Shoulder Yokes and Moon Cakes: 
The Chinese diaspora in the Riverina district of New South Wales, Australia, 1850 to the present

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Abstract

In October of 2008, I was commissioned by the Museum of the Riverina in Wagga Wagga to research the history of the Chinese people in the Riverina with a view to mounting an exhibition at the museum. The exhibition opened in Wagga Wagga in December 2010 and in Albury in May 2011. It has provided startling insights into the daily lives of the Chinese people in this region and resulted in the collection of a large number of artefacts and photographs – many from Chinese-Australian families still living in the region. New insights have been gleaned into the importance of Chinese labour and enterprise for the rural economy, the internal workings of Chinese society, relationships with the police and the justice system and broader European society, and the importance of fraternal and family networks. Of particular significance is the employment of most Chinese men in pastoral pursuits, with others working as tenant farmers, market gardeners, and store keepers.

Many of the history of the Chinese in the Riverina has been lost or (at best) marginalised. Happily, the Museum’s exhibition and its accompanying catalogue will help redress some of this neglect, and point the way for other regional centres to follow suit. The success of the exhibition suggests that the day is not far away that a major rewrite of colonial and post colonial history will occur, restoring the Chinese people to their rightful place as pioneers in this country.

Background

In October 2008 I was commissioned by the Museum of the Riverina in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales (NSW), to assist with the mounting of an exhibition on the history of the Chinese people in the Riverina (the area of southern NSW that borders the Murray River). My tasks included the sourcing of all artefacts and photos (many of which were in private collections), talking to family members (some of whom still lived in the Riverina), researching early press accounts, obtaining photos and other material (such as gaol and immigration records) from the National Archives in Canberra and Sydney and the State Records Centre in Sydney, photographing market gardener’s huts, stores, and Chinese cemeteries (some still with their burning towers and offertory tables), and writing the catalogue, panels, and captions for the exhibits. Logistically it was a complex and sometimes testing project, for the area covered was very large. Framed primarily by the Murray, Lachlan, and Murrumbidgee River systems, it extended as far west as Hay and as far east as Tumut. The main test for inclusion was historical connection and relevance, which meant that towns and cities such as Albury, Wagga Wagga, Deniliquin, Narrandera, Grong Grong, Junee, Temora, Cootamundra, Gundagai, Boolgal, and Hillston made it to the list, but others, such as Young, did not. The exhibition was organised thematically along the same lines as this paper. We were very fortunate to obtain the active support of the Sydney Chinese community and the NSW Migration Heritage Centre, whose financial contribution was vital to the success of the project.

The exhibition was launched on 9 December 2010 amidst raging floodwaters, which kept some people away, but fortunately not all. The opening night was truly glittering; the exhibition was described as “world class”, and was later widely acclaimed in the media. It ran until 27 March 2011 then relocated to Albury, where it was reopened in a slightly different format on 14 May.

The range of photos and artefacts was remarkable. These included traditional food containers such as brown ware jars, soy bottles, ginger jars, liquor bottles, agricultural implements such as shoulder yokes, watering cans, wicker baskets, rake and hoe heads, and an improvised one man plough and seeder. From the stores were Chinese produce boxes, many European made products, and advertising materials such as calendars. A large number of advertisements, some quite bold in their proclamations of competitiveness, and dating from the
1870s and 1880s to more modern times, were obtained from the newspapers. Gaol photos, an illustrated index from the Hay Gaol book, and sundry public notices offering rewards to those who could identify miscreant stone throwers or warning off intending fruit and vegetable stealers helped complete the prejudice and discrimination theme. Certificates of Domicile and Certificates of Exemption from the Dictation Test provided rare glimpses of many former Chinese residents. The certificates were included under the ‘Transnational Lives: White Australia Policy’ theme. Perhaps the most intriguing item in the exhibition was a subscription board listing names and dues from members of the Narrandera Hung Men Society. Following the demolition of the temple it was used as a book shelf before its recovery. Accompanying this item were ritual objects such as a brass serving plate, incense sticks, a stone incense maker, an incense holder, and several moon cake holders. At the Albury exhibition additional items included two temple doors with their side panels and the signboard of the Chinese Masonic Society. To illustrate traditional camp life and leisure activities the usual paraphernalia for opium smoking, such as scales, vials and a pipe were included, along with Chinese coins (used for gambling), and several Chinese books.

There have been several studies of Chinese market gardens, but possibly the most comprehensive study of Chinese farming in Australia is Cathie May’s Topsawyers: the Chinese in Cairns 1870 to 1920, published in 1986. In this work, May discussed the economic and social impact of Chinese farming in the Cairns District in North Queensland. It was to be 14 years before historians and historical archaeologists again discussed the rural and regional Chinese in Australia in any meaningful way. In 2000, Rod Lancashire wrote about Chinese involvement in the vineyards of northeast Victoria. The following year, in a landmark publication on the overseas Chinese in Australia, historical archaeologist lan Jack remarked that the Chinese pre-eminence in market gardening and irrigation ‘was in need of urgent synthesis and field work’ (2001: 51). In the same collection, Maxine Darnell wrote about the experiences of the Chinese as indentured labourers in the period 1847 to 1855. Of particular significance in this decade was Shen Yuanfäng’s, Dragonseed in the Antipodes (2001), which challenged at length the view that the Chinese were merely sojourners. In 2002, Warwick Frost also commented on the characterisation of the Chinese as sojourners rather than settlers, and remarked on the absence of any detailed consideration of the development of Chinese farming, most broad agricultural histories making no mention of any Chinese contribution at all.

