

## Chapter 3

### MESSAGES AND MEANINGS

In the late 1960s and 1970s when oral history as we now know it was emerging, its impetus lay within the social history movement which sought to re-focus the content and issues of history-making and to ensure that the voice of the people was heard. For too long, the argument ran, history had been the history of governments and 'great men'. The time had come for a reorientation and the inclusion of 'ordinary' people and minority groups. Oral history was seized upon as a method which allowed historians and writers to collect and present the voice of the people.<sup>1</sup> From these beginnings a growing and increasingly sophisticated literature has emerged. Within the literature there are debates about the nature and reliability of memory, the relations between researchers and participants, and the type of evidence and information provided through oral history interviews.

Set in the context of the ongoing discussion about what it is that oral history interviews offer the historian, this chapter begins by providing a broad introduction to the current discourse about the place and use of theory in oral history research. It then considers specific aspects of these discussions and how they have informed analytical approaches adopted in this thesis. The starting point is an examination of the subjective nature of oral history evidence, and the various strategies adopted to analyse and address this subjectivity. This analysis is illustrated through a focused commentary on the silences about racism and discrimination in the oral history material collected for this thesis. The discussion leads to a broader analysis of the types of information available through the interviews, and the means adopted to access, explain and verify the patterns and evidence drawn from that information. Attention then turns to an examination of the decisions which had to be made about how to incorporate the layers of messages and meanings into a history of the Chinese contribution to a particular geographical area which reflected and respected the emphases and expectations of participants while also ensuring that the demands of academic rigour were addressed.

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<sup>1</sup> An early assertion of this view was the first edition of Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978. In Australia early practitioners were Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh. See, for example, Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh, *The Immigrants*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1977; and Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour: An oral record of the 1930s Depression in Australia*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1978. For overviews of the history of oral history in Australia see Louise Douglas and Peter Spearritt, 'Talking history: the use of oral sources' in G. Osborne and W.F. Mandle (eds), *New History: Studying Australia today*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1982, pp. 51-68; and Louise Douglas, Alan Roberts and Ruth Thomson, *Oral History: A handbook*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988, Chapter 2.

- **Oral History Debates**

Early criticism of oral history was directed at the apparent willingness of oral historians to promote the methodology as primarily a means of balancing the history books by allowing the previously silent to be heard. In particular there was debate about the extent to which oral history genuinely invited 'ordinary people' and members of minority groups - indigenous people, ethnic communities, women, the working class, the disabled - to present accounts of their lives. Critics argued that the material being offered as 'the voice of the people' was severely, if not irreparably, tainted by the unreliability and selectivity of memory, the interference of hindsight, the impact of the interviewer's agenda and presence, the processes of ageing, and the memories and agendas of other people.<sup>2</sup> Oral history was simply too subjective.

Initial responses to these criticisms focused on establishing the reliability of memory, and on demonstrating the ways in which well prepared and effective oral history interviews could tap into those aspects of recollections which were more likely to be reliable. The responses also focused on proving that oral histories were no less or more reliable than the documentary sources which were touted as the preferred and more reliable sources by critics.<sup>3</sup>

Another response also emerged which, rather than reacting in a defensive way, took as a starting point the possibility that the very subjectivity which attracted criticism could be a strength. Studies were pursued which examined the insights available from an analysis of the silences and apparent inaccuracies in oral histories; from explorations of the impact of the interaction between interviewer and interviewees; from examinations of the relationships between history and memory; from explorations of how oral history interviews can provide evidence on values and perceptions of the past; and from analyses of the narrative structures employed by different groups of interviewees.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Australia the criticisms were led by academics like Patrick O'Farrell. See, for example, *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 5, 1982/1983, pp.3-40 which reproduces O'Farrell's articles and responses to it.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Paul Thompson, *Voice of the Past. Second edition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, especially Chapter 4 in which he explores studies of memory and its reliability, and defends the viability and reliability of oral sources as equal to those of documentary sources. See also Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History*, Hutchinson, London, 1987 with his emphasis on how the details recorded through oral history interviews provide the most reliable evidence.

<sup>4</sup> There is a growing literature. Overviews of the evolution of these theoretical explorations are available in, for example, Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The art of oral history. Second edition*, Praeger Press, New York, 1991, especially Chapters 4 to 6; Martyn Lyons, 'Oral history and the history of memory', *Locality* (Newsletter of the Community History Program, University of NSW.), 7/1, 1994, pp.4-8; and Alistair Thomson, Michael Frisch and Paula Hamilton, 'The memory and history debates: some international perspectives', *Oral History* (UK.), 22/2, 1994, pp.33-41. Also note Paul Thompson's response to the article by Thomson, Frisch and Hamilton in *Oral History* (UK.), 23/2, 1995, pp.27-28. For more specific examples see Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994; Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the craft and meaning of oral and public history*, State University of New York, Albany, 1990, especially Parts I and II; Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and meaning in oral history*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991; and Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The social construction of history*, Cambridge University Press,

One result of the growth in the analytical studies which focus on the subjectivity inherent in oral history research, is the development of a body of literature which is clearly, if not predominantly, concerned with the establishment of theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the collection, use and analysis of oral sources. This body of literature largely, and not surprisingly, is emanating from the research and writing of academics concerned to legitimise (and some argue colonise) oral history as a research methodology.<sup>5</sup> Parallel to such growth, there has also been an expansion in the activities of individuals and groups whose primary concern is to continue to develop the original impetus behind the emergence of oral history as a means to record and present the voices of those whose experiences have previously been neglected. The emphasis in this approach is to capture recollections and then through publications, exhibitions, performances, sound or video broadcasts to communicate these experiences so that both participants and a wider public can have access to the memories which they relate about past experiences.<sup>6</sup> Analysis and preoccupation with theoretical concerns is secondary and sometimes non-existent.

The challenge for oral historians is to build bridges between the various approaches. It is a challenge put forward by Alistair Thomson, the editor of the journal of the Oral History Society of the United Kingdom, when he wrote:

*... a critical feature of the oral history movement ... is a tension between theoretical developments which have problematised memory and identity, and the commitment to democratic and empowering practice. I wouldn't argue that theoretical sophistication cannot be made accessible and useful in practice; nor that community oral history practice is necessarily unreflective or atheoretical. Yet ... a central challenge for oral historians today is to find ways to facilitate links between theory and practice, so that debates about history and memory, about the oral history relationship, or about the ethical or political dilemmas of our work, are informed both by new ways of understanding and by hands-on experience.<sup>7</sup>*

This thesis takes up aspects of this challenge and demonstrates that oral history based research in an academic environment needs to be informed by theory but that the theoretical

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Cambridge, 1992. The three volumes of *The International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories* already published (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, 1993, 1994) also largely reflect this academic and theoretical focus.

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly evident at the international oral history conferences held in Europe which are forums primarily for academics. An overview of the 1993 conference is provided in Janis Wilton, 'Memory and multiculturalism: an account of the VIII International Oral History Conference', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 15, 1993, pp.85-91. The references listed in footnote 4 previously are all by academics and fall into this category of literature largely concerned to develop theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Concerns were expressed at the International Oral History Conference held in New York in October 1994 about the dangers of making theory the focus of oral history analysis. See Alistair Thomson's report on that conference in *Oral History* (UK), 23/1, 1995, pp.32-33.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Joanna Bornat, 'Two oral histories: valuing our differences', *Oral History Review* (USA), 21/1, Spring 1993, pp.77-85; and Donald Hyslop, 'From oral historians to community historians: some ways forward for the use and development of oral testimony in public institutions', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 17, 1995, pp.1-8.

<sup>7</sup> Thomson, Frisch and Hamilton, 'The memory and history debates', p.35. The article has distinct sections by each contributing author. Bornat, 'Two oral histories', pp.73-95 similarly points to divisions between the two approaches, and suggests strategies for overcoming these divisions.

and conceptual concerns need to underpin yet not dominate the way material is analysed and presented. The theoretical and conceptual concerns can be implicit in the ways in which the narratives, stories, anecdotes, patterns and impressions which constitute the content of oral history interviews are used. In order to achieve this, however, attention must be paid to relevant discussions of the theoretical and conceptual concerns which impinge on the nature of the evidence which has emerged from the oral history interviews recorded for this thesis.

- **Subjective Messages**

The first issue to address is the subjectivity of the material. This arises essentially from the fact that oral history interviews are created from an interaction in the present usually between two people<sup>8</sup> one of whom is seeking to reconstruct, describe and explain specific aspects of past personal experiences for the immediate audience of an interviewer as well as for a wider audience of family, neighbours, community members and a general public.<sup>9</sup> The information about the past created through this process, as oral historian Alessandro Portelli has stated,

*... tell[s] us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.*<sup>10</sup>

It is a swathe of often rich, descriptive and informative material which is shaped by individuals' emotions, beliefs, values and opinions as they have evolved and been expressed throughout the course of their lives. As such, one of the characteristics of oral history evidence is the way in which it invites an exploration of the subjective including the way in which opinions and values of the present influence the retelling of past experiences.

The challenge for the researcher is to reveal the various layers of experience and meaning, and to make effective use of the evidence knowing full well that the recollections of any one individual cannot, on their own, be seen to represent any more than that individual's subjective view of a particular experience. In this context, it becomes dangerous, for example, to assume that one person's account of the business practices adopted in a particular store can be used to present all the business practices in that store let alone those in other stores within the region. It is similarly dangerous to assume that, because one or even two participants declare that racism was not a significant factor in shaping their experiences, that the same view can be extended to other Chinese who lived in the district or indeed in other localities. Even more significantly, it cannot be assumed that such an evaluation necessarily applies to the individual recounting that view. It could rather be that, for the public record, participants elect to emphasise certain aspects of their experience and

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 2, pp. 38-40 previously for instances when the interaction is between more than two people.

<sup>9</sup> The impact of these audiences in structuring the interview was addressed in Chapter 2, pp.40-41 previously.

<sup>10</sup> Alessandro Portelli, 'The peculiarities of oral history', *History Workshop*, 12, 1981, pp. 99-100.

play down others, and that the emphases selected have been at least partly shaped by external factors. These factors include, for example, the impact of hindsight, the desire to avoid offending or criticising others, and the absorption of public or collective ideologies.

Faced with these layers of meaning and possibility and the very subjectivity of the material, oral historians have developed various strategies to analyse and utilise the evidence imbedded in this subjectivity. They pay attention to the internal structures of interviews, to the explanations offered by participants, to the impact of external factors, and to the extent that insights gained through an analysis of individual oral histories resonate not just in other oral history interviews but also in other sources and in studies by other people.

Many of these features can be revealed through a close examination of the nature of some of the silences identified in the oral histories recorded for this thesis. These silences related to information about family background, to details about illegal immigration and exploitation of Chinese by Chinese, and especially to experiences of racism.<sup>11</sup> An exploration of the manifestation and explanation of silences about racism and discrimination in the oral history interviews recorded for this thesis provides a starting point. It provides a case study which highlights the types of insights which can be gained when the subjective nature of oral history is accepted as a focus for historical analysis and reconstruction.

### *Remembering Racism*

Existing literature on the Chinese in Australia clearly demonstrates that racism was one of the foundations for Australian immigration and settlement policies and practices towards the Chinese during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Certainly when research for this thesis started, the expectation was that experiences of racism and its impact would figure with some significance in the oral history interviews. This was not the case.

In the course of recalling periods and events in their lives, fourteen participants did provide specific examples of discrimination. They ranged from name calling at school, fights and social isolation to exclusion from particular employment. But there was often a discontinuity between this personal evidence of discrimination, and the response to a direct question about discrimination. One participant, for example, emphatically declared that he had never experienced discrimination. If anything, his experience had been the opposite - being favoured for being Chinese. Yet when asked about his marriage to an Australian with no Chinese ancestry, he made a passing reference to his then future father-in-law's displeasure at the prospect. In a later interview it emerged that this displeasure was

<sup>11</sup> An initial exploration of the nature, extent and meaning of these silences informed two earlier articles. See Janis Wilton, 'The Chinese in New England: the necessity of fieldwork, the fragility of memory', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 11, 1989, pp. 42-57; and Janis Wilton, 'Remembering Racism', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 13, 1991, pp.32-38.

