and women were an important source of labour; throughout the north Aboriginal women served as domestics and nannies in European households, while the men were mostly employed on the beche-de-mer and pearling boats (*QPP* 1907 v. 2: 1264, 1267). Aboriginal labour was also used by Chinese gardeners (*QPP* 1908 Session 2 v. 3: 925).

Figure 4. James and Evelina Ah Foo, c. 1910

Photograph courtesy of Sonia Ware

With the introduction of *The Protection of Aborigines and Restriction of Opium Act 1897*, this contact with Aboriginal communities became subject to strict government control. The employment of Aborigines was regulated through a licensing system, while living with or marrying Aborigines was greatly discouraged. Ostensibly the legislation was introduced to protect what was seen as a dying race from harmful outside influences such as disease, drug addiction and prostitution. Although the Act applied equally to Europeans and Chinese, the Chinese were heavily targeted by authorities because of a belief that cohabitation, or "harbouring", was particularly prevalent among them and led to the worst forms of degradation of the Aboriginal population. In 1902 the employment of Aborigines by Chinese was practically outlawed in Queensland.

There was undeniably a close association between Chinese and Aboriginal communities in the north, with frequent references to Aborigines living or loitering around Chinese gardens and quarters (*QPP* 1908 Session 2 v. 3: 925, 1910 Session 2 v. 3: 960). Within Cooktown the close physical association between Chinese garden sites and the Aboriginal camps, which were both on the outskirts of the town, would have encouraged this relationship. However, these relationships should not be viewed as one sided but also the product of Aboriginal agency in colonial society; through Chinese primary producers and traders, for instance, Aboriginal people could obtain material support not controlled by missions or the government (*QVP* 1901 v. 4: 1329). In many parts of north Queensland the Chinese and Aborigines were joint fringe dwellers and therefore neighbours subject to many of the same exclusory and racist policies, and it is possible to see that a strategic socioeconomic relationship, independent of European influence, was forged between these two groups. Indeed, Ganter (2006) argues that the close Chinese–Aboriginal link in northern Australia was a source of considerable anxiety for a numerically small European population that felt excluded and threatened by such interaction.

Another way that Chinese connected with each other and Cooktown's broader community was through gender relations and building local families. A small number of Chinese families became established in Cooktown by marriages or sexual relations involving Chinese or non-Chinese women (figure 5). By fulfilling the cultural, sexual and emotional needs of both the men and women involved, these unions were important acts of agency. They provided another level of support within Cooktown's frontier environment

and created local dynastic networks that opened up ties to other families and areas of social interaction. For instance, many of the children were given European names and enrolled at the state school (*CC* 13 December 1889: 2; QSA Series ID17750; Rains 2005: 208). The education of children within the European school system became common in overseas Chinese societies and was generally a characteristic of families strategically linking themselves to their host society (Couchman 2001: 134–5; Yong 1977: 211). Chinese children were an important bridge between the communities as Europeans generally reacted favourably to their presence and through the school system children could make friends and thereby draw the family closer into the non-Chinese community. A Western education was also valuable for furnishing a Chinese family with business and language skills.

Figure 5. Taam Hung and family of Cooktown

John Oxley Library negative no. 31590

The bulk of the overseas Chinese population of Cooktown, however, were men who were unmarried or had left their spouses in China. For them, much of their socialisation was with other males and the various clubs, mutual aid societies and other support networks were heavily gendered, with activities and structures that emphasised male bonding and notions of brotherhood. Yet despite the male bias in overseas Chinese society, opportunity for other gendered relations still existed. Not only did sexual relations occur with Aboriginal and European women, but loyalties and familiarity developed between Chinese domestics and storekeepers and the European housewives who called on their services (*CC* 8 May 1875: 2; 19 June 1875: 2; *CHPRA* 29 March 1876: 3; QSA Item ID9145).

For the small number of Chinese women in Cooktown, their traditional role was as subordinates to the men in the family and their duties were restricted to the domestic sphere, in particular household maintenance and the moral education of the children (Couchman 2001: 132–3). To the European eye the women who came off the steamers were exotic novelties whose demeanour and appearance fitted the accepted oriental stereotypes (*CHPRA* 13 September 1876: 2). Yet these women were far removed from traditional domestic contexts. Almost absent from their lives would have been the direct support and authority of their inner circle of female relatives (Ip 1993: 278). Their lives had potential to be isolating or liberating. Although the social positions of these women were as housewives, there was scope for them to expand their social power and

networks through employment and input into their family's business affairs (Couchman 2001:132–3; Ip 1993: 278–9; QSA Item ID87386).