Further important insights into the rural and regional Chinese in Australia were included in two publications in 2004: a special issue of Journal of Australian Colonial History, titled Active voices, hidden histories: the Chinese in Colonial Australia (Roberts 2004) and Otherland Literary Journal’s After the rush: regulation, participation, and Chinese communities in Australia 1860-1949 (Couchman, Fitzgerald & McGregor 2004). These were followed by John Fitzgerald’s Big white lie: Chinese-Australians in white Australia, published in 2007. But the main (and still principal) insight into the lives of rural and regional Chinese in Australia is Janis Wilton’s 2004 Golden threads: the Chinese in regional New South Wales 1850-1950. This book is wonderfully illustrated and covers a number of very important themes such as work, language, leisure, food, beliefs, immigration, and burials. Critically, Wilton’s work gave impetus to other studies of the rural and regional Chinese in NSW, all of which received substantial assistance and encouragement from the late Professor Henry Chan and his ‘Tracking the Dragon’ project, which had as its aim the identification of Chinese Australian heritage places. The first of these studies, by Barbara Hickson and Heather Nicholls (2006), was a heritage report on the Chinese in central and western NSW, to which I also contributed. Two years later, in collaboration with Dr Lindsay Smith, I began work on a heritage study of the Chinese in southern NSW and the Riverina. The Riverina exhibition has followed on from that project. Joanna Boileau’s (2009) study of the Chinese in the Tweed Valley in north east NSW was also inspired by the ‘Tracking the Dragon’ project.

This paper focuses on four aspects of local Chinese-Australian history. Firstly, the settlement patterns within the Riverina – how numerically significant were the Chinese and when did they arrive? Secondly, what were the principal occupations of the Chinese and how important were they for the local economy? How well or otherwise were the Chinese labourers paid? Thirdly, how did they live their lives? To what extent did they maintain their culture and at the same time negotiate and bridge the racial divide? Fourthly, and in relation to the above, what is the evidence for discrimination and prejudice? How did the police, courts, the press, and general citizenry treat the local Chinese?

Through the exhibition publication, Tracking the dragon: a history of the Chinese in the Riverina, the project has highlighted the richness and diversity of the Chinese-Australian experience in rural Australia. To a large degree it reinforces observations already made in other similar studies, but for the Riverina Chinese there is another consideration which sets this study apart from many others: the status of the Riverina as a border province. Adjoined to the south by the Murray River and Victoria, this proximity had important consequences for the daily lives of the Chinese people, many of whom travelled between Victoria and the Riverina for personal reasons, work, and commerce. The consequences of this proximity are no better illustrated than by the impact of the various pieces of restrictive immigration legislation which disrupted the formerly free passage of Chinese people from Victoria to the Riverina.

Settlement Patterns

The Chinese presence in the Riverina is long and substantial and, in contrast to most other regions in Australia, a significant percentage of the men worked in the pastoral industry in the nineteenth century. Many men were also engaged in market gardening in the town camps and on the pastoral stations; as tenant farmers and landowners in their own right, and as storekeepers. Some men were engaged in gold mining, but by the 1870s and 1880s (the main period of Chinese immigration) this activity had begun to fall away. Meaningful population figures are difficult to obtain for it was a moving population, with many men shifting between towns and pastoral stations, and the peak numbers did not coincide with the Census dates. But a mixture of Census results and other data does provide some pointers. In the 1871 Census the total Chinese population in the region was 777, with the largest concentration in the rural areas near Tumut and Albury. Only 150 Chinese lived in the five main Riverina towns, Albury, Narrandera, Wagga Wagga, Deniliquin and Hay. In an 1878 report 1,466 Chinese people were recorded in the towns and villages of the Riverina District, of whom 571 were in the main Riverina towns (Fosbery 1978).
A later report on Chinese camps in the Riverina – subsequently referred to as the Brennan Report (1884) – recorded 869 Chinese as residents or frequent visitors to the Chinese camps in the five main Riverina towns in 1883. The main increase since 1878 had taken place in Narrandera and Wagga Wagga. The Chinese population of Narrandera leapt from a mere 27 to 303. Narrandera’s growth was explosive, for in the 1871 Census only 11 Chinese called it home.