<sup>12</sup> See discussion and accompanying references in Chapter 1, pp.12-14 previously.

demonstrated by abuse and name calling which echoed racist slurs documented in literature on the treatment of the Chinese in Australia. Another participant recalled the discomfort and distress of name calling and isolation at school but, on receiving a copy of the transcript, elected to have those memories deleted from the public record. On at least five occasions, other experiences of discrimination were recalled on the explicit understanding that they were not to be shared with a wider audience. More obliquely, two interviewees indicated that it was harder for them, as Chinese-Australians, to achieve the status and acceptance of their non-Chinese peers by comments like: 'I always felt I had to be better to get accepted. I worked at that.'

There are also sixteen oral histories in which discrimination does not feature at all. When asked directly, the response was along the lines: 'There was no discrimination as far as I was concerned' or 'There wasn't a lot of ... what would you call it ... racism or that sort of thing. We integrated pretty well.' Even those who did give vivid and open accounts of suffering from racist acts and attitudes, tended to locate the instances as something which happened in the past - 'Things have changed now' - or they explained that 'it isn't meant in a harmful way'.

Other researchers have encountered a similar lack of emphasis on experiences of racism in accounts offered by Chinese immigrants and their descendants.<sup>13</sup> The reasons for these silences and gaps reveal a great deal about the process of remembering, how it is shaped by subsequent experiences, the different types of information offered and how participants actively and insightfully engaged in offering explanations and evaluations of their own experiences.

In her analysis of a similar phenomenon in relation to Aboriginal people who minimised their experiences of racism, Heather Goodall points to the need to distinguish between people's descriptions of specific events, and their explanations of the causes and nature of those events.<sup>14</sup> It is the latter, she argues, that tend to be influenced more by political and cultural frameworks, and by the development of a collective memory. It is also the explanations which provide indicators of where certain emphases are placed and why some things are treated lightly. She advocates actively seeking explanations from interviewees themselves, and asking them to participate in the process of analysing their pasts and their memories.<sup>15</sup>

Heather Goodall's advice is useful for this thesis. Participants' explanations provide one route for revealing factors which shape the nature and extent of memories of discrimination and, indeed, of other aspects of their pasts. These factors include the impact of changing values and political climates, of different social situations, and of different cultural perspectives.

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<sup>13</sup> See Wilton, 'Remembering racism', pp.32-33 for a discussion of similar findings by Geoff Gillenkirk, Anne Atkinson and Morag Loh.

<sup>14</sup> Heather Goodall, 'Aboriginal history and the politics of information control', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 9, 1987, pp.21-22.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

The Chinese-Australians whose oral histories were recorded for this thesis either arrived in Australia before the Second World War or in the years immediately after the war, or are the descendants of pre-1939 settlers. All were born before the Second World War.<sup>16</sup> The political climate has certainly changed. Their Australian lives began at a time when racist legislation and attitudes were overtly in place, and when calling people derogatory names and denying them access to work or social gatherings was an acceptable practice. Participants recognised and pointed to these changes. As one participant explained about her childhood in north Queensland in the early 1900s:

*In the old days, when we were quite small, people hated you because you were Chinese.*

*They were not only not friendly but they really had a hate for you.*

A younger relative present at this interview went on to observe that the tensions created by this 'hatred' applied to language. Both participants then agreed that the climate had changed:

*Well years ago it wasn't good to speak another language ... outside. You just wouldn't. Nowadays, tradition, culture has changed and is becoming more broad-minded. So you wish you had that second language.*

The significant point in this context is that participants identified the experiences as belonging to the past. For them, the political climate which constructed a move from racist views of the past to the pluralist views of the present, has had an impact on their lives. The situation has genuinely changed. Younger family members now aspire to Chinese cultural practices which, in the past, had provoked racist insults and treatment for members of the older generation. They also feel and behave as accepted members of a wider community, and have access to opportunities denied to parents and grandparents.<sup>17</sup> As Chinese-Canadian historian Peter Li observes of similar findings in oral histories recorded with Chinese-Canadians who were asked to compare their situations before and after the Second World War:

*Many of them believed that the situation was much improved after the war, and ... As long as the participants believed that there was no discrimination, their behaviour would reflect this.<sup>18</sup>*

A part of this behaviour is possibly to minimise the effect of racism and discrimination. It happened but that was before the war.

Morag Loh makes a similar observation about the place of discrimination in the memories of those interviewed for her book *Dinky Di*.<sup>19</sup> Only one participant recalled

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the places and dates of birth of participants consult Table 1, Chapter 2, pp.36-37 previously.

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of the nature of these changes and their impact on the lives and expectations of participants, see Chapter 10 following.

<sup>18</sup> Peter S. Li, 'The use of oral history in studying elderly Chinese-Canadians', *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 17/1, 1985, p.73.

<sup>19</sup> Morag Loh and Judith Winternitz, *Dinky-Di: The contributions of Chinese immigrants and Australians of Chinese descent to Australia's defence forces and war efforts 1899-1988*, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1989.

specific and detailed experiences of discrimination in the armed services. Indeed, Loh observes, 'for all of them bar one - the services *once you'd joined* [her emphasis] were less discriminatory than society in general.'<sup>20</sup> But they did suffer some discrimination in getting permission to enter the armed services and, after the war, in being treated again as second class citizens. She explains:

*They remember the humiliation and recount it - but it was a long time ago and things have moved on and improved! And it is the improvement they want to stress when they talk.*<sup>21</sup>

Morag Loh extends observation:

*To go into an archive with tales of humiliation is to have those humiliations live forever: who would want that?*<sup>22</sup>

Other explanations of personal encounters, or the lack of those encounters, with discrimination suggest further that time of arrival, age, generation, and current status play a part. Among the Australian-born Chinese who went to country schools in northern New South Wales during the 1930s and 1940s, a tendency to seek explanations for discrimination which have little to do with being Chinese can be detected. Two participants, for example, remembered being called names at school and occasionally having a rough time. One suggested his small stature as a contributing factor:

*I was picked on ... at school but whether that was because I was small or because Chinese, I'm not sure.*

The other participant suggested age and time were the significant influences:

Participant : *When I was young you used to get called a few names, but that sort of stopped. It definitely stopped by high school or the later half of primary school.*

Janis Wilton: *Why do you think it stopped?*

Participant : *Oh probably because ... once you make closer friends with them they probably accept you better: then and, as you get older ... you can sort of look after yourself better ... you haven't got so many people above you.*

Both of these participants went on to declare that these experiences were only transitory. One deliberately emphasised the tolerance he perceived in his school and local community and, for evidence, pointed to the fact that fellow Chinese were prefects, and even school and football team captains.

From this generation of Australian-born Chinese came the further explanation that 'we know how to handle it [discrimination] ...It's something we accept because we don't see it as being harmful.' The conversation was about jokes making reference to being Chinese. As this participant explained:

20 Letter from Morag Loh, 22 April 1991.

21 *ibid.*

22 *ibid.*



*You probably accept it because if you look on the broad scale of things, you're joking about people's backgrounds among yourselves anyway. It hasn't got to be Chinese... You see, everyone is racist. But because, I suppose, we're more assimilated we are hopefully less affected or perhaps can handle it better.*<sup>23</sup>

This type of explanation was not uncommon. It raises important points. Firstly, these participants were brought up as Chinese-Australians. Their parents had settled in Australia. For them, unlike their grandparents or parents, there was little, if any, going to and from China. Their main language became English; some lost their fluency in Cantonese. Their schooling was primarily among non-Chinese Australians, and they tended to live in towns where there were only a small number of Chinese and where their families had established businesses. With all these factors, and with their own subsequent careers in business and the professions, they were spared the extremes of racism which threatened their predecessors. Again, it becomes an issue of the situation improving and the desire to place an emphasis on that improvement.

The factors shaping the nature and extent of memories of racism are also associated with the past and present places of residence of participants and of their families. In the rural towns in northern New South Wales which are the geographical focus of this thesis it seems that the dwindling number of Chinese and the fact that those who stayed included businessmen who not only provided services for the town but also provided employment for local non-Chinese tended to soften what, at the turn of the century, had been quite a racist environment.<sup>24</sup>

There is another factor related to place of residence. The Chinese-Australians who were interviewed were asked to describe and explain their lives in relatively small rural towns. Many still live and work in these towns, and some have reasonably high local public profiles as business people and professionals, and for their involvement in community life.<sup>25</sup> The unspoken pressure here is to refrain from making comments which could reflect negatively on the town, neighbours or clients because they are *their* town, neighbours and clients. The pressure occasionally came through in interviews. One participant, for example, named competing non-Chinese businesses whose owners, during the Depression, had resorted to name calling and other underhand tactics. The request, however, was that these competitors should never be named because any such revelation could reflect badly on the participant's family and family businesses.

Further factors which were identified by Chinese-Australians as shaping their outlook and ultimately the way they remembered the past were ways of reacting and behaving

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<sup>23</sup> A theme hinted at in this, and other interviews, but not discussed here is the attitudes Chinese have had and have towards other groups. As well there were frequently recalled experiences of being rejected for being 'foreign devils' when they made visits to China. For some further discussion of these points see Chapter 9, pp. 212-214.

<sup>24</sup> For more details on this racism and its amelioration see Part Two of this thesis, especially Chapter 5.

<sup>25</sup> Consult Map 2, Chapter 2, p.27 previously, to establish the places of residence of participants at the time of the interviews. See chapter 10, pp.242-244 following for accounts of participants' involvement in their local communities.

passed on from parents and grandparents. Some suggested that such behaviour is a part and parcel of being Chinese. As one participant explained:

*I ... learnt from my father that, when people are nasty, be nice to them.*

The message was repeated by other participants:

*I've learnt the best way to live is not to be outrageous. Not to draw attention to yourself.*

*... that's why the Chinese are inscrutable. Rather than cause a fuss, they shut their mouths.*

and,

*Asian people say one thing and often mean something else. They are polite.*

This 'grin and bear it' philosophy certainly has resonance in aspects of Chinese traditions. Good evidence can be seen in Mo Xiangyi's scroll, *Harvest of Endurance*, painted for the Australian bicentennial year. In explaining his use of a particular Chinese painting style known as *gongbi*, Mo observed that it fitted well the nature of the history he was portraying. As he wrote: 'The history of the Australian Chinese is the history of winning success through forbearance', and the *gongbi* painting technique 'is a process of achieving final perfection through repeated and repeated efforts in great forbearance.'<sup>26</sup> American researcher and photographer, James Motlow, made a similar point when he observed in relation to recording the oral histories of Chinese-Americans in the town of Locke:

*... for the record, at least, most of my Chinese neighbours refused to make a major case about relations with whites' ... [They] are content to make their point by the integrity of their lives rather than by bitter words.<sup>27</sup>*

There is another possible, though largely speculative, explanation for the silences about racism and discrimination. This explanation finds at least part of the answer in an analysis of the ways people cope with difficult experiences in their lives. The alienation and humiliation created by living in a society based on racist and discriminatory tenets, are experiences and feelings perhaps best handled by erasing them from the memory, and by undergoing a selective type of functional amnesia.<sup>28</sup>

The desire or advice to remain quiet also reflects a broader silence about the past. It is a silence between generations. In her evocative, superbly written revelation of the myths, traditions and experiences of her Chinese-American ancestors, Maxine Hong Kingston berates her father for being uncommunicative. She particularly laments his refusal to talk about his past:

*You say with the few words and the few silences: No stories, No past. No China.*

<sup>26</sup> Mo Xiangyi, 'Why I chose the *gongbi* style', *Harvest of Endurance: A history of the Chinese in Australia*, Australia-China Friendship Society, Sydney, 1988.