Other networks

There were a number of other ties that structured Chinese society which were drawn from personal experiences and perspectives. Differences in political views, for example, occurred within sojourner communities throughout Australia (Lydon 1999: 76; Yong 1977). Of particular note was the rift between conservative Chinese who supported the Qing court or upheld the traditional social system, and reformists who wished to modernise China. In Cooktown an organisation known as the Sheathed Sword Society was a reformist element during the 1870s (Crawford cited in O'Brien 2004: 131). It was a branch of the Hung Society, also known as the South China Triad, which was involved in anti-Manchu revolutionary activity (Cronin 1973: 6, 1982: 32). Another reformist was Leong Mun, a prominent landowner, who had links to the *Chinese Republic* newspaper in Sydney (CSCA Valuation register and rates book, Town of Cooktown, 1926: 98). Traditionalists, however, also existed, as demonstrated by the lavish celebrations held in 1889 in honour of the Chinese emperor's wedding (*CC* 1 March 1889: 2).

Ties forged along the lines of occupation occurred, in particular among miners. The first Chinese colonists arriving in Cooktown and on the Palmer River goldfield had been part of the Australian mining scene for some time, and they were reported to have been antagonistic towards the inexperienced newcomers who started to migrate from China from 1875 (*CHPRA* 26 May 1875: 2). Most also demonstrated a stronger commitment to Australia whereas the majority of the "new chums" desired to return quickly to China in order to set up their own businesses (*CHPRA* 23 February 1876: 2). Over time, as later waves of Chinese migration occurred into north Queensland, another veteran group emerged in the region that was held together by mutual bonds forged through experiences in the Cooktown–Palmer region (May 1984: 56)

Many of these relationships were reinforced through leisure activities and drug consumption. The opium shops and gambling halls played a critical role in Chinese sociality within Cooktown. They also attracted many non-Chinese, with Europeans, Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asians regularly visited Chinese gambling houses in Cooktown and other northern communities (*CC* 5 March 1889: 2, 12 November 1889: 2, QSA Item ID9161). The Chinese, in return, frequented the European horse race meets (Browne 1927: 20–1; *CC* 13 September 1889: 2).

Interpenetrating and facilitating all these networks were the *guanxi* networks. Yan (1996) has highlighted the importance, indeed primacy, of these in Chinese social life both in the past and the present. Chinese society has been described as "neither individual-based nor group-based, but relation-based" and "composed of numerous personal networks defined by dyadic social ties and without explicit boundaries" (Yan 1996: 16). Guanxi networks are constructed and expressed through a cyclical exchange of gifts, favours and feasting activities that invoke qualities of reciprocity, indebtedness and mutual obligation, and are instrumental in "maintaining, reproducing, and modifying interpersonal relations" (Yan 1996: 4). During Qing times guanxi was informal but omnipresent, spread through society through kinship, business and locality ties. This process of building guanxi networks was highly competitive and important for various reasons. Economically it was of extreme value as it established access to capital, resources and people in positions of authority (Yan 1996: 14, 89–91). Guanxi networks also had, and still have, a social role in social positioning, self-identification, socialisation, the production of meaning and the expression of emotion. Hence Yan (1996: 88) describes the cultivation of these networks as more than a power game, but also a "life-style" that imbues a rich texture to social interaction.

Lydon (1999) explores the continuance of guanxi within the overseas Chinese community in 1890s Sydney, arguing it to be the performance through which bonds between workers and merchants were confirmed and expressed. The merchants were the control points within these networks and manipulated them for personal gain against

both Europeans and other Chinese (Lydon 1999: 82). The sentiments of obligation and reciprocity imbedded in guanxi, however, ensured that those tied to the merchants had their interests and welfare protected.

The continuation of guanxi in Cooktown is mostly suggested by references to gift giving during festivities (*CHPRA* 22 May 1875: 2). These festivities appear to have been initiated and funded by the key merchants, indicating their centrality within the network system. References to the European friends of Chinese receiving "presents and other courtesies for their patronage" (*CI* 9 June 1888: 2) suggest that they were drawn into Chinese gift-giving, or guanxi, networks.

Conclusion

During the Palmer River gold rush a Chinese community became established in Cooktown and its environs, and this community persisted until the 1930s. Evidence presented here indicates that agency operated within this community. Chinese immigrants arrived for the purpose of finding wealth, and they actively developed strategies and resources for doing so. Through agency members of the community built multiple social networks, or webs of association, that allowed them to negotiate in various ways the conditions of their existence. Rather than seeing this community as a monolithic ethnic group, it should be understood as a complex, heterogeneous society. In building their networks, people drew on a range of social identities, including family, lineage, gender, class, political faction and occupation. Some of these networks helped bring the community together, some fragmented society and created competition, paradoxes and tensions, while others extended beyond racial barriers to establish alliances with non-Chinese, thereby imbedding Chinese people deeply within Cooktown's broader social milieu. Through these networks a multifaceted, entwined social landscape evolved. Although in its specific details this landscape was particular to Cooktown's historical context and frontier environment, agency and network analysis could be applied to other overseas Chinese communities, offering a useful approach for studying social complexity.

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