Using a simple method of extrapolation the total Chinese population, in the Riverina in 1883 could have been around 2,200 – and this figure may well be an understatement for many Chinese lived on large pastoral stations, many of which were akin to small villages. A comparison with the predominantly rural Cairns, Atherton, and Innisfail districts in North Queensland and the New England area in northern NSW is instructive. In North Queensland the Chinese arrivals post-dated the Chinese presence in the Riverina, and by 1901 the Chinese population was 2,550 (May 1984: 14). The New England district had a Chinese population of 2,134 in 1877, but in distinct contrast to the Riverina area over 90 per cent of the Chinese population was engaged in mining (Fosbery 1878). The numbers of Chinese in these regions may not seem large, but it must be remembered that this was rural and outback Australia, not Melbourne or Sydney – or for that matter Bendigo or Ballarat. Chinese men constituted a very large proportion of the adult male population in the Riverina towns. The late historian, Geoffrey Buxton (1887: 224), estimated that the presence of 300 adult male Chinese in a town such as Narrandera (with a total population in the early 1880s of 1,400) meant that almost every second adult male in town was Chinese.

In the Riverina, many of the Chinese people lived in camps located on the fringe of the main towns and close to the main waterways. The camps were self-contained, vibrant, and sometimes controversial communities. According to Brennan and Tart (1883) the camps were ‘indispensable necessities’ where large numbers of Chinese were involved, providing accommodation for the unemployed and paupers. The Narrandera camp had 340 residents, including women and children (almost all of the women were European). Of the Chinese men, 14 worked in stores, 20 in opium shops, 10 in cook shops, 20 in gaming houses, and 12 were gardeners. Most of the others were labourers. The village had streets and lanes and contained stores, a temple and lodge, a very large cook shop, two lottery houses, several fan tan rooms, and several houses of ill-repute. The village was surrounded by market gardens, and at one time had a hospital and a Christian church (Narrandera Ensign 1894). The Wagga Wagga camp had 223 residents: 194 Chinese, six European married women, one Chinese married woman, 16 children and seven prostitutes. Of the men, 12 worked in stores, 13 in opium shops, 30 were gardeners, six were fruit dealers, 124 were ticket sellers and labourers, and six were proprietors of lottery rooms. The camp also had temples and lodges (Brennan & Tart 1883: 1–7). These camps probably differed little in appearance from the Victorian camps in places such as Beechworth, except perhaps in size. Unlike Victoria, no controls were imposed on Chinese settlement by the NSW authorities. Once across the border the Chinese were free to settle where they liked. The Riverina camps also meet Pauline Rule’s categorisation as contact zones (2004: 119–131). Indeed, this was one of their more contentious aspects, with the camps serving as a source of amusement and entertainment for many Europeans through prostitution, gambling and sly grog selling. But more important was their role as a safe haven for European women who had fallen on hard times and who were pursued relentlessly by the police under the vagrancy laws. Many of these women married Chinese men and successfully raised families. Others became notorious, forever before the courts for all manner of offences. Annie Singleton (from the Hay camp) was described as a ‘female Lucifer’ (Riverine Grazier 1888b). Not far behind her in reputation was Lizzie Ah Fee from Narrandera and, prior to that Beechworth, where she had been known as ‘Tiger Lili’ (McWaters 2002: 103–111; Narrandera Ensign 1891, 1893; Riverine Grazier 1888b). In the larger towns the camps lingered on until the 1940s or 1950s, by which time few residents were left, and the camps soon dismantled.

Work and economy

Discussion of the camps leads readily into the question of work and economy, for they were a vital source of labour for pastoralists, who used the services of Chinese contractors to engage large groups of Chinese men to ringbark trees and clear their properties of timber. The Chinese men were also used for many other tasks on the pastoral stations, such as fencing, dam construction, wool washing, market gardening, shearing, and cooking. George Gow, a station manager and later a stock agent, wrote a detailed account of these activities. One of the Narrandera contractors was Wong Gooey. He would inspect the proposed contracts and property and then bargain for terms, taking five per cent of the contract monies...
for organising the job. Sometimes he had several jobs going at once, ‘extending into thousands and thousands of acres’, and ‘he would move to and fro inspecting them’. After making his inspection of the contract work he would return to Narrandera and discuss it with Sam Yett, a Chinese storekeeper and financier, who supplied the rations and took the men to the job in his two horse caravan (BPA & IS 1975: 20, 35–38).

Gow commented that ringbarking was usually shunned by most European bush labourers, who called it ‘Chinamen’s work’ (Bendigo Advertiser 1864a). He stated that the Chinese men were very well provided for and lived ‘exceedingly well’ (BPA & IS 1975: 36–38). And the contracts could be strongly contested. C.F. McDonald (1881), the manager of Wantabadgery station in the early 1880s, recounted the instance of Chinese labourers refusing to work at the prevailing rates and bargaining for higher ones. By the 1880s the ringbarking frontier had moved further north, following the copper and gold mining booms in the Mt Hope, Nymagee, Cobar, and Mt Drysdale areaS. But a significant number of Chinese remained in the Riverina district for decades to come.

As the years passed, the contracts gradually grew smaller. Gooey’s last large contract in the Riverina was on Barellan Station at the end of 1910. It comprised 6,000 acres and was undertaken by a gang of 11 men (BPA & IS 1975: 20, 50–54). Ah Sam and Ah Hem were two other Narrandera contractors who were rivals of Gooey (ibid.: 23). George Hock Shung succeeded Sam Yett on the latter’s death in 1903, though he may have commenced contracting work well before that (ibid.: 20–23, 50–54).