<sup>27</sup> Geoff Gillenkirk and James Motlow, *Bitter Melon: Stories from the last rural Chinese town in America*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1987, p.16.

<sup>28</sup> Goodall, 'Aboriginal history and the politics of information control', pp.28-29 makes a similar observation in relation to Aboriginal memories of racism.

*You only look and talk Chinese. There are no photographs of you in Chinese clothes nor against Chinese landscapes... You fix yourself in the present, but I want to hear the stories about the rest of your life, the Chinese stories.*<sup>29</sup>

Participants in the research for this thesis similarly observed that grandparents and parents rarely talked about the past, especially their pasts in China. The repeated refrain was captured in the words of one participant who shrugged and declared:

*Well, Dad never, ever talked about the past. ... he never, ever did that.*

Some participants sought explanations for this silence. They talked about parents being too busy and children not being particularly interested:

*My Dad, he was just a businessman. He didn't talk about anything other than business. He was purely a businessman.*

Another participant similarly recalled:

*Dad was always too busy to tell me anything, even if I asked.*

These are explanations which sit comfortably with other studies of the immigrant experience which demonstrate so clearly that, for the first generation, life in a new country was about establishing oneself. It was always about long hours, hard work, and looking to the future. For Chinese settlers, this shortage of time and incentive to reflect on the past was arguably heightened by the relations between parents and children. In traditional Chinese custom, elders were to be respected and not questioned, and there was a distance between generations. One participant recalled how this distance was reflected in the apparent coldness between himself and his father. He recalled:

*Pop was a cold person. He would never hug you or show affection, and he always addressed me in the third person.*

Author Mary Rose Liverani captures another side of this distance when, in writing about Australian-born Chinese Irene Moss's response to questions about her father's past, she observes:

*Irene shrugs. She doesn't know. They never talked about any of these things. Who's interested in the past, anyway, she demands impatiently ... But what about Confucius? Venerating the old. Right. You venerate the old by not bugging them with questions.*<sup>30</sup>

For Liverani/Moss 'prying' into the family's past and, more specifically, seeking information from elders is just not a Chinese way of behaving. Historian Henry Chan also alludes to this tradition of silence and privacy when, in advocating a new approach to the research and writing about Chinese-Australian history, he advises that it would, among other things, require '... a move by our Chinese communities from their policy of invisibility and silence to a new openness about themselves.'<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p.18.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Rose Liverani, 'Portrait of an ABC', *Overland*, 101, 1985, p.77.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Chan, 'The Chinese communities in Australia: the way ahead in a neglected field of research' in Peter Hanks and Andrew Perry (eds), *The Chinese in Australia*, Centre for Migrant and Intercultural Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, 1988, p.58. A similar point is made by Chooi Cheng-Yeen.

Whatever the balance of reasons for silences about aspects of the past in general and more specifically about racism and discrimination in the oral histories recorded for this thesis, an analysis of the factors shaping those silences has provided insight into the rich complexity of the material offered through recorded memories, and the different issues and analytical approaches which can be used to access that complexity. In particular, it has demonstrated how the evaluations offered by participants about their own experiences can provide starting points for analysis. It has also demonstrated how an awareness of changes in the political and social climate can both influence the way people recall the past and can be documented through those recollections. Similarly, it has shown how specific cultural practices and expectations are revealed through analysing why and how certain types of information and emphases are revealed through oral history interviews. Finally, the subjective moving between past and present and between recalling and explaining the past, can be viewed as a strength and a means of accessing aspects of the history and experiences of a group of people which are likely to be missed or not documented in other sources. It is through oral histories that it is possible to explore why and how people behaved in a particular way, the values and opinions they shared then and now, and the way they felt about certain experiences.

### *Narrative Structures*

The importance of the subjective and its analysis in oral history interviews can be further demonstrated by examining briefly another focus emerging in oral history literature. This is the concern to expose and explain the narrative structures which underpin the way different individuals and groups recount their experiences. In these analyses, attention is particularly paid to the impact of collective memory and public ideology. The concern is to determine and document patterns which have been shaped by a participant's membership of a particular group or exposure to, and absorption of, a particular ideology. Classic studies in this vein are Alessandro Portelli's analysis of the 'collective' mistake made by working class comrades relating to the death of a colleague, and, on Australia, Alistair Thomson's analysis of the impact of the Anzac legend on the memories of returned servicemen.<sup>32</sup>

A significant example in the oral histories recorded for this thesis is the intrusion and repetition of images of 'the migrant success story'. This is a litany and ideology familiar to a post-war Australia which styled itself the 'lucky country' in which anyone could 'have a go' and succeed, and it is an ideology identified in oral history studies of other immigrants.<sup>33</sup> It

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Blooding a lion in Little Bourke Street: the creation, negotiation and maintenance of Chinese ethnic identity in Melbourne, MA thesis, University of Adelaide, 1986, pp.iii-iv.

<sup>32</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*. pp. 1-26; Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories : Living with the legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994. See also Paula Hamilton, 'The knife edge: debates about memory and history' in Darian-Smith and Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, pp.9-32 which places these approaches in a wider analytical context.

<sup>33</sup> On the pervasiveness of the 'migrant success story' as a post war ideology in Australia see Janis Wilton and Richard Bosworth, *Old Worlds and New Australia: The post-war migrant experience*, Penguin,

is certainly the formula shaping the stories repeated within families about the 'success' of their predecessors. They resound with images of the penniless state in which migrants arrived in Australia, the tenacity and hard work which improved their situation, and the 'success' finally achieved for themselves and their descendants. It is a success marked by upward social mobility characterised by higher levels of education, a move into professional occupations, and the acquisition of material comforts and possessions. In the case of the Chinese-Australians whose memories were recorded for this thesis, the fact that the message and stories of success were repeated and emphasised, becomes an indicator of the extent to which, as a group, they absorbed the ideology of success. Further analysis and measurement against other evidence from the oral history interviews and various sources, however, suggests that, in practice, the success has not been complete or, at least, has not been without a price. These are issues which are taken up particularly in Chapter Ten of the thesis. The important point here is to illustrate further that an effective and analytical use of evidence available through oral history interviews requires opening wide the doors on the possibilities and range of evidence available, and that the unearthing, analysis and use of the various layers of messages and meanings in the material is an essential activity.

### *Dangers*

There is, however, a danger in an analytical approach which constantly searches for hidden meanings and which becomes too preoccupied with justifying and demonstrating the value of subjectivity as an inherent characteristic of oral history interviews. The danger is that an overemphasis on theoretical and conceptual analysis risks denying one of the original motivations behind the adoption of an oral history approach. It risks converting oral history work into intellectual exercises which explore meanings and constructs at the expense of presenting the history and narratives of the people whose memories provide the core of the material. There is the risk that the participants in oral history projects will no longer be the subjects of their own histories but will again become objects of study.

The risk, in terms of the Chinese-Australians whose histories and experiences occupy this thesis, was that the desire to portray them as more than victims, objects or useful demographic statistics, could be subverted. More broadly, the risk was that an overemphasis on theoretical and intellectual constructs could achieve the opposite of one of the original motivations behind the oral history movement (and behind this thesis) which was to give a voice and place to those previously denied recognition of their part in history making.

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Ringwood, 1984, pp. 85-87. The impact of this image is taken up in Chapter 10 following. See also Jean Peneff, 'Myths in life stories' in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp.36-48 for an analysis of the 'success story' of the self-made man as revealed through life stories; and Barbara Allen and Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using oral sources in local historical research*, American Association for the Study of Local History, Nashville, Tennessee, 1981, Appendix B for examples of 'Migratory Legends' in oral histories which follow the formula of 'the migrant success story'.

One way to avoid these dangers, is to ensure that the concern with analysing the subjectivity of oral history material is balanced by a desire to establish and utilise other types of information offered through oral history interviews - the 'what people did' category at the beginning of the quote from Alessandro Portelli used earlier in this chapter.<sup>34</sup> It is this type of information which is the concern of the next section of this chapter.

- **Descriptions, Patterns and Information**

Complementing the hidden meanings which can be discerned in oral history interviews, there are the descriptions, patterns and information provided by participants which can be used in a fairly literal way. In order to do this, however, there needs to be an appreciation of the nature of the information available. In particular, there needs to be an understanding of the types of things which we tend to recall accurately, an acceptance of the need to confirm patterns and details through consulting and comparing as many oral histories as possible, a fuller appreciation of participants' status as experts on their own experiences, and an acceptance of the checks and balances provided by accessing and using as wide a variety of sources as possible.

### *What Do We Remember?*

As a rule, people do not remember facts, dates, or genealogical information accurately. At best, we sometimes 'get it right'. Similarly, we cannot always easily and accurately locate events and experiences at a particular time. Rather, they belong before, after or during a personal event or a well known national or international event. Chronology also tends to slip and slide as a particular recollection triggers a memory of an earlier or later related experience.<sup>35</sup> Given these constraints, however, there is a wealth of material which can be regarded as reliable in as much as what is offered are individuals' reconstructions of events, feelings, perceptions, values, daily routines and family stories as well as their offerings of lists of names, patterns, and places. Significantly, the information contained in these remembered accounts and details is often information which is unavailable elsewhere or which, if it is available, makes little sense without the insights offered through the oral histories. Some examples should illustrate the point. They are all examples whose details and substance are explored in later chapters of this thesis.

One of the clear messages of established historiography on the immigration of Chinese to Australia after 1901 is that the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 severely limited, if not

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<sup>34</sup> See p.50 previously.

<sup>35</sup> There is extensive literature addressing these characteristics of oral history material. See, for example, Allen and Montell, *From Memory to History*, pp.25-40; and Lyons, 'Oral history and the history of memory', p.4.

stopped, the flow of new Chinese immigrants able to settle in Australia.<sup>36</sup> The oral history interviews conducted for this thesis challenged this view. Participants gave accounts of how their grandparents, parents and, in some instances, themselves not only came to Australia after the imposition of the immigration restrictions but managed to remain and eventually settle in the country. Their accounts indicated that the pattern of a diminishing Chinese population in the district hid a wave of new Chinese immigrants.<sup>37</sup>

Another established tenet in the historiography of the Chinese in Australia is a silence about the presence and role of Chinese women.<sup>38</sup> It is an understandable silence given the small percentage of women in the Chinese communities in Australia right up to the eve of the Second World War, and given the lack of source material documenting their experiences. The oral histories conducted for this thesis have gone a part of the way towards redressing this silence at least in relation to a small number of Chinese women who lived in a particular part of New South Wales. The oral histories also suggest that there are aspects to the histories and experiences of these women that should be explored further. For example, they indicate that, contrary to the provisions of the immigration legislation, a small number of women were among those who arrived after the turn of the century and who settled in Australia. They also indicate that, contrary to images of the submissive and relatively passive role which have attached to Chinese women of this generation, there were women whose work and personal lives played a central part in directing and sustaining the lives and livelihoods of family members.<sup>39</sup>

On a different tack, there has been some analysis and writing about the business successes of Chinese entrepreneurs in Australia during the first half of the century. Individuals like Quong Tart and business enterprises like Wing Sang and Wing On in Sydney have attracted attention.<sup>40</sup> So too have those Chinese who spent some time in Australia and who, on their return to Hong Kong and China, contributed to the establishment of some of the early large department stores there.<sup>41</sup> Oral histories with Chinese-Australians who had spent at least a part of their lives in northern New South Wales, quickly revealed that Chinese business enterprises also played a significant role in this part of rural northern New South Wales. The descriptions, details and information provided through oral histories

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, C.Y. Choi, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1975, Chapter 3, especially pp.42-46; and C.M. Yuan, 'Chinese in White Australia 1901-1950' in James Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1988, p.304.

