

Landscapes of Memory and Forgetting: Indigo and Shek Quey Lee

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Abstract: In this illustrated essay I explore the intertwined histories of two rural settlements – Indigo in north-eastern Victoria, Australia, and Shek Quey Lee in Xinhui county, Guangdong, China – to consider how the rich story of Chinese migration and settlement in Australia has been remembered and forgotten, both in China and Australia. With the growth in interest in the history and heritage of the Chinese in Australia over the past twenty years, we can no longer say that it is a “forgotten” history, yet there are still challenges to researching and telling it. One of these is for Chinese Australian history to be seen as integral to the broader narrative of Australia’s past. Another is being able to connect the Chinese and Australian parts of the story, to broaden the scope of our research beyond national boundaries to create a truly shared history. This essay suggests that drawing on the small stories of individual people is one way to bring together the connections across time and place, and between landscapes and people often thought of as distant and fundamentally different.

Keywords: transnational, microhistory, biography, family history, intermarriage

Indigo

Early one Saturday morning in February 1902, a devastating fire struck the village of Mount Pleasant at Indigo in north-eastern Victoria. Sleeping residents had to be dragged from their beds by their neighbours as their homes burned around them. The fire passed through half the village before the wind changed direction, giving the villagers the chance to save the settlement’s most significant buildings – the large store and the joss house. More than twenty other buildings were lost. The *Argus* newspaper described Mount Pleasant as a “Chinese camp” and noted that with the fire “fully half the camp, which is one of the oldest in the colony, was totally destroyed”.¹

Mount Pleasant and its nearby villages of Cornishtown and Durham had grown up along the Indigo Lead after the discovery of gold in the area forty years before. In 1860, Indigo’s population numbered about 3000, around a third of whom were Chinese, but by 1902 the area was home to only a couple of hundred people. The store saved from the fire was run by the Shing family – Chinese-born Charles Chin Shing, his Indigo-born Anglo-Chinese wife Jessie Ah Coon and their six children: Millie, Dolly, George, Frank, Daphne and Alma, who were born at Indigo between 1896 and 1912. Twenty-five years earlier, the store had been home to another mixed-race family, that of Chong Ming, Winifred Minahan and their little boy James. Charles Shing had taken over the store’s management after Chong Ming left Indigo in 1882, when he returned to China with James. Over the following years, Charles Shing sent a share of the store’s profits – through their kinsman Chung Kee in Melbourne – to Chong Ming and his son in rural China.

Charles and Jessie Shing’s granddaughter, Wilma Conroy, described the Indigo store:

The building was of very solid structure, large rooms with slab wooden floors and a bark shingle roof. In the kitchen was a huge mound of earth with a fire place in the centre. When the earth warmed up with the heat it stayed warm for days. In the centre of the building was 2 huge underground cellars with timber tops. The perishable goods were kept in there ... The shop counters were up to 6 inches thick and the slabs on the floor were the same.²

¹ “Fires in the Country: A Chinese Camp Burnt,” *Argus*, 11 February 1902.

² Wilma Conroy, “The Chinese Settlement at Indigo,” typescript held at the Chiltern Athenaeum, no date. Wilma Conroy’s insights into the Shing family, their store, the Indigo joss house and the story of the Chinese at Indigo more generally come from an interview with the author at Corowa, New South Wales, on 3 January 2010 and from the transcript of an interview with Cora Trevarthen at Corowa on 24 April 2005. My thanks to Cora Trevarthen for sharing this interview with me.

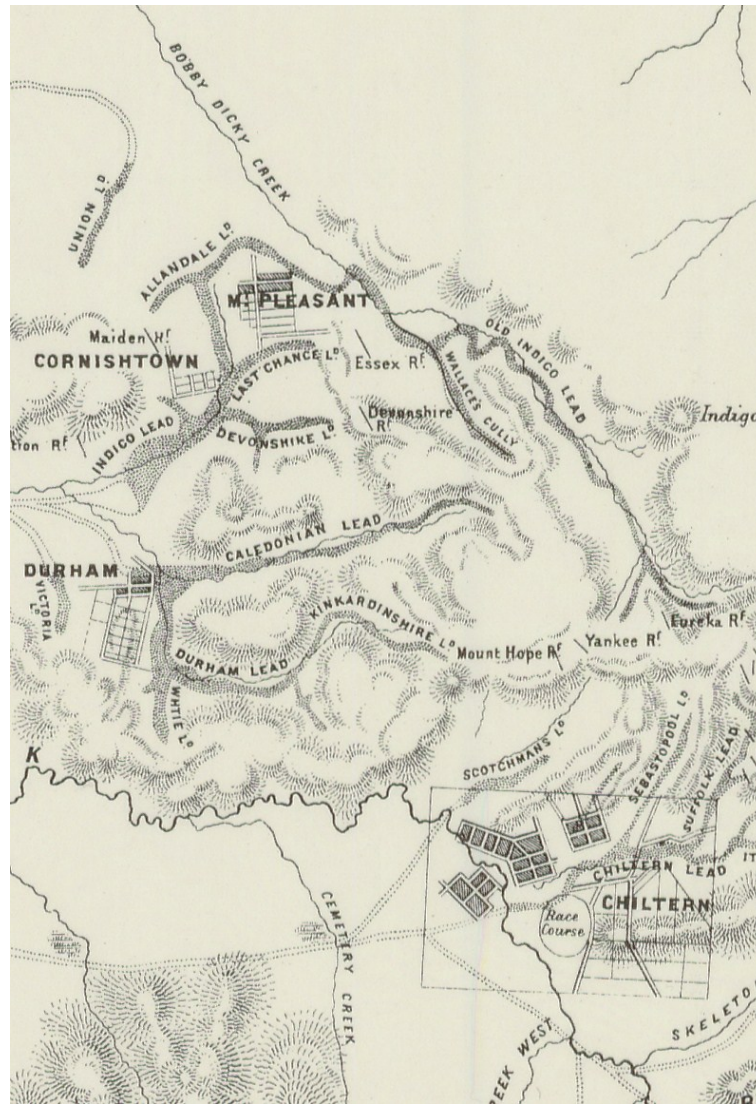


Figure 1. The Indigo goldfield centred around the townships of Mount Pleasant, Cornishtown and Durham, north of Chiltern, in north-eastern Victoria. They are shown here on a mining map from 1868.