One of the last large scale ringbarking and root grubbing contracts in the Riverina was in 1920 on Tubbo Station, near Narrandera. King Fan, who lived at the Narrandera camp, was by then the main labour contractor. Station ledgers reveal that Chinese men were engaged in a variety of labouring tasks (particularly ringbarking) along with their employment as market gardeners and cooks from at least 1866 (the earliest known record) to the 1920s, after which their activities were confined to cooking and market gardening. The contract labourers were paid through the headman or contractor. Other workers such as cooks and market gardeners were paid individually at rates comparable with European wages (Tubbo Station 1866–1930).

At Deniliquin in 1894, one contractor had about 60 men working at Hartwood and Coree stations. He purchased his groceries from a Melbourne merchant and had them sent to Sing Lee’s store in town (Deniliquin Pastoral Times 1894).

Some of the Chinese labourers came from Victoria. Historian Rod Lancashire (2004) recounts the prevalence of Chinese labour in the vineyards in the Rutherglen-Wahgunyah area of Victoria and in the local pastoral industry. Prior to the restrictive immigration legislations of 1881 and especially 1888, Lancashire tells us, many Chinese sought employment in the NSW pastoral industry and in the Corowa vineyards. Lancashire states that some of the NSW pastoral teams operated out of Wahgunyah. Lancashire also comments that attempts to avoid payment of the border dues reveals a strong networking pattern between Chinese in both colonies, particularly as many would have belonged to the same district associations, such as the Sze Yap (ibid.: 193–201). As will be discussed later, many also belonged to the same fraternal associations.

With the passage of time an increasing number of Chinese men were recruited under arrangements between leading Chinese merchants in Australia and recruiting companies, some of which were based in Hong Kong. In this process family and fraternal associations were critical, with the recruiting focused on specific villages. Almost all of the Riverina Chinese came from Guangdong Province, though from different counties and districts within the region. The late William Liu (1977: 5), a prominent Sydney entrepreneur, recalled that the Hong Kong based Sam Yick Co was the primary contractor for land clearing in Narrandera (though there were probably others). They hired labourers from the village of Hor Chung Hong Li Toon in Toishan County, Guangdong Province, including Liu’s father (ibid.: 5). Willie Ah Kin, originally a market gardener in Deniliquin and Urana, also diversified into labour contracting, recruiting men from his home district, and on their arrival into Australia, forming them into gangs to work on contracts in the Urana area (Shire of Urana 1951). In the 1870s and 1880s it is possible that the bulk of the new arrivals in the Riverina were recruited direct from China. Land clearing was hard work, and by the 1880s many original labourers would have been well into their 40s, if not 50s.

Ringbarking was not the only work that Chinese labourers excelled at. In 1887 a correspondent for the Argus reported on the large numbers of Chinese labourers engaged in wool scouring in the Hay district. In answer to the question, ‘why not employ whites?’, he was told ‘The Chinamen do the work better; they neither waste the wool nor damage the plant; there is in fact no bother with them at all; they do their work faithfully and well and earn higher wages than the ordinary white workmen’ (Argus 1887a). Observing the amount of wool barged down river from Burrabogie Station, he lamented that the ‘best of the work was passing out of the white men’s hands, and simply because of their inferiority or idleness’. All of Burrabogie’s wool clip for the year was scourcd by Chinese labour. The Chinese ‘did not work for a low wage, but they have organisation, industry, carefulness, thrift which the available white work men lack’ (Argus 1887b). There were between 20 and 30 of them busy on the washing punts and it was described as ‘nice, cool, comfortable, pleasant work’ (Argus 1887b).

The economic value of Chinese pastoral labour was undisputed. On 30 December 1890, a Sydney Morning Herald correspondent stated that nearly all the pastoralists to whom he had spoken had the same opinion of the Chinese people. It was not so much that their labour was cheaper, for in many cases the Chinese labourers received the same wages or even more than the Europeans; it was because they were steadier and more reliable. He stated that as cooks and gardeners they were invaluable and produced nearly all the vegetables grown in the bush. They also turned their hand to rabbiting in some cases, and were found ready to do nearly all the rough work on the stations. On 19 May 1888, a correspondent for the Town and Country Journal cited a squatter who criticised the European labourers, saying that:

They can’t do it at the price, and if they take a contract they only do so to get a draw of rations and then clear out and take the tools with them. It’s quite different with the Chinese; we only deal with the head man and whatever price he accepts the work is always done, even when they can’t earn tucker at it, and then they don’t get drunk, and kick up rows.

Their worth as market gardeners was equally appreciated, not only on the pastoral stations but also in the towns. Market gardening was a major activity in Deniliquin, perhaps more so...
than in any other Riverina town. A favourable climate and adequate water meant that three crops could be harvested each year, and a major destination for the crops was the Bendigo goldfields. A news report in 1864 referred to an A. Cooey, whose garden was described as ‘a perfect oasis in the surrounding desert’, the first dray load of vegetables leaving for the Bendigo area in April 1865 (Bendigo Advertiser 1864a).