<sup>37</sup> This pattern is taken up particularly in Chapters 4 and 5 following.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Chan, 'Community, culture and commerce: new approaches to the history of the Chinese in Australia' in Jan Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand: A multidisciplinary approach*, New Age International Publishers, New Delhi, 1995, p.111.

<sup>39</sup> Chapter 8 following focuses on the histories and experiences of these women.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Robert Travers, *Australian Mandarin: The life and times of Quong Tart*, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 1981; and C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia 1901-1921*, Raphael Arts, Adelaide, 1977, pp.46-50.

<sup>41</sup> See Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, pp.56-58; and Wellington Chan, 'The organizational structure of the traditional Chinese firm and its modern reform', *Business History Review*, 56/2, 1982, pp. 228-232. For an overview of the literature on Chinese businesses in Australia see Chan, 'Community, culture and commerce', pp.112-113. For more detailed discussion and references see Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.

indicated that the Chinese owned and managed stores were the pivot around which the lives and livelihoods of the Chinese in the district turned during the first half of the twentieth century. They also revealed much more than this. They provided rich descriptions of daily routines, lists of staff and owners, details of fellow Chinese sponsored to work in the stores, accounts of relations with the local non-Chinese community, social life and leisure time, business practices, visits to China, and family, social and business activities and contacts. These accounts indicated that there was a complex network which extended well beyond the stores themselves and carried practices, people, money and concerns throughout parts of rural New South Wales and Queensland, to Sydney and on to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Shekki in Chungshan, China, and back again.

The oral histories have also opened doors on a different aspect of past experiences. They have provided documentation of the way people felt and feel about their experiences. Through metaphors, gestures and descriptions of emotions participants invoked a sense of what it was like for them during particular periods, events and encounters. Robert Duck Chong's description of his trip as a ten year old up the river to his father's home village near Shekki in China, for example, captures the wonderment of a child confronted by new and strange images.<sup>42</sup> Joe Mah's description of his grief at the death of a dog a few months after his arrival in Australia evokes the sense of isolation and loneliness which overwhelmed him during his first few months in the country.<sup>43</sup> Albert Yum's observations about the social isolation of being a Chinese male in a small rural community exude the frustrations at the barriers between Chinese and non-Chinese when it came to social life.<sup>44</sup> Ken Gett's accounts of his mother's efforts to ensure that her children acquired a good education underlined her hopes that education would provide a route to upward social mobility for her offspring.<sup>45</sup> Accounts like these surface throughout the interviews, and invite the addition of a significant dimension to the construction of the history. They suggest that individuals' emotions, fantasies, hopes and fears should be presented alongside the patterns and interpretations of their experiences.<sup>46</sup>

Acceptance and use of such descriptions and information provided by these oral histories, however, needs to take into consideration the warning voiced at the beginning of this chapter about the danger of assuming that one person's recollected experiences can, on its own, be taken to represent anything more than that individual's recollected experiences.<sup>47</sup> In order to utilise the oral history material for the type of analytical and interpretative history which is the object of this thesis, it is necessary to establish a means for ensuring that

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42 See Chapter 9, pp.210-211 following.

43 See Chapter 7, p.139 following.

44 See Chapter 7, p.164 following.

45 See Chapter 8, pp.193-194 following.

46 It is a point also made in oral history literature. See, for example, Allen and Montell, *From Memory to History*, p.56. Samuel and Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By*, p.2 see 'the emotionality, fears, and fantasies carried by the metaphors of memory' as the starting point for a discussion and analysis of the significance of the myths revealed through oral history interviews.

47 See pp. 50-51 previously.



an individual's remembered experiences can be used to substantiate or at least illustrate broader experiences. This has been done by adopting a number of established strategies. These include comparing and contrasting the information and details provided from a range of oral histories, listening carefully to the evaluations participants provided of their own experiences, and examining the patterns and explanations provided in the oral histories against the patterns and explanations discerned in other sources.<sup>48</sup>

### *Comparing Oral Histories*

In the first instance, oral histories have been recorded with a variety of people. The nature and extent of participants' backgrounds and of the interviews conducted with them were addressed in Chapter Two.<sup>49</sup> Here, the concern is to establish the extent to which their recollections agree in terms of the messages emerging from the detailed descriptions of daily life, business practices, work experiences, and other events and practices. These tend to be the moments when the impact of collective memory and public ideology recedes and when individuals reconstruct images and moments from their pasts. In the oral histories for this thesis, they were moments when participants described in detail, for example, the food served at home, the activities involved in stocktaking, the feelings on arrival at the docks in Sydney, or the behaviour expected of children. Comparison and cross-analysis between oral histories then provided substance for claiming that some patterns and descriptions were common. It was these comparisons and the repeated messages which emerged which then suggested that what was being revealed were experiences, patterns and developments which characterised the histories of more than one individual.

Comparison and cross-analysis of the oral histories alone, however, remained insufficient. Two other strategies were necessary. The first was to acknowledge clearly participants' expertise in recounting, explaining and evaluating their own experiences. The second was to conduct what was essentially a negative case analysis of the insights and interpretations emerging from the oral histories against other available evidence.

### *Participants as Commentators*

There is a growing literature in the oral history world which focuses on the need to expose and dismantle the unequal power relationships inherent in the traditional roles of researcher and participants.<sup>50</sup> According to this view, it is essential that participants have

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<sup>48</sup> In the social sciences, this cross-checking and use of a variety of sources and methods is referred to as triangulation or multi-method research. See, for example, Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, pp.200-213.

<sup>49</sup> See Chapter 2, especially pp.33-43 previously.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, The Personal Narratives Group (ed.), *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist theory and personal narratives*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989, Part Four; and Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Worlds*, Routledge, New York, 1991, especially Part IV.

control over the material from their oral history interviews and the way it is presented. It is also essential that participants' evaluations and explanations of their experiences are treated as valid and as informed as those of researchers trained to employ a different range of skills and knowledge. As Alessandro Portelli has argued: 'the field situation is a dialogue, in which we are talking to people, not studying "sources"; and ... it is largely a *learning* [Portelli's emphasis] situation, in which the narrator has information which we lack.'<sup>51</sup>

This approach, as applied to the messages and meanings which have emerged from the oral histories for this thesis, meant that participants were asked how and why they thought certain events occurred or patterns emerged. Sometimes their answers concurred with explanations and interpretations provided in existing studies. Sometimes the explanations, if not diverging or different, at least suggested a different emphasis. Some examples of the impact of this approach were provided in the earlier discussion and analysis of participants' explanations of the place of racism in their histories.<sup>52</sup> The following provide further examples of the insights gained when explanations offered by participants are heard and adopted.

Set in the context of the growth in literature about the benefits of multiculturalism, a surface reading of interviews with one participant could provide evidence that multiculturalism is encouraging people to speak out about their cultural heritage and come to terms with a dual identity. After all, it was during the 1980s that this participant started to discuss and explore his Chinese ancestry and his experiences of being a Chinese-Australian. The timing coincided with the advent of multiculturalism. The timing, however, also coincided with a number of other factors. When the interviews were held, the participant was in his ninetieth year and was certainly feeling comfortable in the life-review stage, and said so.<sup>53</sup> He explained that he was prepared to talk about some things because most of the people concerned were no longer alive and so could not get hurt by what he said. The process, he observed, had also been prompted by his youngest son who had developed an interest in family history and had gently urged his father to re-establish links with the past, to the extent that he took him back to China in 1985 and again in 1989. These were the father's first visits since the age of ten. Both the participant and his son offered this interest and encouragement as an explanation for the revitalised attention to his Chinese heritage. They offered the further observation and explanation that the 1980s visits to China would not have been possible if China's doors, so tightly shut for so long, had not re-opened.

Events outside Australia so often cause changes for overseas-born Australians and their descendants, yet they are not often reflected in the literature which focuses on theoretical explanations and broad patterns measuring the settlement patterns and success

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<sup>51</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp.x-xi. See also Janis Wilton, 'Chinese-Australians talk, we theorise!' in Siri Gamage (ed.), *Studies on Assimilation, Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Australia*, UNE Symposium Group on Assimilation, Pluralism and Multiculturalism, Armidale, 1993, pp.163-166 for an earlier exploration of these issues in relation to the oral history research conducted for this thesis.

<sup>52</sup> Refer to pp.51-58 previously.

<sup>53</sup> See Thompson, *Voice of the Past. Second edition*, pp. 116-117 for an account of the life review stage.

of immigrants in Australia.<sup>54</sup> Here the importance of events overseas was stressed by Chinese-Australians themselves. The participant and his son mentioned earlier were not the only ones to do so. Another participant, for example, explained how the Communist Revolution and the closing of the doors to China caused many Chinese to stay in Australia, even though their preferred lifestyle was in China or at least in Hong Kong. Explanations like these provided insights which might have been overlooked if the research questions being addressed were set solely by an agenda drawn and devised from previous research and existing literature. Indeed, the constant references throughout the oral histories to the importance of China, visits to China, contacts with China, and images of China dictated that, in constructing the history of this particular group of Chinese-Australians, attention had to be paid to this theme and topic.<sup>55</sup>

Another aspect of acknowledging participants' expertise was to accept that they were able generally to distinguish between the different types of information they were providing. Hence, for example, a number of participants observed that all they could offer was their version of events and that other people were likely to have alternate or even conflicting accounts. Participants also frequently explained that a particular piece of information had been passed on by an older relative or community member. Some participants also, without prompting, indicated when the opinion they were expressing was their explanation of why something happened rather than a description of their memories of the event, experience, place or person. All these evaluations provided indicators imbedded in the oral histories themselves about the types and layers of information being offered, about the different approaches which could be adopted to analyse and use those pieces of information, and about the extent to which they could be seen to indicate patterns and experiences which encompassed more than one or two individuals.

### *Other Sources*

A final approach used to substantiate the evidence emerging from the oral histories was to test this evidence against as many other sources as possible. As the ultimate objective of the research for this thesis was to construct a history which brought together and analysed the experiences of a group of people and the contexts in which their experiences were located, then an approach which used only oral history would have been a blinkered one. To this end, the insights offered through the oral histories were measured against information in official and personal documentary sources. At times, it was found that the only evidence was that which emanated from the oral histories. This particularly applied to the descriptions of, for example, the daily routines involved in working in the

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<sup>54</sup> D.Cahill, 'Editorial: Ethnic tensions and social cohesion', *Migration Monitor*, 23/24, December 1991, p.2 makes a similar point.

<sup>55</sup> Chapter 9 following concentrates on this theme and topic. Chapter 10 following pursues further the impact of changing circumstances on the ways in which participants viewed the past and future.

stores or to accounts of the division of labour within homes. For these topics substantiation depended on cross-checking with other oral histories.

There were other areas, however, in which documentary evidence substantiated, complemented and sometimes extended the patterns and experiences presented in the oral histories. This occurred, for example, in the exploration of movement patterns between China and Australia. The federal immigration archives have a mass of documents which detail the time and stated reasons for visits to China, and provide some biographical details of those who applied to leave and reenter Australia. Information was found here not just about individuals and family members mentioned in the oral histories but also about people whose presence in the district of interest to this thesis had passed from living memory. The archives also, through naturalisation and immigration files, provided details on, for example, strategies used by members of the Chinese community to enable family members to immigrate to, and eventually remain in, Australia.<sup>56</sup>

Additional details about means employed to negotiate the severity of the immigration regulations emerged from a collection of personal and business papers in the possession of one of the participants.<sup>57</sup> These same papers provided examples of the letter contacts with China so often described in the oral histories, and they provided details and examples of the business networks which the oral histories indicated emanated from specific stores in the region. Another set of personal papers offered particular confirmation of the importance of family obligations and of the values and expectations passed down from generation to generation. The papers included memoirs in which family members offered advice and instructions about appropriate values and ways of behaving.<sup>58</sup> The descriptions of store picnics and ways of spending leisure time took on an added dimension through personal and family photographs recording these occasions.<sup>59</sup> The list goes on. Interpretations offered initially in the oral histories frequently found further substantiation and illustration in other sources.