State Library of Victoria: <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/118168>

Next to the store on one side was the Indigo post office, while on the other was the joss house. There had been a joss house in the area since 1860, when the “whole paraphernalia” of one of the temples from the Chinese camp on Spring Creek at Beechworth, around thirty kilometres away, had been transported by foot and with great ceremony to Indigo.³ Joss houses like the one built at Indigo were once a common part of the landscape of Australian rural and mining settlements. Several hundred were built over the second half of the nineteenth century but over time most have disappeared. Many were the victim of fires, while others fell into disuse and were later razed.⁴

³ “Domestic Intelligence: A Travelling Temple,” *Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston), 1 February 1860.

⁴ Derham Groves, “Some Similarities Between the Feng-Shui of Chinese Joss Houses in Australia and Postmodern Architecture,” *Grainger Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1 (2011): 55–73.

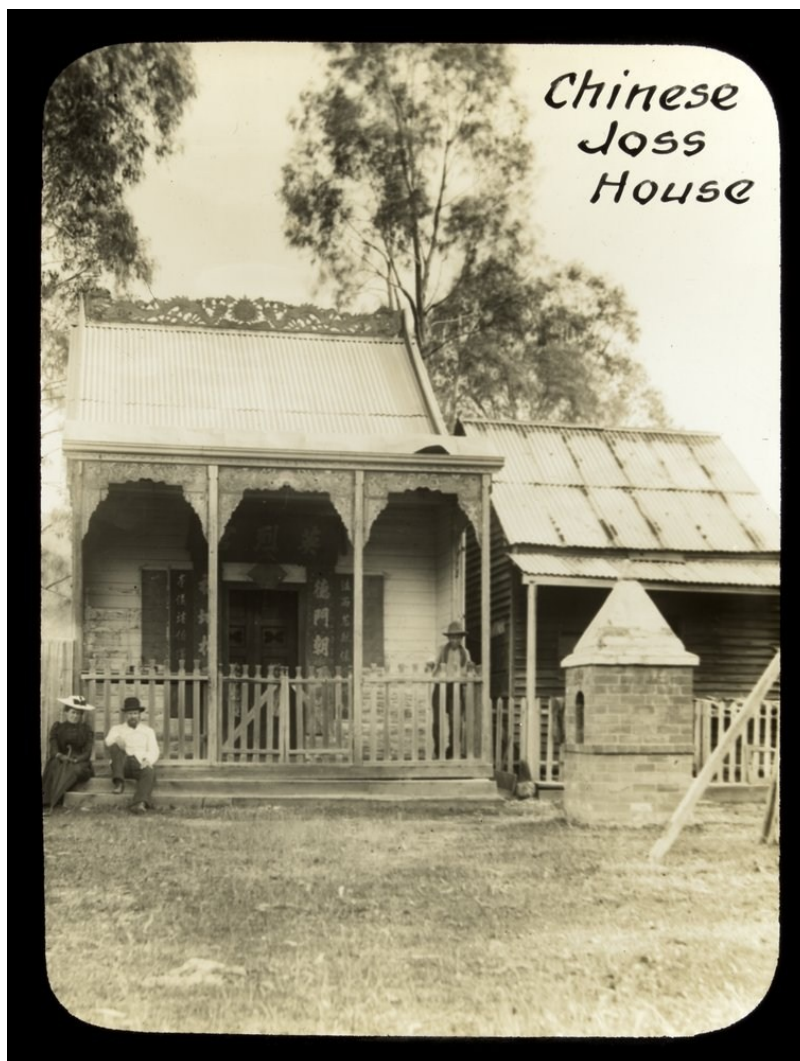


Figure 2. The joss house at Bright, Victoria, photographed in the early twentieth century. No pictures of the Indigo joss house remain, but it is likely that it was similar to the one at Bright.

State Library of Victoria: accession no. H2003.95/14

Escaping the fire of 1902, the Indigo joss house was also eventually demolished. After the death of storekeeper Charles Shing in 1925, his family made the decision to close the joss house down, since his only living son was in Sydney and there were no other male relatives to maintain it. Wilma Conroy recalls being told how they sounded a gong all day to mark her grandfather's passing and the temple's closure. Wilma's grandmother Jessie Shing lived on at the store next door until her death twenty-five years later, at which time it too was demolished. According to Wilma Conroy, the store was pulled down bit by bit and burnt, including two magnificent red wooden doors, each carved with a curling dragon, that had once graced the front of the joss house.

If you visit Indigo today, there is nothing obvious to suggest that there was ever anything more there than scrubby bush and paddocks. To the more accustomed eye, the nearby landscape does bear the tell-tale scars of alluvial gold mining – the scattered, irregular mounds of tailings and their corresponding gouges into the brown earth. Two local cemeteries hold markers, some in Chinese and some in English, of the passing of a handful of early Indigo residents. This, together with an assortment of bits and pieces held in the small museum at the Chiltern Athenaeum, gives the impression that the men and women of Indigo's early mixed-race community have left little trace.



Figure 3. Some of the remaining headstones in the Chinese section of the old Chiltern Cemetery, 2009.