Other gardeners soon followed suit, the Bendigo Advertiser correspondent commented favourably on their industry and remarking that they were the ‘coming man’ of the Riverina (1864b; see also Bendigo Advertiser 1865a, 1865b). The editor of the Deniliquin Pastoral Times commenting on 16 July 1870 on the ‘large numbers of Chinese’ flocking to the district, almost every station having its Chinese cook or gardener, or both. He conceded, however, that the local population was ‘greatly indebted’ to the Chinese for a cheap and good supply of vegetables all year round. Earlier, on 6 April 1867, a Hay correspondent for the same newspaper noted the industry and thrift of the Chinese gardeners, commenting that ‘for industry and sobriety he is a pattern to the whites’.

Further north were the Chinese gardens at Hilliston. On the occasion of Chinese New Year in 1876 the Riverine Grazier correspondent spoke very highly of the energies of the Chinese gardeners, of whom there were about 20 working in a cooperative arrangement. He commented that the district ‘would suffer materially without the aid of our Asiatic friends’.

Further west were the Chinese gardens at Booligal. In 1896 the two gardens were irrigated by two windmills, which pumped water from the Lachlan River (Sydney Morning Herald 1896). To the south at Wagga Wagga, most of the gardens were located in the lagoon area known as North Wagga Island, though some were also near the main camp in Fitzmaurice St. At Albury, most of the gardens were located between the main camp area and the Murray River. But the largest garden area was at Mungarabeena, where it extended over several hectares and included pumps, brick and concrete lined water channels, and concrete piping. Of particular note is the longevity of some of these gardens, many of them commencing in the mid 1860s and still operating in the 1950s.

But market gardening was not the only form of agricultural activity. In the early 1870s the Chinese turned their energies to other crops such as tobacco. Tobacco was first cultivated near Albury in the 1870s and later introduced to the Tumut area. The main area of tobacco farming was on the Tumut Plains, particularly on Wermatong station, and also at Gocup on the road to Gundagai, at Kimo station, also near Gundagai, and near Tarcutta (Sydney Mail 1889). The Chinese were tenant farmers, renting the land from European land owners and paying an annual or quarterly rent, usually at a higher rate than most Europeans (Town and Country Journal 1889). They were financed by Tumut based entrepreneurs (of whom the main one was Dang Ah Chee) who helped them set up their farms, taking a share of their crops as payment, and bargaining with the landowners and the tobacco buyers on their behalf. A local Tumut resident, Jack Bridle, remarked in his reminiscences that the owners of Wermatong were very happy with the Chinese as tenants because they were ‘industrious, honest, and above all, because of their system of banking with their local storekeeper their rents were always paid on time’ (Bridle 1993: 12–14).

Other Chinese worked in the towns as storekeepers, shop assistants, cooks, herbalists, and wool and skin buyers. The stores sold a wide range of Chinese and European goods. They were multifunctional in nature and played an essential role in Chinese- Australian society, channeling new arrivals into accommodation and employment, helping with travel documentation, writing letters, banking, and remitting money to China and elsewhere (Lydon 1999: 83–84). Some of the more notable stores in the main town areas were Dang Ah Chee’s Hi Chong stores at Gundagai and Tumut and Man Sing’s and Mee Ling’s stores at Temora, though there were many others. The owners ran advertisements in the local papers and were not backward in offering lower prices than European traders. In the twentieth century the Chinese people diversified into businesses such as garages, theatres, drycleaners and trucking. One branch of the Choy family played a very significant role in the commercial life of Grong Grong. Starting with a market garden they went on to own a garage, steel fabrication business, the school bus, the mail run, the picture show, barber shop, pool hall, and café. Later, some members of the family moved to Narrandera, where they established (and still run) a dry cleaning business. Another notable entrepreneur was James Ah (or Wong) Chuey, a commission agent, general storekeeper and contractor, wool scourer, and wool and skin buyer, with branches in Junee, Cootamundra, Wagga Wagga, Wyalong, Barmedman, and Tumut. Tommy Ah Wah was another well known businessman, owning garages and car sales rooms at Wagga Wagga and Junee. Dang Charles Doon from Tumut, also another
prominent businessman, began as a wool and skin buyer, before diversifying into dry cleaning and general carrying. Some Chinese men also owned farms. Such people included James Fong of Broken Dam near Temora, William Quong and later Harry Choy of Grong Grong and James Ah Chuey of Junee (Grong Grong History Committee 2003; Speirs 1987; Sydney Szue Yup Kwan Ti Temple 1998: 21).

Culture, influence and friendship
Prosperous businessmen such as Dang Ah Chee and James Ah Chuey had an influence in the broader community which extended well beyond their commercial success. Dang Ah Chee was a contributor to many local charities, such as the hospitals. James Ah Chuey was a leading member of the Junee Methodist church and often held large functions for church members (many of whom were Chinese) and other townsfolk to his home on special occasions such as Chinese New Year (Junee Southern Cross 1903: 2). He was also a friend and confident of the then premier of NSW, William Holman, whose services were called upon to help rescue his adopted son who had been kidnapped by Chinese bandits (Braidwood Review 1916; Chinese Australian Herald 1916). Like so many other Chinese people, Ah Chuey straddled both cultures. He was a leading benefactor of the Szee Yap Society in Sydney, contributing substantially towards the building of the Glebe Temple, and co-founded the Chinese Masonic Society. On leaving Junee he lived in Sydney, where he became a leading merchant and a co-founder of the China-Australia Steamship Line (Sydney Morning Herald 1908, 1912; Yong 1977; Junee Southern Cross 1904: 1; Chinese Australian Herald 1904).