There were also topics emerging from the oral histories which were contradicted or were at least challenged by checking against other sources. These most clearly included some of the areas of silence in the oral histories discussed earlier in this chapter. When this occurred, the task was to balance the conflicting messages. It was a task which took on particular significance when it came to decisions about the form, focus and arguments which were to be presented in the history.

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<sup>56</sup> Examples are provided in Part Two of the thesis, especially Chapters 5, 6 and 9.

<sup>57</sup> Mar Letters. See the Bibliography at the end of this thesis for more details on the contents of these papers.

<sup>58</sup> Kwong Sing Papers. See the Bibliography at the end of this thesis for more details on the contents of these papers.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, some of these photographs in Chapter 7, pp.159-160 following.

- **Presenting the History**

Exploration of the messages which can be discerned through an oral history approach reveal the extent to which the methodology with its underpinning theoretical and conceptual concerns provides an opportunity to explore aspects of the past which have previously been neglected or overlooked. In particular, it invites documentation and examination of aspects of the lives and experiences of individuals, groups and communities which have traditionally been absent from the pages of history books. It promotes the idea that values, attitudes, emotions and perceptions are as much a part of the historical record as descriptions of events, places and people. It offers an opportunity to explore relations between past and present, and to examine in particular the ways in which the processes of remembering shape and are shaped by recollections of the past and by the forces which intrude on that process. There are, however, ethical and intellectual dilemmas imbedded in the methodology which surface when the time comes to write and present the results of the research process. Central to these dilemmas are the potential and often real tensions between the concerns, conceptual framework and purpose of the researcher, and the expectations and emphases which shaped and influenced participants' willingness to share their memories and memorabilia.

#### *Different Emphases*

Attention has already been paid to the emphases provided by participants in the structuring and choice of topics addressed in their oral history interviews. It was argued that, at times, these emphases obscure or deny aspects of the past which have been clearly documented in other sources. It was also argued that the emphases were shaped by a variety of external factors and were influenced by the desire to provide a positive image for the public record. In so doing, certain topics were avoided and others enhanced. In this vein it became apparent that, for example, the oral history evidence provided only limited and often quite guarded accounts of discrimination and racism. There was equally little overt reference to Chinese exploiting Chinese, illegal immigration, criticism of family members or of family obligations and expectations, or of the price paid to achieve success in Australia. By contrast there was ample evidence of the importance of family and family obligations, and of the 'success' of family and community members as they and their descendants accommodated to Australian socioeconomic patterns and, in many instances, excelled in their educational and occupational achievements. Indeed, the constant message conveyed by participants was that their version of the past focuses on the hardship endured by predecessors, their tenacity and skill in overcoming this hardship, and ultimately, their success in making a good life for themselves and their descendants in Australia.

One dilemma in seeking to construct the histories of this particular group of Chinese-Australians, was to resolve how to retain the emphases chosen by the participants while also including the hidden messages which were revealed through analysing the subjective

nature of their oral histories and through comparing their experiences and accounts with those offered in other sources. It is both an ethical and an intellectual dilemma. It focuses on the issue of how to respect the emphases and silences in oral history interviews, while also acknowledging the conflict, tension, disappointment and despair which a reading of hidden meanings and other sources clearly indicated were an integral part of the history and experiences of Chinese-Australians. The challenge was to find a format which could present evidence about Australian racism and about other silenced topics without undermining the emphases made by community members, without breaking their trust and confidentiality, and without exposing them to the risk of negative images and the accompanying risk of perpetuating negative stereotypes.

### *Resolutions*

There is a growing wealth of material in oral history literature confronting similar dilemmas, and offering resolutions.<sup>60</sup> The strategies adopted in this thesis demonstrate the influence of these discussions. They also demonstrate the influence of work done by researchers, writers, artists and performers who seek to document and present the experiences of Chinese-Australians.

A number of Chinese-Australians concerned to explore, understand and present their Chinese heritage have used the solutions adopted by Chinese-American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan.<sup>61</sup> Among Australian writers, Brian Castro and Beth Yahp have written novels and short stories drawing on the stories and experiences of their own families.<sup>62</sup> There are also performing and visual artists like William Yang, Cheryle Yin-Lo and Anthony Kwan Gett who have examined aspects of family and personal history and identity, and have conveyed their responses through performance, paintings and photography.<sup>63</sup> These creative artists are exploring a route which respects silences and the privacy of older family and community members while accommodating the artists' and

<sup>60</sup> One of the repeated comments in the literature is the difficulty of finding satisfactory resolutions. See, for example, Bornat, 'Two oral histories', p.87 and Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives*, p.264. A clear and powerful exposition of the ethical and intellectual dilemma which arises when researcher and participant have different emphases is provided in Katherine Borland, 'That's not what I said': interpretive conflict in oral narrative research' in Gluck and Patai (eds), *Women's Words*, pp.63-76. For earlier examinations of these dilemmas in relation to the oral history interviews conducted for this thesis see, for example, Wilton, 'Remembering racism'; Wilton, 'Chinese-Australians talk, we theorise!', pp.163-166; Janis Wilton, 'Oral history and ethnic community studies in Australia', Unpublished paper to the International Oral History Conference, New York, October 1994; and Janis Wilton, 'Talking beyond racism: the Chinese contribution to Australian history', *Communicating Experience: IX International Oral History Conference, Volume 1*, University of Göteborg, June 1996, pp.73-81.

<sup>61</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, Picador, London, 1977; Kingston, *China Men*; Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, Minerva, London, 1990 (1989) (also the film of the same name); and Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Harper Collins, London, 1991.

<sup>62</sup> Brian Castro, *Birds of Passage*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984; and Beth Yahp, *The Crocodile Fury*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1992.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, William Yang, *Starting Again*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1989; Cheryle Yin-Lo in *Fragments of Origin*, Exhibition catalogue, Blaxland Gallery, Sydney, June 1994; and Sue Smith, 'Gett in the picture', *Weekend Courier Mail*, 14 November 1992. Gett Papers.

writers' own desires to explore their histories and identities. They demonstrate how fiction, and visual and performance art with their emphases on creativity and expression allow greater freedom and licence. Through these mediums Chinese-Australian artists and writers are able to convey the meaning of a Chinese heritage without having to identify specifically individuals, places or particular traumas. They clearly assume the role of author, and in so doing, invite the audience to gaze on them rather than on the people whose experiences triggered the creativity and, even when individuals are identified, they are presented as fictional or semi-fictional characters.

Museum curators have offered a similar solution. In her exploration of the use of oral history in exhibitions about Australia's cultural diversity, Brenda Factor argues for the need for museums to move away from exhibiting majority and one sided views.<sup>64</sup> Minority experiences, perspectives, and conflict should also be conveyed through exhibitions. The challenge is to achieve this aim without exposing members of the minority concerned to the risk of humiliation or ostracism. Factor suggests that this is where the curator/oral historian must step in. In order to exhibit conflict but to protect those involved, the authorial voice needs to be that of the curator/oral historian. Presumably, this means producing commentary and analysis, and organising and displaying artefacts in such a way that the interpretation is clearly attributed to the curator and is not claimed as the perspectives and emphases of a particular individual or group.

A similar route is available to oral historians seeking to present histories which document conflict, humiliation and despair alongside achievement and other positive elements, and who seek to do this without offending or exposing the sensibilities and privacy of the individuals involved. The strategy is twofold. It requires that the oral historian assumes the mantle of author and provides the commentary and analysis which presents conflicting views and binds different voices. It also offers anonymity as a means to shield the identity of participants. As Sherna Berger Gluck explains in a footnote discussion about the various methodologies in the oral history world:

[anonymity is] ... a necessity ... in social history and other disciplines [where] ... identifying one's sources may drastically restrict the type of material with which a researcher is likely to be entrusted.<sup>65</sup>

The benefit for the researcher is that anonymity, while protecting the privacy and confidentiality of participants, also permits tough and sometimes critical analysis which occasionally may reflect poorly on participants or, indeed, may have negative repercussions for them.

This combination of researcher as author and anonymity for participants has been used effectively by oral historians, and is an approach familiar in the social sciences.<sup>66</sup> It

<sup>64</sup> Brenda Factor, 'Making an exhibition of yourself: museums and oral history', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 13, 1991, pp.45-46

<sup>65</sup> Gluck and Patai (eds), *Women's Words*. p.4.

<sup>66</sup> Oral historians who have used anonymity in presenting their histories include, among many others, Janet McCalman, *Struggletown: Public and private life in Richmond 1900-1965*, Melbourne University Press,

offered a possible solution for this thesis. However given that a significant impetus behind the research was the desire to break through the practice of presenting 'the Chinese' as nameless individuals or statistics, and to establish the identities, contributions and complexities of specific individuals and groups, anonymity seemed an inappropriate option. The oral history participants, their families, stores, work profiles, hopes, desires, experiences, and contributions were to take centre stage. The history was to be about their lives and experiences. It was to explore the ways in which their experiences were shaped by and, in turn, reflected their social, cultural, economic and political circumstances. It was to be about acknowledgement and analysis of the experiences of immigration and settlement, the contributions made to local communities and commercial enterprise, the achievements in making a life in Australia, and the prices paid for those achievements. None of this could happen if the people involved could not be identified. It would be like presenting an analysis of the lives and achievements of prominent individuals without identifying who the people were or the names of family members and other people who were a part of their lives. In this context, if Chinese-Australians, or other previously marginalised or neglected groups, are to have their role and place in history recognised, at some stage that acknowledgement entails being named and profiled.

The rejection of anonymity as a strategy, however, did not mean retreating to a traditional academic position of researcher as expert, and discarding ethical and intellectual issues about privacy, confidentiality, ownership, and respecting the emphases and rights of participants. If anything, it made those issues more prominent. It required an assurance that, in the presentation of the history, views which challenged the emphases of participants were handled sensitively and were well substantiated. It also meant that, in some instances, information simply could not be used or needed to be used in such a way that a degree of anonymity was preserved. In this thesis, this particularly applied to 'off the record' insights offered by participants about such subjects as polygamy, illegal immigration, internal rivalries within families, exploitation, and resentment about specific practices. It also meant that, as Sherna Berger Gluck clearly indicates,<sup>67</sup> some information simply has not been made available because participants do not want to be identified as having shared that information. These factors reinforced the idea that the presentation of the material required that the binding and analytical authorial voice had to be that of the researcher. As well, it meant that when there were different emphases or when participants offered different explanations or details, these needed to be presented as just that - different emphases and different explanations.

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Melbourne, 1984; and Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An oral history 1940-1970*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995. Discussions about the purpose of anonymity are basic methodological issues in the social sciences. See, for example, Charles M. Judd, Eliot R. Smith and Louise H. Kidder, *Research Methods in Social Relations, Sixth edition*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Fort Worth, 1991, pp.520-524.