Photograph by Kate Bagnall

My interest in Indigo came as I began investigating the life of James Minahan.⁵ After leaving Indigo as a small boy, James Minahan spent the next twenty-five years in his father's ancestral village, Shek Quey Lee in China. Deciding to return to Australia to work as a Chinese teacher, James Minahan arrived in Melbourne in early 1908. Customs officials questioned his right to enter Australia, believing that the identity papers he produced were a fraud. He was given the Dictation Test, which he failed to complete, and was arrested as a prohibited immigrant. After many months of legal wrangling, his case was heard before the High Court – a test case as to the meaning of the term “immigrant” under the new Australian Constitution.⁶

In the legal and administrative paper trail left by the case, James Minahan himself is but a shadow and, even though the High Court ruled in his favour, there is no trace of what happened to him afterwards. I became intrigued by the legal case and by the life of this Australian boy raised in China and so set out to find what happened to him. As I write, I have still not discovered whether James Minahan remained in Australia or returned to China after 1908. I have, however, uncovered a world of unseen and unknown connections across place and time, linking the lives of a group of Chinese men and the Australian women who became their wives and mothers of their children.

⁵ See Kate Bagnall, “Aussie Lad or Chinese Scholar?,” *Memento* (National Archives of Australia), 38 (2010): 16–18, <<http://www.naa.gov.au/naaresources/publications/memento/pdf/Memento38.pdf>>, accessed 1 September 2011.

⁶ National Archives of Australia: A1, 1908/12936; A10074, 1908/31.

Shek Quey Lee

Seven thousand kilometres away from Indigo is another village and another landscape changed by men like Chin Shing and Chong Ming. Shek Quey Lee village, part of Xinhui county, is located in the hills south-west of the district capital and river port of Jiangmen (Kong Moon) – once a bustling gateway to Hong Kong and overseas destinations like San Francisco, Vancouver and Melbourne.⁷ Shek Quey Lee itself was never a prosperous place, however, and its residents – members of the Chan and Lee clans – struggled to find sufficient arable land, leading in the early years of the twentieth century to a village war whose losers, the Lee clan, were forced to relocate. Over more than five decades from the 1850s, this struggle to provide for their families prompted around a hundred members of the Chan clan to also leave their ancestral village – with Australia as their destination. Among their number were Chong Ming, who arrived in Victoria as a young man around the late 1850s, and another storekeeper, Chung Kee, who was in Melbourne from at least the late 1870s. The ancestral village of Charles Shing is not known, but it is likely that he too was a Chan from the same part of Xinhui county.



Figure 4. Shek Quey Lee (Shiquli) is located just to the south-west of Kong Moon (Jiangmen) in Xinhui county.

As with Indigo, it is difficult to read the village's history in the landscape of Shek Quey Lee. Unlike many home villages of overseas Chinese, Shek Quey Lee has no grand, Western-style mansions or fortress-like watchtowers built to house and protect families who stayed behind while husbands and fathers lived abroad. Shek Quey Lee's largest building – a now-abandoned two-storey schoolhouse dating from the 1920s – and a number of houses were, however, built with money brought back from Australia. While the size and architecture of the schoolhouse reflects the money and modern influence overseas migration brought to the Pearl River Delta villages, the small, grey brick houses scarcely suggest fortunes easily won on the New Gold Mountain. Now uninhabited and with yards overgrown, the houses instead suggest the impoverished circumstances that prompted families to send their men and boys so far away. If these small structures were the new homes proudly built with overseas remittances, what sort of accommodation had they replaced?

⁷ *Shek Quey Lee* is the way the village name (石渠里) was written in English in early twentieth-century Australian records, based on the pronunciation of the local Xinhui dialect. In Hanyu pinyin it is *Shiquli*.



Figure 5. One of the small houses in Shek Quey Lee built with money earned in Australia, 2009.

Photograph by Kate Bagnall

Today, Shek Quey Lee's inhabitants are mostly the old and the very young – those of working age have moved away in search of work. Chen Ruihuai, one of those who remain in the village, is compiling the clan genealogy and documenting the village's history. Aware and proud of Shek Quey Lee's Australian connection, he nevertheless knows very little of the circumstances of the men who sailed south for Victoria – where they went, how they lived, the work they did, the Australian families they formed and, importantly, where they died. I visited Shek Quey Lee in 2009 with the hope of finding out what had happened to James Minahan in his later life.⁸ No one there could tell me, however, and as we spoke Chen Ruihuai was most keen to hear anything I could tell him about the villagers' lives in Australia and about the Australians of today who might also trace their heritage back to Shek Quey Lee. At the time I could tell him only a little.

The names of the men I had uncovered in the archives in Australia bore only a faint resemblance to those recorded in the genealogy of the Chan clan of Shek Quey Lee. Chen Ruihuai and I guessed at how the names I presented – Chong Ming, Chin Shing, Chung Kee, Deung Garng, Ah Chew, Dern Hoy – might fit with those written in Chinese characters in the genealogy, names that followed the pattern of the family's generation poem. Chong Ming's name was the only one I had seen written in Chinese – from when he signed the death registration of his baby daughter, Winifred Leina, who died at Indigo in late 1881 at the age of three months.⁹ Scanning the characters that formed the lines of the poem, there was at last a concrete connection. The character for "Chong" (象) – *xiang* in Mandarin, meaning "image" or "symbol" – sat neatly at the start of the second line. Men with that generation name were born in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Chen Ruihuai told me.

⁸ My thanks to Chen Ruihuai, Tan Shicheng, Nicki Kemp, Ben He Zhibin and Natalia Hooker for their assistance during my two visits to Shek Quey Lee in 2009.

⁹ Birth registration for Winifred Chong Meng, Indigo, Victoria, 1881/6963.



Figure 6. Chen Ruihuai (centre) speaking with the author and local guide Tan Shicheng outside the now-abandoned Shek Quey Lee primary school, built in the 1920s with overseas funds, December 2009.