Many Chinese men (particularly the storekeepers) were married, mostly to European women, although some married Chinese women and many were members of one of the Christian churches. Christian missions, Chinese Christian churches and Sunday schools existed in the larger towns such as Narrandera, Albury, Wagga Wagga, Tumut and Hay. Their adherents were buried in the denominational sections of the local cemetery with either Chinese or European-style headstones. The Hay Church of England mission was opened in 1893 and the Narrandera church in 1894 (Riverine Grazer 1893; Narrandera Ensign 1894b). A Chinese mission (church) opened in Tumut in the late 1890s and later shifted to Wagga Wagga (Stacey 1926: 51). A Chinese Sunday School was also established at St David’s Presbyterian church at Albury in the 1890s (Wilton 2004: 100).

Despite these cross allegiances the Chinese people were successful in maintaining their traditional cultural ties, many no doubt seeing church membership as a way of bridging the racial divide. Temples and Masonic Lodges were located in all the main towns, and festivals such as Chinese New Year were held on a regular basis and were very public. Many of the Riverina Chinese were members of the Hung Men Society, which operated as a paternal association and mutual aid organisation, subsequently transforming itself into the Chinese Masonic Society. Artefacts relating to both societies have been found in Albury and Narrandera. The societies looked after their own – the poor and the homeless – and their ceremonies, like the temple functions, were very well attended. Perhaps the Chinese cemeteries are the most visual expression of this cultural resilience. Most were located within the boundaries of European cemeteries, especially in the larger towns. Chinese who were members of a fraternal association and also members of a Christian church were buried first with Christian rites; traditional rites then followed. At Wagga Wagga, Albury, Tumut and Deniliquin, the burning towers are still standing. The importance of traditional Chinese burial customs, including the practice of feng shui, is evident at the Adelong cemeteries in the location and orientation of the graves and the very strong evidence of exhumation (Smith 2006: 146–151).

Beyond the Christian churches other aspects of European life were also embraced, foremost of which was the willingness by the Chinese community to donate money to the local hospitals and help in other fund raising efforts. The Riverine Grazer carried regular lists of contributors to the Hay hospital, Europeans and Chinese alike. On 8 February 1879, the list contained the names of 52 Chinese residents of and visitors to Hay, and the names of 30 Chinese at the small town of Booligal, plus the contributions of those residing on iconic stations such as Burrabogie. On 16 February 1892, the subscription list included 18 Chinese contributors on Tupra station and 25 on Ulonga station, to name but two. The Deniliquin Chinese were equally generous, with 52 contributors from the town in 1875 and 66 in 1899 (Deniliquin and District Historical Society n.d.). At Gundagai in 1879 the Chinese were congratulated on having set a ‘praiseworthy example to the Europeans’ by the generosity of their contributions (Gundagai Times 1879).
The Chinese also took part in local concerts, fetes, and processions, particularly where fund raising was involved. For instance, in 1892 a Chinese orchestra and singers performed to a mixed audience at the Athenaeum Hall in Hay, and in 1894 took part in the Hillston hospital fete procession and some of the games that then followed. They often donated fireworks to the Hay hospital fetes (Riverine Grazer 1892d, 1894a, 1897). In Albury in 1897, the Chinese people turned out in large numbers to take part in the Queen’s Jubilee celebration. A highlight of the day was a Chinese band and a monster dragon, almost 50 metres long and carried by 80 men ‘all dressed in gorgeous attire’, and a fireworks display (Ovens & Murray Advertiser 1897; Albury Daily News & Wodonga Chronicle 1897a, 1897b). Chinese gardeners also entered and won prizes in the horticultural shows (Riverine Grazer 1894b). The Chinese New Year festivals were a highlight for the Chinese and many European residents, especially those invited to the feasts (Gundagai Times 1880). In several instances very genuine friendships arose between Europeans and Chinese. People such as James Ah Chuey gardener and general help on his property.

Prejudice and discrimination

To many Europeans, the Chinese were a mysterious, alien, and inferior race. Criticisms of their opium smoking and gambling, the perceived lack of hygiene in the camps, and the behaviour of their more boisterous wives and other female camp followers, can be found in most newspapers. On the other hand the same newspaper, after a long-winded diatribe, could not long after express the deepest sympathy for a Chinese man who may have been injured by being thrown from his cart or who may have had his vegetable produce destroyed in floods. The press was particularly scathing about the local larrkin element, who sometimes assaulted the Chinese by throwing stones or stealing or damaging their garden produce. On 25 October 1878, a Gundagai Times correspondent bewailed the tricks played by larrkins on the Chinese and other vulnerable citizens and pleaded that the sooner that ‘larrkimism is stamped out the better’. It was an all too familiar refrain. On 13 January 1881, a correspondent for the Wagga Wagga Advertiser remarked that assaults upon the Chinese by larrkins were very common, notwithstanding the severe sentences and fines that had been inflicted. In the latest incident a European youth had been fined £2 6s 4d for throwing a stone and striking a Chinese storekeeper. The correspondent commented that perhaps the fine would ‘teach other boys that Chinamen live under the same protection as other colonists and must not be ill treated’. A similar incident took place at Gundagai in 1882 (see Gundagai Times 1882).