67 Gluck and Patai (eds), *Women's Words*, p.4.



### *Structure*

The decision to ensure that, as much as is ethically and empirically possible, the history constructed for this thesis was a history with named individuals was shaped by the recognition that, in this case, my task as historian was as much to write a history with and for participants as it was to write a history which provided theoretical insights, details and different perspectives on the history of the Chinese in Australia. This produced another dilemma in relation to the structure and organisation of the history. There were the demands of a doctoral thesis and that part of the research shaped particularly by the insights and rigours of social science methodologies and approaches. These demands urged that there should be a focused and clear theoretical and conceptual framework addressing issues of relevance to the interpretation and analysis of the histories and experiences of ethnic communities. Certainly, emerging from the analysis of the oral histories and other evidence were a number of themes of concern in ethnic community studies. These included, for example, ethnic identity, adaptation, responses to outside pressures, strategies for surviving the experiences of migration and settlement, the nature of ethnic enterprises, and cultural maintenance and accommodation. One possible way in which to structure the history would have been to pull out these themes and to use them as the main organising points for chapters and sections within those chapters. This, however, seemed to deny the integrity and complexity of the experiences as they were lived and remembered by the Chinese-Australians whose family and life histories provided the core of the material. For them, the themes and issues familiar to social scientists were confronted and negotiated, often unconsciously, in a variety of contexts that impinged on different aspects of their lives. They rarely focused their recollections on, for example, issues of identity or plotting experiences of racism. Rather, these themes and concerns were imbedded in the narratives they told about migration, settlement, work, social life, family life and achievements, visits to China, and involvement in local and Chinese communities in Australia. It seemed important, and more ethical, to retain this sense of narrative. It was also important to allow the new collective narrative, albeit controlled by one author, to provide a sense of change and continuity over time - the classic concern of all history.

With these considerations in mind, Part Two of the thesis is structured around the broad topics which emerged from the oral histories of the participants. It aims to provide a sense of time both across and within chapters. It also aims to convey how different issues and themes central to the analysis of the experiences of ethnic communities are an integral, rather than isolated, part of the lived histories of individuals and their communities. Finally, it aims to demonstrate that focused research and analysis of the information offered through the oral histories of a small number of Chinese-Australians can add to our knowledge of the history of the Chinese in Australia.

### *Terminology*

One final issue which had to be confronted in writing the history, was to determine the appropriate terms to use for describing participants, their ancestors and, more generally, members of the Chinese communities in Australia. The core of the issue is highlighted by the terminology used by participants of Chinese ancestry. They readily referred to themselves as Chinese. They certainly also described themselves as Australian. Yet, at times and especially when discussing topics like 'mixed' marriages or experiences of discrimination, they used the term 'Australian' to describe Australians of non-Chinese backgrounds and the term 'Chinese' to refer to themselves. In doing this, they absorbed an ideology which located Chinese as 'not real Australians'. It is an ideology which also creeps into the use of the terms in some of the literature on the study of the Chinese in Australia. The quote from Jennifer Cushman used in the Introduction to this thesis provides but one example.<sup>68</sup>

It is difficult to negotiate and resolve these various uses. They, after all, reflect both the usages of participants and a reality in Australian life that 'being Chinese' or having Chinese ancestry marks individuals as belonging to a particular cultural minority and, as such, having at the very least a different heritage to other Australians. Whether the membership of this minority is seen as a positive or negative attribute depends on the stance of the onlooker.

The resolution of these issues for this thesis was to accept that the focus of concern was on the experiences of Chinese immigrants and their descendants who settled in Australia. To this end, it seemed satisfactory to use the terms Chinese and Chinese-Australians fairly interchangeably. Care, however, had to be taken to ensure that the Australian part of the history and identity of Chinese-Australians was not denied or undermined by using the term 'Australian' in any context which suggested that being Australian excluded people with Chinese ancestry. Consequently, at those moments when it is important to make a distinction between Chinese-Australians and Australians with no Chinese ancestry, the terms used are simply non-Chinese Australians or Australians with no Chinese ancestry.

- **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the various messages and meanings which can be discerned in oral history material, the variety of theoretical and conceptual approaches adopted by oral historians to expose the different layers of information available, and the application of such insights to the oral history material collected for this thesis. In particular, attention has been paid to hidden meanings, and the documentation of changing values, cultural influences and external factors as illustrated through the analysis of the way in which racism

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<sup>68</sup> Refer to Introduction, p. 1, previously.

and discrimination was addressed by participants. Attention has also been paid to analyses of the impact of collective memory and public ideology, especially in relation to the narratives used by participants to present accounts of the success of settlement in Australia. These excursions to expose and utilise the evidence available through a careful analysis of aspects of the subjective nature of oral histories have been followed and balanced by an acceptance, exploration and substantiation of the literal meanings offered in the oral histories. In particular, it has been demonstrated that the descriptions and details offered by participants about specific experiences, especially when the details and patterns were repeated across a range of oral histories, provided substantive and significant indications of patterns and accounts important for understanding and analysing aspects of the history of a particular group of Chinese-Australians. These indications are heightened when participants' explanations of their own experiences are used as a basis for analysis. They are also extended when the insights offered through oral histories are tested against other sources.

Having explored the messages and meanings accessible through oral histories, attention then turned to issues involved in incorporating the information into the writing and presentation of the history itself. It has been demonstrated that this process involved confronting dilemmas central to working with participants in recording and constructing their histories. It has required addressing the ethical and intellectual dilemma of determining how to retain and respect the emphases and expectations of participants while also being able to indicate when and how those emphases and expectations had hidden meanings, denied certain factors and information, or could be challenged by other evidence. The option of using anonymity in Part Two of the thesis has been rejected on the grounds that participants became involved in the research partly in order to document and construct the history of the Chinese contribution to a particular region. This contribution entailed being able to identify individuals and families, and their achievements. The need for balance has meant that some information could not surface in the writing of the history, that competing explanations were presented, and that the overall interpretation and presentation of the history was the responsibility of the researcher. In this way, it was hoped, any negative images or interpretations perceived in the history and any views or interpretations with which community members or others disagreed, could be attributed to the researcher and not seen to reflect on the integrity and contributions of the participants.

The other decision which impinged on the presentation of the history related to determining a structure which retained the emphases provided by participants while also incorporating and addressing the theoretical and conceptual issues which, it has been demonstrated, lie at the core of the use of oral history material. The decision here has been to adopt a structure which reflects the themes, topics and emphases presented by participants and, within that structure, to raise and address the interpretive, conceptual and theoretical issues required by academic rigour and analysis.

## **PART TWO**

## Chapter 4

### GRANDFATHERS, FATHERS, UNCLES

In the late 1940s Marie Hunnam was a student at Tingha Public School. Her great grandfather was Chinese but, while she was growing up, she was unaware of her Chinese ancestry: 'We just weren't told about being Chinese'.<sup>1</sup> For Marie Hunnam, the Chinese were other people in town and there were still quite a few. Looking back, she revisited the streets of her childhood town. She drew a mud map. She recalled some of the Chinese stores and businesses, and the people who ran them:

*Now Ned Lowe had the picture theatre. Lee Chues owned a cafe near where the old Inverell bridge was. They used to sell pork buns. We didn't go there. Tim Kay had an electrical shop. Wing Hing Long, the general store, it used to be quite busy. Out the back was the produce store... There was the market garden next to the Joss House. It was worked by a very old fashioned looking Chinese who used a square ended hoe, carried water on his shoulders and used to scoop it out with a tin with holes which he'd then sprinkle over the garden. He had about half an acre. ... Chinese ingredients used to be bought from Wing Hing Long and Sam Kee's. I can also remember the Chinese ceremony at the cemetery. The food and paper money. And the paper money in the joss house. That happened into the 1950s.<sup>2</sup>*

Like all our memories, Marie Hunnam's have been heightened and shaped by subsequent experiences. In particular, her discovery and pride in her Chinese forebears has helped sharpen images of the Chinese presence in her childhood. She is critical of the environment which caused her parents and grandparents to bury this part of the family heritage. She is determined to reinstate and respect the Chinese contribution to her family history and to the history of her town. Yet, her childhood recollections provide a signpost to the status and extent of the Chinese presence not just in Tingha but in the region encompassing the towns of Tingha, Inverell, Emmaville, Tenterfield and Glen Innes in northern New South Wales.<sup>3</sup> It is a region characterised by the discovery of tin at Tingha and Emmaville in the 1870s and, for the Chinese, by a community and family network of Chinese owned and managed general stores established throughout the district during the first half of the twentieth century.

Marie Hunnam's desires and recollections provide a fitting start to a chapter which introduces the nature of the Chinese presence in a particular part of northern New South Wales during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They offer a reminder that broad patterns in the history of the Chinese in Australia during this period are built, ultimately, from the lives and experiences of individuals. They also intimate that broad patterns can

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Marie Hunnam, Mudgerceba, 25 September 1991.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

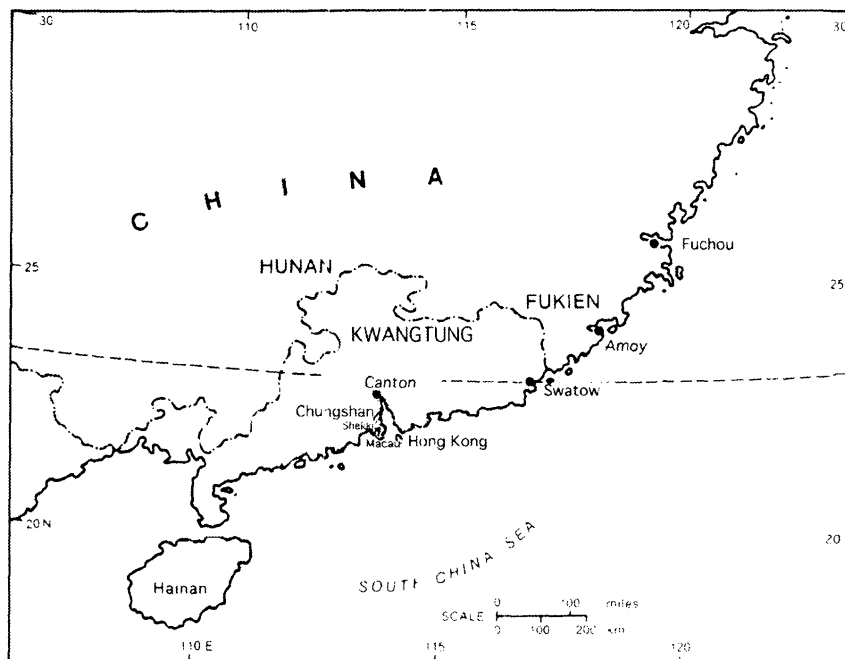
<sup>3</sup> See Map 1 on p. 4 previously.

hide variations and complexities created by the circumstances in specific localities, and that they can overlook the similarities and differences between groups who arrive at different times. It is these characteristics and aspects which form the focus of this chapter.

The chapter begins with an account of the origins and nature of nineteenth century Chinese immigration to the district. Attention then turns to the Chinese who stayed in the district and whose work histories and lives provided a link to a new, albeit much smaller, group of Chinese immigrants who arrived during the first few decades of the twentieth century. The chapter examines the similarities and differences between the various groups of immigrants. In the process it also identifies families and clans whose histories in the district began with the immigration and settlement of grandfathers, fathers and uncles who belonged to these different waves.

### Nineteenth Century Arrivals

Chinese first came to the area around Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield from Amoy in the Fukien district in China. They were brought as contract farm labourers, shepherds and cooks in the late 1840s and into the 1850s.<sup>4</sup> Marie Hunnam's great grandfather, Joseph Hong Hay, was possibly among these early arrivals. He was married at Grove Station near



Map 3: South China showing main emigration areas for Chinese who came to Glen Innes, Inverell, Tenterfield and surrounding districts during the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Maxine Darnell, Department of Economic History, University of New England, is currently researching the network of interests which brought these Chinese to the region. See her 'Bulwark of the country ... (and) ... salvation of the colony', Paper to the Conference of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia, Macquarie University, July 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Ann Atkinson, *Asian Immigrants to Western Australia 1829-1902: Bicentennial dictionary of Western Australians*, Volume 5, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1988, p.2.