Photograph by Natalia Hooker

Family Forgetting

For Australians with Chinese heritage, making this sort of connection with an ancestral home can be a haunting and often unwinnable quest. For a long time many Australian families were silent on their Chinese pasts; in many cases the forgetting was a natural progression of time, but in others it was a deliberate act. In the face of racist sentiments of the White Australia period and as circumstances allowed, the mixed-race children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Australia's early Chinese residents could distance themselves from their non-European heritage. Names were changed, hometowns abandoned for more anonymous locales, family papers discarded and stories invented to explain away "foreign" colouring or to hide gaps in the family story. Portrait photographs were a frequent target of this purposeful forgetting. While the physical features that marked families as the Chinese "Other" might fade with passing generations and with further marriage into the white Australian population, a photograph was a tangible and irrefutable reminder of a family's mixed-race past.

For other families, being "Chinese" remained a more obvious part of their story, one that could not or would not be hidden. Wilma Conroy – whose genetic make-up is in fact more British than Chinese – found that growing up at Indigo in the 1940s, racial difference could still be cause for taunts and teasing, despite the long history of Chinese settlement in the area. Her childhood friend Rex Fuge always spoke up for her and has, in more recent times, been the one to collect and care for the Chinese artefacts in the Chiltern Athenaeum. However, despite the Shing family's obvious Chinese identity and maintenance of certain Chinese cultural traditions, details of their particular origins were lost, never passed on from parent to child and seemingly irrelevant to their Australian lives. Wilma Conroy recalls that they never thought of themselves as being different and never gave any thought to the fact that one day the Chinese heritage of Indigo might be valued or even considered interesting.



Figure 7. Jessie Shing as a young woman, taken around the turn of the twentieth century.

Photograph courtesy of Wilma Conroy

The forgetting (or not remembering) of Australia's early Anglo-Chinese families took place not only in what passed privately from one generation to another; it was also within the written stories, and histories, that have been more publicly told about Chinese migration and settlement in colonial Australia. Drawing on sources such as government reports and the major urban newspapers, early studies were coloured by white colonial perceptions of the Chinese in Australia, describing the Chinese community as one almost completely bereft of family life and casting most relationships between Chinese men and white women as illicit liaisons tainted with opium, alcohol and immorality.¹⁰ Other work by scholars such as Ann Curthoys, Kathryn Cronin and Andrew Markus acknowledged the way in which fears of racial mixing affected the response of white settlers to the Chinese presence, yet the stereotypes – of the lack of real families, of widespread immorality and vice connected to the Chinese, and of the immoral and dissolute character of the white partners of Chinese men – still persisted, particularly in less scholarly and popular representations.¹¹

¹⁰ See, for example, C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia 1901–1921* (Adelaide: Raphael Arts Pty Ltd, 1977) and Vivien Suet-Cheng Burrage, "The Chinese Community, Sydney, 1870–1901," Masters thesis, Macquarie University, 1974.

¹¹ Ann Curthoys, "Race and Ethnicity: A Study of the Response of British Colonists to Aborigines, Chinese and Non-British Europeans in New South Wales, 1856–1881," Ph.D. thesis, Macquarie University, 1973; Kathryn Cronin, *Colonial Casualties: Chinese in Early Victoria* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982); Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850–1901* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979).



Figure 8. "A lively lady fight, in a Chinaman's hotel, Ballarat" (*Police News*, 16 December 1876). Crude stereotypes of both Chinese men and white women featured in many nineteenth-century depictions.

State Library of Victoria: accession no. PN16/12/76/00

In the mid-1980s, a pioneering exhibition by Morag Loh and Christine Ramsay, *Survival and Celebration*, together with its accompanying book, was the first detailed look at Chinese family life from within families themselves – the authors undertook interviews with 33 long-established Chinese Australian families.¹² At a similar time, Monica Tankey, whose Chinese ancestor Tan Kee arrived in New South Wales in 1851, also published a number of articles on her family history, suggesting that what was required was "for the people concerned – the Chinese and their descendants – to detail their movements and experiences so that the stereotyped picture will be broken".¹³ It has, however, only been in the last ten years that further studies focusing on the particular experience of Anglo-Chinese couples, their children and families have emerged. My own work, which considers Anglo-Chinese families in both their Australian and Chinese contexts, has highlighted the extent and diversity of interracial couples in colonial New South Wales, as well as the "normality" of the lives they lived.¹⁴ Research by Pauline Rule in Victoria, Dinah Hales in western New South Wales and Sandi Robb in Queensland has also provided new insights.¹⁵

¹² Morag Loh and Christine Ramsay, *Survival and Celebration: An Insight into the Lives of Chinese Immigrant Women, European Women Married to Chinese and their Female Children in Australia from 1856 to 1986* (Melbourne: self-published, 1986).

¹³ Monica E. Tankey, "A Blueprint for Action," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 6 (July 1981): 189. See also *Chinese in Australia: One Family* (self-published, 1980) and "English on the Outside and Chinese on the Inside," *Australia-China Review*, 11 (February 1983): pp. 9–10.

¹⁴ Kate Bagnall, "Golden Shadows on a White Land: An Exploration of the Lives of White Women who Partnered Chinese Men and their Children in Southern Australia, 1855–1915," Ph.D. thesis, University of Sydney, 2006.

¹⁵ See, for example, Pauline Rule, "A Tale of Three Sisters: Australian-Chinese Marriages in Colonial Victoria," in *Chinese in Oceania*, ed. Kee Pookong et al. (Melbourne: Association for the Study of the Chinese and their Descendants in Australasia and the Pacific Islands, Chinese Museum and Victoria University of Technology Centre for Asia-Pacific Studies, 2002); Dinah Hales, "Local Histories: Chinese-European Families of Central Western New South Wales, 1850–80," *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, 6 (2004): 93–112; Sandi Robb, "Myths, Lies and Invisible Lives: European Women and Chinese Men in North Queensland," *Lilith*, 12: 95–109.