However, much of the bullying and taunting of individuals on the streets, school grounds or the work place was never recorded – leave alone prosecuted – particularly if school kids were involved, and it lasted well into the twentieth century. The well known horse racing jockey Ted Doon, originally from Tumut, recalled that his father taught all the boys to box and they could thus manage to command respect with their fists if needed. But for the girls it was different. According to Alison Nye some Chinese girls in Wagga Wagga attempted to disguise their ethnicity by trying to ‘whiten’ their faces; more tragically some who were unable to cope committed suicide.

Also of concern to the Chinese communities was the formation of Anti-Chinese leagues in Adelong, Tumut, and Temora in the 1890s. These leagues were, fortunately, a pale imitation of their more violent American counterparts and not particularly successful in their aims. The Tumut League lasted only a short while and floundered on the unpopular proposition that local landowners not rent land out to Chinese tenant farmers since many landowners (including the in-laws of the main proponent Mr Shelley) regarded the Chinese farmers as their bread and butter. A League meeting in August 1888 ended in high farce, with a committee member resigning because he had agreed to allow three Chinese men to erect huts on his land for £1 a week (Riverine Grazer 1888d). In Temora the League came unstuck at its inaugural meeting when it was pointed out that the Chairman’s son was apprenticed to a Chinese tradesman (Temora Star 1883).

The status of the Chinese people before the law is intriguing. Institutional discrimination was enforced through legislation, the most important of which related to immigration restrictions. Following the Lambing Flat riots the Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1861 was introduced, though it was repealed in 1867. More damaging to the Riverina Chinese was the 1881 legislation, which imposed a tonnage restriction on ships in the ratio of one Chinese for every 100 tons of cargo and a poll tax of £10 on Chinese entering or re-entering the colony. Many Chinese had business and kinship ties on either side of the border and up until 1881 could move freely between the other colonies and NSW. After that date it was more difficult, for the poll tax was costly if frequent visits were envisaged. With a stroke of the pen a new class of criminal was created: Chinese people seeking to avoid payment of the poll tax.

But much worse was to follow in 1888. The debate on and passage of the Influx of Chinese Restriction Act 1888 was borne from a deep seated racial xenophobia, particularly on the part of the premier, Sir Henry Parkes. Earlier, the Riverina press had welcomed the imposition of restrictive measures, many newspaper using emotive and intemperate language to persuade their readers to believe, as did Parkes, in an imminent ‘Asiatic invasion’ (Riverine Grazer 1888a; Wagga Wagga Advertiser 1889a, 1888c; Albury Border Post 1888). However, Parkes’ hysterical outbursts, his unconstitutional actions against Chinese passengers wishing to disembark from the Afghan, and his harsh and hurried legislation proved too much for many of his supporters, and the Riverina press pleaded the case for British justice and criticised the extreme measures proposed in the legislation (Markus 1979: 81–144; RG, 22 May 1888b; Wagga Wagga Advertiser 1888c; Gundagai Times 1888; Albury Banner and Wodonga Express 1889a, 1888b).

The most objectionable provisions of the bill were removed by the Legislative Council, but the remaining restrictions were harsh. The tonnage ratio was increased to 500 tons for each Chinese passenger and the poll tax increased to a prohibitive £100. Failure to pay incurred an extra fine of £50, failing which the offender faced two years in gaol. Chinese immigration was all but prohibited, both from overseas and other colonies, and an increase in the Chinese gaol population all but assured (Markus 1979: 81–144). But not everyone agreed with these provisions. The editor of the Corowa Free Press stated on 20 July 1888:

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To say that a Chinaman living in Corowa, and possessed of duly authenticated naturalisation papers for the colony of New South Wales, and who has occasion to go to Wahgunya, cannot return to his home without paying £100 poll tax, or running the risk of two years imprisonment, is to make our legislation the laughing stock of the whole world.

Wholesale evasion of the poll tax soon became commonplace, as did the large number of police and customs officers and informers needed to enforce it. The main point of evasion was near Wahgunya, the Chinese first making their way to that town then proceeding along the river on the Victorian side to a place owned by a compatriot, remaining some time as labourers, then crossing in the night by boat (Wagga Wagga Advertiser 1893, 1894b). The practical application of the poll tax often bordered on the absurd. In 1894, a Chinese man – a former servant of a Mr Stuckey for more than 15 years – was denied entry into NSW as part of Mr Stuckey's funeral cortège unless he paid the £100 poll tax, despite several people giving their personal guarantee that he would return the same evening into Victoria (Wagga Wagga Advertiser 1894a; Narrandera Ensign 1894a). No less ridiculous was the inability of the Reverend Cheok Hong Cheong to visit Albury from Victoria for the purpose of holding a short mission amongst his countrymen unless he paid the poll tax. At least his copies of the Bible were exempt (Albury Banner and Wodonga Express 1896).