Tingha in 1865 to Ann Battersby, and the birth certificates of some of his children indicate he was born in Amoy, China, in the early 1830s.<sup>6</sup>

There are only fleeting references to these first Chinese.<sup>7</sup> Their presence and contribution has been overshadowed by the influx of Chinese attracted by the discovery of gold around Tenterfield in the late 1850s and of tin around Emmaville and Tingha in the 1870s. At the beginning of the tin mining boom, for example, the census recorded 183 residents of Chinese nationality in the district.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the 1891 census enumerated 1297 people born in China and this was after the mining booms had reached their peak.<sup>9</sup>

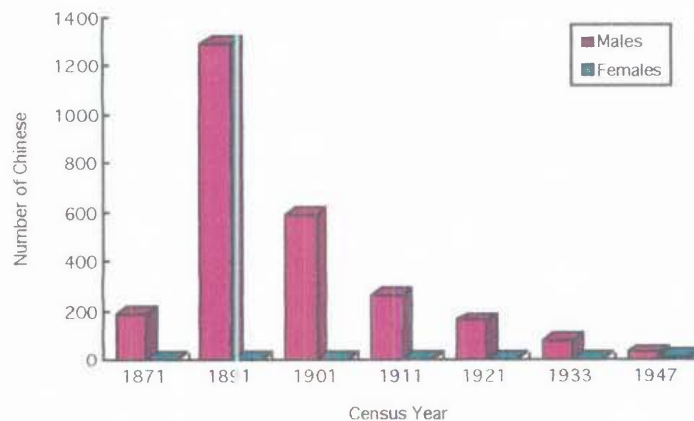


Diagram 1: Number of people born in China and resident in and around the towns of Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield, 1871-1947.<sup>10</sup>

As with mining booms elsewhere in Australia, the towns and communities which emerged in and around Tingha and Emmaville acquired characteristics shaped by the backgrounds and needs of the newly arrived populations.<sup>11</sup> For the Chinese this meant the provision of housing, services and goods, and the adaptation of mining and work practices.

<sup>6</sup> From family history research conducted by Marie Hunnam. Hunnam Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Monica Tankey has located one of her forebears among these early Chinese from Amoy. See, for example, Monica Tankey, 'Armidale and the Amoy labourers', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, 29, 1986, pp.74-76. For other references to these Chinese see Elizabeth Wiedemann, *World of its Own: Inverell's early years 1827-1920*, Devill Publicity, Inverell, 1981, pp. 43, and 152-153; and R.B. Walker, *Old New England: A history of the northern tablelands of New South Wales 1818-1900*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1966, p.54. See also Evadene Swanson, 'Chinese immigrants in New England', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, 11, 1968, especially pp.27-29. Swanson also offers an early discussion of some of the inadequacies of the documentation available on the early Chinese. Darnell's research (see footnote 4 above) is finally correcting some of this lack of attention.

<sup>8</sup> *New South Wales Census, 1871*, pp.410-413. For a more detailed breakdown see Tables 3 to 6 in Appendix B at the end of this thesis.

<sup>9</sup> *New South Wales Census, 1891*, pp.453-479. In his report on the 1891 census, the government statistician noted that two of the counties in the district (Gough and Hardinge) were among the six rural counties in New South Wales 'most affected by the Chinese'. T.A. Coghlan, *General Report on the Eleventh Census of NSW*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1894, p.185. The 1881 census which was taken at the height of the mining boom does not provide a breakdown by town or counties. For further details on the patterns of the Chinese presence in the area see also Diagram 1 on this page, and Appendix B Tables 3 to 6 at the end of this thesis.

<sup>10</sup> Constructed from information in Tables 3 to 6 in Appendix B at the end of this thesis.

<sup>11</sup> For an account of the Chinese services and communities which developed on other mining sites in Australia see, for example, Kathryn Cronin, *Colonial Casualties: Chinese in early Victoria*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1982, especially Chapter 2.

Contemporary accounts from non-Chinese sources, underpinned by the racism of the time, hint at the complexity, diversity and vitality of the lifestyles and practices pursued. There is discussion of, for example, the specific mining techniques developed and used by the Chinese, their housing and living standards, Chinese religious observances and buildings, and the emergence of specifically Chinese stores and services.<sup>12</sup> There is also evidence of the regional backgrounds of these Chinese. No longer only from Amoy and Fukien, they now came from other parts of southern China and, as historian Henry Chan suggested, the existence of at least three different joss houses in Tingha indicates that there were probably at least three distinct Chinese groups in Tingha, let alone the rest of the region.<sup>13</sup> The increased numbers and needs also meant that there was an increasing variety of occupations pursued by the Chinese. The miners were supported and serviced by market gardeners, herbalists, storekeepers, shop assistants, and joss house caretakers.

As the mining booms passed, however, only a relatively small number of Chinese stayed in the region. The majority moved on to other mining fields or occupations. Most eventually returned to their villages in China. After all, Chinese men traditionally emigrated in order ultimately to return home.<sup>14</sup> The exodus from Australia was heightened by the imposition of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act which implemented the federation generation's desire to 'keep Australia white' by discouraging, if not preventing, the immigration of people from Asia, particularly China.<sup>15</sup> The exodus is reflected in the census

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12 Examples of these contemporary sources can be found in, for example, Elizabeth Campbell, *A history of tin mining in the Inverell district and its effects on the development of the town and district*, BA Hons, University of New England, Armidale, 1968, especially pp.47-53; Ian Lobsey, *'The Creek': A history of Emmaville and district, 1872-1972*, Regional Printers, Glen Innes, 1972, p.33 where he quotes an 1887 description of Emmaville's Chinese quarter and a Chinese wedding; Walker, *Old New England*, p. 96; and Wiedemann, *World of its Own*, pp.83-86 where she quotes from contemporary local newspapers and Annual Reports from the NSW Department of Mines. See also Eric Rolls, *Sojourners: The epic story of China's centuries old relationship with Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992, pp.221-229 and 239-246 passim for evocative descriptions of Chinese contributions to mining practices in the area.

13 H.D.Chan Min-hsi, 'The social history of the Chinese communities in Australia: towards a new historiography', Unpublished paper to the Inaugural Conference of the Australian Association of Chinese Studies, University of Melbourne, July 1989, p. 4.

14 Cronin, *Colonial Casualties*, especially pp.18-19; and C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia 1901-1921*, Raphael Arts, Adelaide, 1977, pp.2-3, for example, emphasise the significance of the sojourner tradition. Compare analyses which question whether sojourning was a particular trait of Chinese emigration or whether, indeed, it applied generally to emigrants. See, for example, Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A history of Asian Americans*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1987, pp.10-11. There is also debate about the extent to which the trait (or myth) was reinforced, or even created, by factors other than Chinese traditions. See, for example, Anthony Chan, "'Orientalism' and image making: the sojourner in Canadian history', *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 9/3, 1981, pp.37-46; and Jean Ohai, 'Family history for Chinese Americans', *World Conference on Records*, 11/807, 1980, p.6. A critique of different analyses and approaches to the 'sojourner tradition' can be found in Franklin Ng, 'The sojourner, return migration, and immigration history' in Chinese Historical Society of America (ed.), *Chinese America: History and perspectives 1987*, Chinese Historical Society of America, San Francisco, 1987. Whatever the reason, the pattern was clear: the majority of nineteenth century Chinese in Australia returned to China.

15 There have been a number of detailed and early studies of the history and development of the relevant immigration legislation. See, for example, H.I. London, *Non-White Immigration and the 'White Australia Policy'*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1970; Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850-1901*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1979; A.C. Palfreeman, *The Administration of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967; Charles

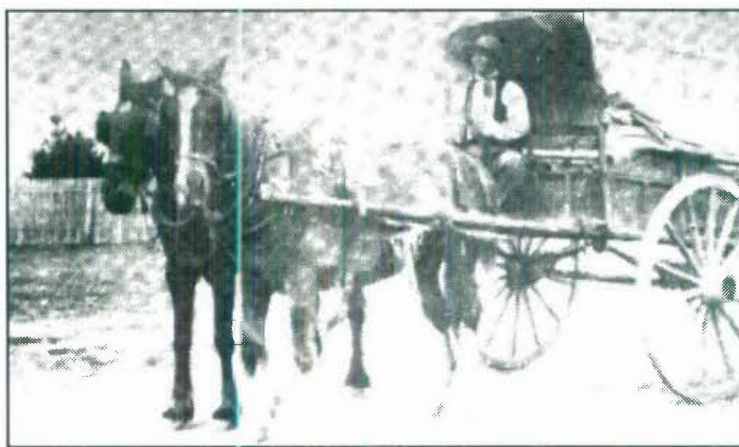


statistics. By 1901, the number of people born in China in the area had dropped to 593, by 1911 to 267 and it continued to decrease until, by 1947, there were 47.<sup>16</sup>

Those Chinese immigrants who stayed in the region included men who continued to eke out a living from mining and others who had moved into market gardening. Most of these were single men either unmarried or with wives and families back in China. Their presence is recorded primarily through the memories of long time local residents, Chinese and non-Chinese. In Emmaville, for example, there are vivid memories of Ah Sing, cook, miner and market gardener. Ernest Sue Fong, who grew up in 1920s Emmaville, described Ah Sing as

*...a big Chinese, a big Mongolian ... He had a garden along the Emmaville road and he used to come in of a morning, come in selling his greengroceries, and what he used to like, he used to like smoking opium up in the Joss house.... and he finished up dying down there that [at his market garden] poor fellow.<sup>17</sup>*

In Tenterfield there are memories of Quin Chee. He first appeared in the region in the 1880s and, from then until his hospitalisation in the 1930s, tended his market gardens in Bolivia and, later, Tenterfield, and hawked his produce in the district. In a local history publication, there is a photograph of Quin Chee, draught horses pulling his covered wagon, as he travelled the district hawking his goods.<sup>18</sup> The local story ends with a fundraising effort to enable him to return to China in 1934.<sup>19</sup>



Quin Chee with his horses and cart, c1920.<sup>20</sup>

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Price, *The Great White Walls are Built: Restrictive immigration to North America and Australasia 1836-1888*, Australian Institute of International Affairs with ANU Press, Canberra, 1974 and A.T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia The background to exclusion 1896-1923*, Melbourne University Press, London, 1967, especially Chapter 6. Specific aspects of the legislation are discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Refer to Diagram 1 on p. 77 previously. For a detailed breakdown of the census figures see Appendix B, Tables 3 to 6, at the end of this thesis.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Ernest Sue Fong, Inverell, 27 March 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Ken Halliday, *Tenterfield Reflections*, The author, Tenterfield, 1981, p.6.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 4-6. Quin Chee is listed as a gardener in the 1906 and 1914 Post Office Directories for Tenterfield. There is also a Quin Chee listed as operating a store outside Deepwater (which is reasonably close to Bolivia) in the 1906 Post Office Directory. Local residents, Dulcie Rose and Maisie Petrie, included descriptions of Quin Chee in their memories of the Chinese in Tenterfield. Interview with Dulcie Rose and Maisie Petrie, Tenterfield, 5 May 1990.

<sup>20</sup> Photograph and caption from Halliday, *Tenterfield Reflections*, p.6.