Figure 9. “Chinese fancy hawker” (*Australasian Sketcher*, 10 June 1876). Opportunities for white women and Chinese men to meet and mix were many, as they lived and worked as neighbours in many colonial communities.

State Library of Victoria: accession no. A/S10/06/76/37

This work builds on the research of many family historians, whose tenacious and detailed study of individual and family lives has broadened with greater online access to genealogical and historical source material – including the National Library of Australia’s digitisation of historical newspapers in Trove, the National Archives of Australia’s descriptive and digitisation work on early White Australia case files, and archival partnerships with organisations such as ancestry.com.au. Family historians have published the results of their research and have contributed to larger projects such as the *Golden Threads* study of the Chinese in regional New South Wales and the *Chinese-Australian Historical Images in Australia* project at the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne.¹⁶ This combined body of research is gradually shifting our perception of the nineteenth-century Australian Chinese community, asserting the place of the intimate and domestic spheres in a history that has usually been written as one of men alone.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Janis Wilton, *Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional New South Wales 1850–1950* (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 2004); *Chinese-Australian Historical Images in Australia (CHIA)*, Museum of Chinese Australian History/La Trobe University, <<http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au/>>, accessed 30 August 2011.

¹⁷ For more on this theme see Kate Bagnall, “Rewriting the History of Chinese Families in Nineteenth-Century Australia,” *Australian Historical Studies*, 42:1 (2011): 62–77.

Following the Trace

There is no lack of evidence of the presence of Chinese-European couples and their children in the Australian colonies, with birth and marriage records providing the most fundamental evidence. Marriage records indicate that there were around 600 marriages between Chinese men and white women in New South Wales between 1855 and 1888, and probably another 200 to the turn of the century. Pauline Rule has estimated that in Victoria between 1855 and 1901 there were at least 750 marriages between Chinese men and European or Australian-born women, including in later years the mixed-race daughters of earlier unions.¹⁸ Contemporary reports suggest that there were at least as many unmarried couples as married ones, if not more. Hundreds of children were born to these mixed-race couples. The census figures for 1901 record that there were just over 3000 “half-caste Chinese” in the newly federated nation, the majority living in New South Wales (1041), Victoria (1002) and Queensland (800).¹⁹ It is likely though that these figures underestimate the true numbers of Anglo-Chinese Australians, as many chose to conceal their mixed-race heritage.

Anglo-Chinese families were found in all corners of the colonies. They lived scattered about the suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney, and in the urban Chinese quarters – around Little Bourke Street and Carlton in Melbourne and George Street North, then later Surry Hills and the Haymarket, in Sydney. They could also be found in thousands of rural settlements – from the Chinese quarters and camps on the outskirts of towns such as Ballarat and Albury, to mining settlements such as Indigo and Emmaville, to small farms and large rural properties across the south-east.

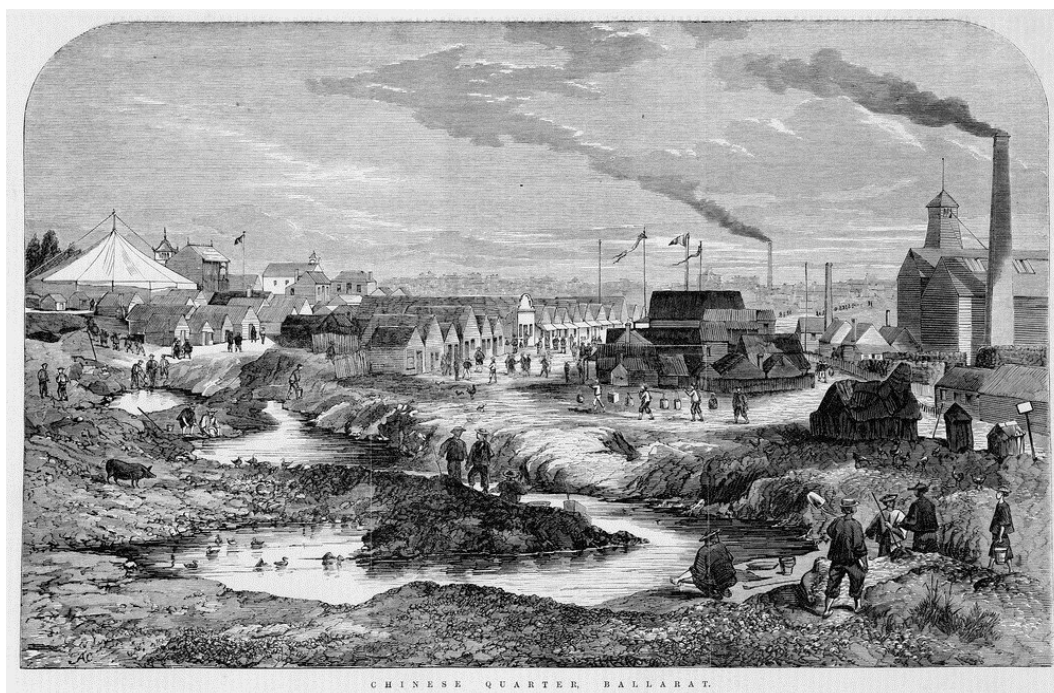


Figure 10. “Chinese quarter Ballarat” (*Illustrated Australian News*, 18 July 1868). Anglo-Chinese families lived throughout the colonies, including in the Chinese quarters of towns such as Ballarat, shown here in 1868.

State Library of Victoria: accession no. IAN18/07/68/SUPP/5

¹⁸ Pauline Rule, “The Chinese Camps in Colonial Victoria: Their Role as Contact Zones,” in *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation, and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860–1940*, ed. Sophie Couchman et al. (Kingsbury: Otherland Literary Journal, 2004), p. 125.