After Federation the poll tax disappeared but the restrictions on entry into Australia under the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 and the requirements imposed on Chinese-Australians wishing to travel overseas and return to Australia proved no less onerous than before. As historian A.T. Yanwood (1964: 67–83) has so effectively argued, the underlying motivation was a deep-seated racism, which saw all coloured people as distinctly inferior to whites, and the need to promote the ideal of racial homogeneity. Because of their greater numbers and the disproportionate numbers of males the Chinese were more disadvantaged by the new legislation than any other non-European group, and after a brief interregnum of 15 months in the early 1900s they could not, as a general rule, admit family members to Australia. For the Chinese the regulations were strictly administered and any major concessions would have been a serious breach of policy.

In 1905, Certificates of Exemption from the Dictation Test replaced the Certificates of Domicile. The bureaucratic needs were complex and involved photographs, handprints and character references, including one from the local police who had also to verify the accuracy of the photographs. The Chinese may have been residents of this country but they were not free people, and if not under continued surveillance, then at least aware that any slip-up on their part could mean that their CEDT application would be refused. As George Hock Shung found out, possession of a court record or a bad character reference from the local police ensured it. Children too were scrutinised: they had to have a satisfactory report from their teacher (Series SP42/1, C1912/3324, C1913/4423, C1913/5044, C1913/5044, NAA, Sydney).

Notwithstanding these institutional restrictions and provocations, the law courts were generally even-handed in their treatment of the Chinese people. Unlike California in the early days, Chinese evidence was admissible in the courts and the use of interpreters was common. The Chinese made full use of the courts to prosecute individuals, including their own countrymen, who had aggrieved them by assault, stealing or refusal to pay debts. However, the Chinese were probably prosecuted more than Europeans for selling alcohol without a licence, excessive gambling or running houses of ill-repute, the police being very dependent on informants (both European and Chinese) who were rewarded for their ‘Judas’ acts with half the fine monies. The usual ploy was for the informant to proceed to the house in question, almost always located in the camp, with a marked coin and empty bottle, then on purchasing the alcohol, departing and handing the evidence to the local constable, who had meanwhile observed the proceedings from some vantage point (Riverina Grazier 1891a, 1891b). Even more problematic was the prosecution of the Chinese for gambling, given the prevalence of this pursuit among Europeans, who were rarely prosecuted. At a trial of fan tan participants at Hay in 1892, the defending lawyer reminded the Bench of this discrepancy, pointing out that one third of the proceeds from such games went to the Hay hospital, one third to the Chinese Freemason's Lodge and only one third to the banker. Because of the poverty of several of the defendants he bore the court and professional fees and instituted a subscription list to pay the fines (Riverina Grazier 1892a, 1892b).

With one infamous exception the level of provocation against the Chinese people in the Riverina never rose to anything like that occasionally seen on some Australian goldfields, these melees in turn paling into insignificance compared with the racial free for all with its associated murder and systemic violence characteristic of Chinese and European race relations in the USA. Petty theft, such as fruit stealing, stone throwing, name calling and other relatively minor physical provocations seem to have been the extent of the harassment. The exception was the ‘Battle of Hillston bridge’ in 1895, in which one Chinese man was killed and two severely injured. This appalling incident occurred on Chinese New Year and involved about 30 Chinese men and about 20 Europeans, some of whom were inebriated and abused the hospitality of the Chinese by pulling fruit from the trees. The perpetrators were brought to trial but the lack of reliable witnesses meant that all were acquitted of manslaughter (Riverina Grazier 1895).

Conclusion

Much of the heritage of the Chinese in the Riverina has had been lost or at best marginalised. Happily, the Museum's exhibition and its accompanying catalogue will help redress some of this neglect, and point the way for other regional centres to follow suit. The exhibition was able to tap into a rich vein of folklore, artefacts and photos that otherwise would have not made it into the public gaze. It generated much excitement amongst local Chinese Australian families, who felt that the lives of their forebears were at last being recognised and honoured. The exhibition and its catalogue say much about the value of regional studies of the Chinese people. Regional studies allow for a more detailed analysis and description of people's daily lives, in particular the linkages between different families and places, and the European community. They also emphasise the merit in looking beyond the well worn paths of the gold mining communities, and in so doing helping to further illustrate the rich diversity in the lives of the Chinese people in regional Australia and add to the body of work that is so successfully addressing the many stereotypes and generalisations that still litter the historical landscape.

The success of the Wagga Wagga exhibition suggests that the day is not far away that a major rewrite of colonial and
postcolonial history will occur, restoring the Chinese people to their rightful place as pioneers in this country, a people who maintained their culture and traditions and adapted successfully to what was for many a very alien and hostile environment, particularly in the area of race relations.

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