FIELD NOTES: ‘NO MORE TUCKER’

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Abstract
The illegal overland migration of Chinese migrants from the Northern Territory into Queensland was a hot topic in the late nineteenth century that has received little attention since. It was the northern version of the better known, but much shorter, Robe to Ballarat and Bendigo migration route of the 1850s. Several northern routes were used. Most involved treks of around 2,000 kilometres. The efforts and risks taken cast doubt on the argument that most Chinese migrants of that period were mere sojourners. While the direct archaeology of such activities is minimal some associated features (tracks, police stations and a gaol) remain within the cultural landscape. Photographs of that landscape are presented here alongside a contemporary image of Chinese prisoners detained in Queensland’s northwest.

Introduction
Chinese immigration to northern Australia peaked in the late nineteenth century. Asians were seen as cheap manual labour, willing and able to work in the tropics (see for example Reynolds 1873 quoted in Jones 1997:3). In the Northern Territory there were several overseas recruitment drives taken to encourage contract workers to participate in mining and government works (Daly 1887:10). The discovery of gold in the north was soon to result in an even greater influx of Chinese throughout the region. The Palmer Goldfield, in northeast Queensland, and Pine Creek in the Northern Territory were both discovered in 1872. The Palmer attracted approximately 18,000 Chinese within a few years of its discovery (Kirkman 1984:55). Over the border, in the Northern Territory, Chinese outnumbered Europeans more than six to one by 1888 (Powell 1982: 99).

Queensland had developed a reputation as a place with good prospects. Not surprisingly, many Chinese decided to try their luck in the eastern colonies, and their efforts appear more consistent with the desire to become settlers rather than mere sojourners. They retained strong links with their homelands but Australia was where they could see opportunities for the future. Anyone who undertook the challenges of walking to Queensland was certainly indicating that they were in no hurry to return to the upheavals in China. But the easiest way to get to Queensland was by the regular coastal steamers. In 1898 the fare from Darwin to Townsville was £5; significantly more than the fare of £3 from Hong Kong to Darwin. This, along with a £10 poll tax, meant anyone planning to move to Queensland needed to raise at least £15. In present terms that apparently modest figure equates to around $1,600 (Blake 2008). Clearly the steamer trip was not an option for near destitute Territory Chinese.

Figure 1 Turn-off Lagoon viewed from the site of the former police station late in the dry season. During the wet season the area in view is flooded (Source: author).
Drovers taking cattle to the Kimberley region of northwest Western Australia opened up a coastal track in the 1870s and 1880s (see Daly 1887; Powell 1982; and Roberts 2005). There are some claims that people were moving through this area as early as 1869 (Cotton 2005: 6). Europeans heading west to the Halls Creek goldfields around 1885 used the same route. From near Burketown heading west, that track ran almost parallel to the routes followed by Ludwig Leichhardt between 1844 and 1845 and later by A.C. Gregory between 1855 and 1856. While some Chinese had horses, most simply walked. They carried their meagre possessions in bundles thrown over their shoulders or on yokes and poles.

For those who decided the southerly track was preferable, the terrain consisted predominantly of rolling grasslands interspersed with low shrubby trees and extended for around 500 kilometres. Water was a greater concern along this route, particularly in the dry season. Creeks are generally rare, shallow and seasonal, but when it rains they spread across the black soil plains. Waterholes exist, but they too are seasonal, few and far between and, again, just off the main route.

During June and July 1898, Queensland police arrested twenty-seven men who had arrived at Camooweal, two singly and the rest in groups of two, ten and thirteen (NTAO file 5/1899). Several stated they were out of water and had ‘no more tucker’. They were arrested for entering the colony without a permit, and jailed for six months. This put pressure on Camooweal’s jail – a three square metre tin shed. The men were eventually shifted to Stewart Creek, Townsville. On being released in December 1898 and January 1899 they were immediately remanded in custody for deportation back to Darwin.

There appear to be only five photographs associated with efforts to enter Queensland overland. One is of a deceased male who perished en route to Queensland. The other four relate to twenty-five men who absconded from their employment near Wollogorang station in the north east corner of the Territory. According to the Queenslander (1900) they headed to Burketown in 1900. They were arrested but, apparently before formal charges were laid – the records for this period are missing – they were loaded onto a dray and sent back to the Territory.

The four photographs taken by local photographer, Alphonse Chargois, show two views of the men under police escort. A third image shows them engaged in a tug-of-war, apparently to keep fit while in jail. The final photograph is of a group of young
men crouched, under guard, being fed in the grounds of what was probably the Burketown Police Station. This latter photograph is apparently the only one to have survived in a separate collection of Chargois’s glass plates. It was previously thought to relate to prisoners held at nearby Croydon for unspecified offences.

The descendants of those who made the perilous journey between the Northern Territory and Queensland, who still live in the tropical north, speak to the fact that for a significant number of Chinese seeking gold in Australia their desire was to settle there to make a future. The understandable prominence given to Chinese gold seekers in southeastern Australia nevertheless justifies archaeologists, historians and heritage professionals examining the physical, oral and documentary records of the thousands of Chinese who migrated, a few decades later, to northern Australia.

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References