¹⁹ *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, no. 18, 1925 (Melbourne: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1925), pp. 951–6.

The physical trace of these early Anglo-Chinese families may sometimes be difficult to see, but there remains a different kind of heritage – a living, breathing one. Many thousands of Australians, including many who would consider themselves to be “white”, are descended from early Chinese residents. Their family heritage forms a web of unseen connections.

Thinking of Indigo, my quest to find out about the fate of young James Minahan revealed his family’s connection to Indigo storekeepers Charles Shing and Jessie Ah Coon. This led in turn to the family of Willie Ah Poy and Louisa Ah Coon – one of Jessie’s younger sisters – who ran a fruit and vegetable store in nearby Chiltern in the early years of the twentieth century. Louisa Ah Coon had nine children and today her descendants can be found living around Australia, as well as in Canada – included among them is the former Governor General of Canada, Adrienne Clarkson.²⁰ In 1928, after Willie Poy’s death, Louisa Ah Coon married again, to Edward Mahlook, the ninth son of John Mah Look and Mary Ah Shin, pioneer residents of the King Valley in Victoria’s high country. This marriage connected the Poy to the family of Pan Ah Shin and Catherine Martin who had married in Melbourne in 1857 and made their home in the Buckland Valley near Bright. Pan Ah Shin and Catherine Martin had eight children, and today the descendants of their family number around 1800.²¹

A different path of inquiry led from James Minahan and his parents to the family of fellow Shek Quey Lee native Chung Kee who ran a store on Little Bourke Street in the heart of Melbourne’s Chinatown. Chung Kee’s wife was a Melbourne-born Anglo-Chinese woman, Ethel Hun Gip, whose white mother Isabella Mackay was one of two sisters who married Chinese men in Melbourne in 1876. Isabella and her children spent a period of time in China in the 1880s. The other sister, Emma Mackay, married Ham Hoyling, a storekeeper, hotelier and market gardener in the village of Vaughan on the Mount Alexander diggings near Castlemaine. Between them, Isabella and Emma had fourteen children. One of Emma’s daughters, Dora Hoyling, married Albert Lesock, whose grandparents were Pan Ah Shin and Catherine Martin of the Buckland Valley. One of Emma’s sons, Harry Hoyling, was the interpreter present when James Minahan was given the Dictation Test on his arrival in Australia. Another son, William Hoyling, married Ruby Yon, the daughter of William Yon and Margaret Ah Ket, who lived in the King Valley.²² Margaret Ah Ket’s brother, William, was the barrister who represented James Minahan during his High Court case. And so the connections go on.

Honouring the Ancestors

The descendants of Anglo-Chinese families such as these are today uncovering and retracing the journeys that brought their Chinese and non-Chinese ancestors together. A growing number of Australians are making a pilgrimage to China to visit their ancestral home and pay their respects at the graves of their forebears. For others, however, this is not possible. Being able to make the connection to China comes with knowing details such as one’s ancestor’s Chinese name in characters and their village of origin. More often than not, though, this knowledge has been lost over time and the archive is unable to help. Chinese names were recorded in many different ways and rarely in characters. Indigo storekeeper Chong Ming’s name, for instance, was variously written as Chong Ming, Cheong Meng, Chong Meng and Teung Ming, and even when he signed his own name in Chinese characters he wrote his given name (象明) but not his family name, Chan (陳).

²⁰ Barry McGowan, *Tracking the Dragon: A History of the Chinese in the Riverina* (Wagga Wagga: Museum of the Riverina, 2011), pp. 91–3.

²¹ Jocelyn Groom, “How the Family of Pan Ah Shin Became Settlers Rather than Sojourners,” paper presented at the *Chinese in Australasia and the Pacific: Old and New Migrations and Cultural Change* conference, University of Otago, 20–21 November 1998, < www.stevenyoung.co.nz/The-Chinese-in-New-Zealand/Chinese-in-Australasia-and-the-Pacific/Earlier-Chinese.html >, accessed 18 August 2011.

²² My thanks to Chris Kee and an anonymous family member for information on the Kee, Hun Gip and Hoyling families.

Figure 11. Chong Meng's signature on the birth registration of his daughter, Winifred Leina Chong Meng, 1881.

Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages: registration no. 1881/6963

In the Pearl River Delta villages are families who face a similar disconnection with their Australian past. As with Chong Ming and his son James Minahan, it was not uncommon for Chinese men to take or send their mixed-race children to China to be educated in Chinese; sometimes white Australian wives and mothers went too. While most families eventually returned to Australia, for some individuals this time in China created a long-lasting bond to their father's homeland. Some stayed on, married, worked and died in the villages, Canton or Hong Kong. Others lived transnational lives, spending time in both China and Australia. With Chinese families tracing their lineage strictly through the paternal line – clan genealogies do not often include the names of mothers, wives and daughters – for families that remained in China, most know little, if anything, about the white women who also form part of their family tree. Sometimes all that is known is as a given name, "Mary", or that she "had red hair". Historian Michael Williams has suggested that, as with the hidden Chinese ancestry of many "white" Australians, in the Pearl River Delta "more people have non-Chinese ancestry than is realised in these villages today".²³

While tracing the family back to its overseas origins is important for some, for others the remembering is centred on the Australian lives of their ancestors. Many are understandably proud of their pioneering families, of the courage and tenacity they demonstrated in dealing with not only the hardships of life, but also with the particular difficulties they encountered because of their race. The descendants of Irish-born Catherine Martin, who married Pan Ah Shin in Melbourne in 1857, have chosen to remember her by erecting a memorial plaque in the Beechworth Cemetery, where she was buried in an unmarked grave in 1872.²⁴ The mother of eight half-Chinese children, Catherine Martin died at age thirty-six, "her body wearied and exhausted by living under extreme conditions, constant child bearing and the effects of poor nutrition".²⁵ Another memorial has been erected through the efforts of the Chinese Australian Family Historians of Victoria, in the form of a commemorative stele dedicated to the Chinese who lost their lives in the Buckland riots in 1857 and other Chinese buried in the Buckland

²³ Michael Williams, "Destination *Qiaoxiang*: Pearl River Delta Villages and Pacific Ports, 1849–1949," Ph.D. thesis, University of Hong Kong, 2002, p. 78.

²⁴ *The Ah Shin Family Chronicles*, 14 (December 2009), <<http://panahshin.com/Newsletters/ASC14Dec09.pdf>>, accessed 18 August 2011.

²⁵ Jocelyn Groom, "How the Family of Pan Ah Shin became Settlers Rather than Sojourners," no page number.

Valley. More than 200 people attended the unveiling of the memorial on a cold winter morning in July 2007, including descendants of Chinese men driven off the Buckland goldfields 150 years earlier.²⁶



Figure 12. The Buckland memorial stele remembers the Chinese who suffered in anti-Chinese riots and marks the site of the Chinese cemetery in the Buckland Valley near Bright, Victoria. The stele and accompanying heritage interpretation story board were funded by a Heritage Victoria grant.

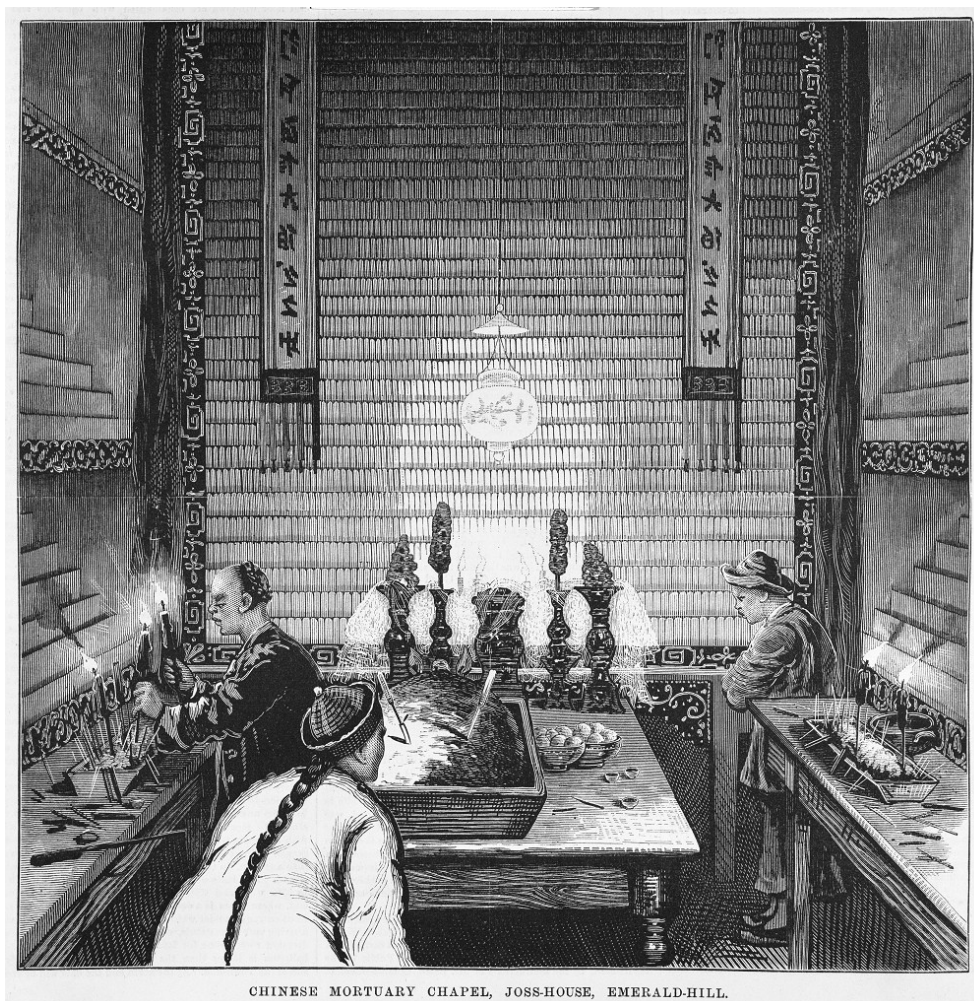
Photograph by James Twycross

Sitting quietly in a South Melbourne street, behind an elegant wrought iron fence and a screen of large leafy trees, is a place where such commemoration of individual lives has taken place since the days of those goldfields disturbances. For almost 150 years, the See Yup Temple has honoured the memories of members of the See Yup Society who died on Victorian soil.²⁷ Members of the society came from the See Yup (Four Counties) district of the Pearl River Delta, made up of the counties of Taishan, Kaiping, Enping and Xinhui, where Shek Quey Lee is located. Housed in the temple's three ancestral halls are more than 10,000 ancestral tablets – small, painted wooden plaques each one inscribed with a name and village of birth. Following traditional practice, the society remembers and shows respect to those who have died through religious services, offerings and rituals. Among the ancestral tablets that line the walls of the temple are forty for men from Shek Quey Lee, including one for Melbourne storekeeper Chung Kee, who died at his home in Melbourne in 1918. A death notice in the *Argus* newspaper noted that

²⁶ Carolyn Webb, "Chinese Heritage Proudly Recalled," *Age*, 23 July 2007; Chris Neelima Lee, "Buckland Memorial: Report to the Chinese Family Historians of Victoria Inc. (CAFHOV)," <<http://www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au/cafhov/activities.htm>>, accessed 18 August 2011; "Memorial Tells the Story of Buckland Valley Riots," *Inherit* (Heritage Council magazine), 27 (January 2008): 13, <http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0013/110353/Inherit-27-Jan_2008_Part4.pdf>, accessed 9 November 2012.

²⁷ See *See Yup Temple – Victoria's open heritage*, no. 5 (Melbourne: Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment), <http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/45253/SeeYup_English.pdf>, accessed 22 August 2011.

he was the “dearly beloved husband of Ethel Chin Key, and loving father of Leonard, Sylvia, Ida, Norman, Muriel, and Myrtle”.²⁸ Until recently his descendants knew only of his grave in the Coburg Cemetery but not of the tablet in the See Yup Temple.



CHINESE MORTUARY CHAPEL, JOSS-HOUSE, EMERALD-HILL.

Figure 13. “Chinese mortuary chapel, Joss House, Emerald Hill” (*Australasian Sketcher*, 7 August 1875). The shelves lining the walls of the See Yup Temple, shown here in 1875, are today filled with 13,000 ancestral tablets.

State Library of Victoria: accession no. A/S07/08/75/72

Indigo storekeepers Charles and Jessie Shing are buried in the Chiltern Cemetery. The written record of their life together is scattered – there are listings for the Indigo store in post office directories; official registrations of family births, deaths and marriages; and a few snippets from the newspapers, including accounts of a dramatic incident that took place in 1898. Nineteen-year-old Jessie – already the mother of a two-year-old daughter – attacked her husband Charles with a chopper, wounding him on the shoulder.²⁹ When the case came before the court, Jessie stated that drink had been the cause of the trouble. Family folklore suggests that she was perhaps a troubled, or troublesome, girl who was “married off young” – she was only fourteen at the time of her marriage, her

²⁸ “Deaths,” *Argus*, 18 November 1918.

²⁹ “Intercolonial Telegrams: From Melbourne Papers,” *Mercury* (Hobart), 2 April 1898; also “General News,” *Camperdown Chronicle* (Launceston), 2 April 1898.

husband three times that age.³⁰ Wilma Conroy never met her grandfather, Charles Shing, but recalls that Jessie Shing, her Nanna, was “an absolute darling”, who spoiled her granddaughters and sewed and knitted and prepared wonderful Chinese dishes for them to eat.

Wilma Conroy still visits her grandparents’ graves at Chiltern, where they lie in the cemetery’s small Chinese section. Alongside them are the graves of Jessie’s baby son, Frank, who died in 1908, and the graves of Hoy Gee and Fong Kay, two men whose lives were entwined with those of the Shing family at Indigo over many decades. When she visits, Wilma Conroy maintains a tradition taught to her by her Anglo-Chinese grandmother – taking an offering to share with the spirits of her ancestors. Rather than the more usual meal of rice, pork, fruit and wine, Jessie Shing taught her granddaughter to take biscuits – sometimes fancy creams and sometimes just plain ones – to sprinkle on the headstones.



Figure 14. Wilma Conroy's precious copy of a photograph of her grandmother Jessie Shing with her two granddaughters.

Photograph courtesy of Wilma Conroy

³⁰ At the time of her marriage in 1893, Jessie Ah Coon's age was given as seventeen. She was, however, born in 1879, meaning that she was only fourteen. Marriage registration for Jessie Ah Coon and Ah Shing, Indigo, Victoria, 1893/1962.

Remembering Their Lives

Rural graveyards are the most obvious physical site of remembrance of the lives of Australia's early Chinese settlers and their families. Cemeteries with significant Chinese sections, including Beechworth, Rutherglen and the old Indigo cemetery, are now featuring in heritage trails like the Indigo Gold Trail launched in mid-2011.³¹ In this context, cemeteries become symbolic of the wider history of Chinese migration to Australia, and it can be easy to think that they are all that remains of that history – the seemingly indecipherable Chinese headstones emblematic of the difficulties of uncovering such a hidden story. Yet these cemeteries also provide a place where we can clearly see individual lives, rather than an anonymous and unknowable mass. Each grave marker represents a life lived on Australian soil, and the rituals of remembering that accompany them – whether private or public – symbolise the emotion that lies in the stories of these lives. The markers provide a tangible and personal connection between Australians of the past and present, inviting us to share in remembering the loves and losses, successes and failures that make up the stories of Australia's early Chinese community.



Figure 15. “Chinese rites at the graves of their countrymen” (*Illustrated Australian News*, 10 September 1872). The tradition of presenting offerings to honour the dead is continued by Chinese Australian families today, particularly on return visits to their ancestral villages in the Pearl River Delta.

State Library of Victoria: accession no. IAN10/09/72/196

³¹ See “Indigo Gold Trail,” Beechworth Visitor Information Centre, <<http://www.beechworthonline.com.au/pages/indigo-gold-trail/>>, accessed 15 September 2011.

Today the landscape at Indigo might just barely whisper the stories of the men and women who, for a century, lived, loved and worked in this one small corner of the Australian bush. But the district is part of a rich and significant history of Chinese life in colonial Australia – a history that includes intimate encounters that crossed boundaries of race, language and culture. Uncovering this history shifts our understanding of race relations in Australia's past, as it does our understanding of Australians' encounters with their Asian neighbours. Piecing together the lives of Chinese men who travelled south across the sea and tracing those lives back to China demonstrates the connections that exist across time and place, between landscapes and people often imagined to be fundamentally different and distant. I hope to be able to make another journey back to Shek Quey Lee, to share more of what I have uncovered about that small village's Australian connection. I would like to share with Chen Ruihuai the names of the villagers who are remembered in the See Yup Temple in Melbourne and perhaps to meet with the descendants of those men who left behind wives and children when they came to Australia. This is a shared history, one that belongs both to China and Australia.