There was also Cum Day who, for many years, was a market gardener on Tom Manuel's father's property on the outskirts of Emmaville. Tom Manuel located Cum Day as a part of his childhood memories:

*I can remember his market garden. I can remember Cum Day, he used to fascinate me because he always wore three hats, one on top of the other. And he had a lovely little beard, about six whiskers. He was a good old Chinaman. He used to go into Emmaville with his vegetables, two big Chinese baskets on a yoke and he'd ... sell his vegetables, have a few drinks and come home.<sup>21</sup>*

There were also those Chinese who came to the region during the mining booms and stayed on as miners or market gardeners but whose individual presence has disappeared from local memory. They are among the men whose names are recorded in local tin buyers' books, who appear briefly in court reports and other news items in the local newspapers, and who are mentioned in descriptions of mining and market gardening techniques.<sup>22</sup> They had a relatively isolated existence, living and working alone or with a small number of other Chinese. Some died in the region. Others returned to China. For a number of those who returned to China, government records provide a little individual detail. Intent on keeping track of Chinese leaving and entering the country, forms were filled in with biographical information and were often accompanied by photographs. This was the case, for example, for Low Gun. Records show that he first applied for a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test<sup>23</sup> in 1914. By this time he had spent three years in Sydney, fourteen years at Hillgrove (a mining centre near Armidale) and ten years at Emmaville. His occupation was listed as gardener. In subsequent applications (1919, 1926 and 1933), he was described as a gardener, previously a miner, and, after moving to Sydney in 1921, as a cook. Portrait photographs accompanying the applications provide a sense of the way in which Low Gun aged and, in so doing, emphasise the length of time he stayed in Australia, commuting occasionally to his home village in China where there may have been a wife or wives and children.<sup>24</sup> There is no record of him returning from his last trip to China in 1933. He presumably joined the many other Chinese who, sooner or later, returned permanently to China.

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21 Interview with Tom Manuel, Glen Innes, 10 May 1990.

22 See, for example, the list of Chinese names in Thomas Chandler's tin buying book, History House, Glen Innes. For examples of Chinese mentioned in court reports see *Glen Innes Examiner*, 20 October 1896, 24 December 1901, 27 November 1911, and 12 February 1914, and *Glen Innes Guardian*, 14 January 1902, 21 January 1902, and 30 August 1904.

23 The Dictation Test was the means established under the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act to control the immigration of non-Europeans. For information on the immigration legislation which included the need for non-Europeans to pass, or gain exemption from, the Dictation Test, see Chapter 5, pp.96-98 following.

24 Australian Archives (NSW): SP42/2; C33/4122.



Low Gun (also referred to as Ah Gun) in 1914, 1919 and 1933.<sup>25</sup>

These single men who arrived during the nineteenth century mining booms and who continued to work as miners and market gardeners into the twentieth century were a fading feature of the region. The pattern of work and settlement began changing for the Chinese from the late nineteenth century. Mining and market gardening were replaced by storekeeping, and single Chinese were replaced by married men with families. Among these men who married and settled were some of the grandfathers, fathers and uncles of the Chinese-Australians whose memories and memorabilia lie at the core of this story of the Chinese contribution to the region during the first part of the twentieth century. A number were miners, others market gardeners and herbalists, some opened stores. There were also those who pursued a mixture of occupations. The histories of a few of these men provide examples.

By the mid 1880s Robert Duck Chong's father, Charles Duck Chong (born in China in about 1850), had settled with his wife, Susan Chun, in Tingha. Their nine children were born in the town, the first in 1886. Two of the children's birth certificates record their father's occupation as miner.<sup>26</sup> Later, in about 1910, Charles Duck Chong spent some time sharefarming tobacco around Ashford, north of Inverell. His health then deteriorated. His son, Robert, recalled that his father's last years were marred by severe asthma.<sup>27</sup> He died in 1937.



*Left:* Robert Duck Chong with his father, Charles Duck Chong in the garden at the back of the family home in Tingha, c.1918. *Right:* Charles Duck Chong holding his eldest grandson, Neil Duck Chong, Tingha, mid 1930s.<sup>28</sup>

26 Birth certificates of Ruby Duck Chong (born 1899) and Robert Duck Chong (b.1900). Duck Chong Papers.  
 27 Interview with Robert Duck Chong, Sydney, 26 April 1991.  
 28 Duck Chong Photographs.

Alvena Gibbs's father, Charles Kum Sing, was also a miner. He worked and lived at The Gulf, north of Emmaville. She remembered how, by the time she was growing up, mining had become a job shared by her parents:

*Mum had to work with him... See, Dad'd work down the bottom and Mum'd pull the dirt up on a windlass.*<sup>29</sup>

Like Charles Duck Chong, Charles Kum Sing suffered from respiratory difficulties or, as Alvena Gibbs so clearly stated, 'miner's dust'. He died in 1926 aged about 73.<sup>30</sup>

Trevor Jack's grandfather, Quin Jack, similarly began his working life in the region as a tin miner. He also laboured as an orchardist and carpenter, with some sources asserting he played a part in building the Wing Fling Long store in Tingha.<sup>31</sup>

Kevin Garr's father, George Fong Garr, arrived in the area in the late nineteenth century, presumably attracted by tin mining. He married Katherine Gorkong whose father, Charles Gorkong had come to the district as a miner during the height of the boom. By the turn of the century the couple had established a market garden outside Emmaville. Kevin Garr remembered that when he was a child in the late 1920s his father's business employed about ten people. The garden had to support a large family of nine surviving children. Eventually, George Fong Garr retired to Brisbane where he continued to work in a market garden, this time for someone else.<sup>32</sup>



George Fong Garr (back row, far right) with his wife, Katherine (Gorkong) and eight of their children.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Alvena Gibbs, Deepwater, 22 March 1990.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* See also Charles Kum Sing's obituary, *Glen Innes Examiner*, 21 October 1926.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Trevor Jack, Coonabarabran, 25 June 1990. See also *Inverell Times*, 14 April 1978 and Helen Brown, *Tin at Tingha*, The author, Armidale, 1982, pp.35 and 108.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Kevin Garr, Brisbane, 25 September 1991.

<sup>33</sup> Garr Photographs.

George Sue Fong also started out mining tin at Emmaville in the 1880s. He, however, eventually diversified and opened a store. As his son, Ernest Sue Fong, recalled:

*Dad used to work the tin during the day and at night, he made his house into a little shop, selling vegetables from his garden out the back, mainly to other Chinese. ... From the house Dad moved into a small shop and he began working in the shop full-time. It was a mixed business and slowly it grew. By 1926 when it was at its height, there were about ten employees working there and the customers were no longer mainly Chinese because most of the Chinese had gone away by then. The business became known as Sue Fong and Sons.<sup>34</sup>*

George Sue Fong did not stop at storekeeping. As daughter, Bessie Chiu, explained:

*He was a very good herbalist because he used to get letters from everywhere and he used to make something. I don't know the ins and outs of it but he was. He said, 'Well twelve kids, a shop alone wouldn't keep you'. So he also used to buy rabbit skins and fox skins. I remember that and tin... My brother used to go every week with him and put the skins on the train at Deepwater station and send them wherever it was - Sydney I suppose.<sup>35</sup>*

By the time of his death in 1932, George Sue Fong was an established small storekeeper in Emmaville. His business had supported a family of fourteen children.



George Sue Fong with seven of his children, c.1920.<sup>36</sup>

34 Interview with Ernest Sue Fong, Inverell, 14 February 1984.  
 35 Interview with Bessie Chiu, Gold Coast, 24 September 1991.  
 36 Sue Fong Photographs.

These brief work histories of men like Charles Duck Chong, Charles Kum Sing, Quin Jack, George Fong Garr and George Sue Fong illustrate the occupation patterns which characterised the dying years of the tin mining booms for the Chinese who stayed in the district. Some continued to work as miners; others diversified. One area of diversification was the move into storekeeping. This was the occupation which ultimately was to provide the main employment opportunities for Chinese who stayed, and for new arrivals. It was an occupation which also encouraged Chinese to move away from the main tin mining towns of Emmaville and Tingha, and into the neighbouring and larger centres of Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield. This pattern is evident in the census statistics which show that, between 1891 and 1947, the percentage of Chinese in the district who lived in the three main towns increased.<sup>37</sup>

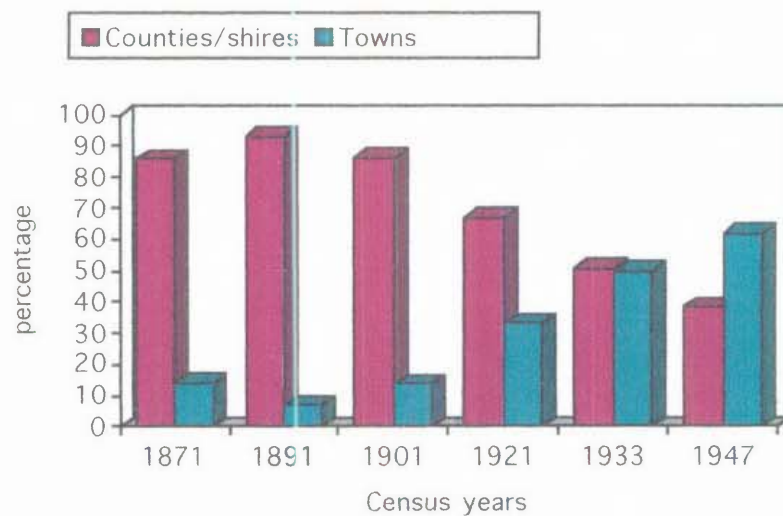


Diagram 2 : Percentage of people born in China living in selected counties and towns (Glen Innes, Inverell, Tenterfield), 1871-1947.<sup>38</sup>

This change in settlement and work patterns is also evident in the work histories of Chinese who arrived in the district in the late nineteenth century, and whose descendants were born there. Among these were Wong Chee, adopted grandfather of the Fay family, and Percy Young, founder of the Australian branch of the Kwan clan.<sup>39</sup> Their work activities ultimately focused on the Kwong Sing store in Glen Innes.

Wong Chee was born in the Chungshan district of China in the late 1850s and migrated to Australia some time in the 1870s. He first appeared in northern New South Wales at Emmaville, possibly opening a store there.<sup>40</sup> By 1889, he had joined the staff of the Kwong

<sup>37</sup> See Diagram 2 following.

<sup>38</sup> For more detailed statistics consult Tables 3 to 6 in Appendix B at the end of this thesis.

<sup>39</sup> For further information about the Fay family and the Kwan clan see Appendix D at the end of this thesis.

<sup>40</sup> There is no specific evidence that he had a store in Emmaville. This was a supposition by a journalist writing a history of the Kwong Sing Store for its centenary celebrations. See *Northern Magazine*, 25 May 1986.

Sing War store in Glen Innes. By the time he returned permanently to China in 1912, he was the owner and manager of the store.<sup>41</sup>

More is known about Percy Young. He was born in about 1865 in the village of Wing Ho, Shekki, Chungshan. At around twenty years of age he emigrated to Australia where, through Chinese (presumably Chungshan) networks, he spent the next ten years working in a number of different Chinese stores, largely in rural New South Wales. He also spent some time in China although he saw prospects in Australia as he sought naturalisation in 1883. In the late 1890s the network led him to Kwong Sing War in Glen Innes. By 1907 he had become a partner in the business and, by 1912 was a major shareholder and the manager of the store. He took over from Wong Chee.<sup>42</sup> His influence, networks and management style were to shape the history of the store for the next few decades.<sup>43</sup>



On the left, Wong Chee in c.1907, and on the right, Percy Young in c.1920.<sup>44</sup>

Charles Duck Chong, Charles Kum Sing, Quin Jack, George Fong Garr, George Sue Fong, Wong Chee and Percy Young were among the relatively small number of later nineteenth century arrivals who stayed in the district and whose children were born there. Importantly, most of these men came from the Chungshan district of China and brought with them contacts with and obligations to family and village members. Through their families and the work they did, they provided an anchor which attracted and shaped a new wave of Chinese who arrived after the turn of the century and whose presence and activities hastened the changing occupational structure of the Chinese resident in the district.

<sup>41</sup> *Glen Innes Examiner*, 21 December 1894, 20 November 1903, 28 November 1911, and 9 December 1912; Autobiography of Mr Kwan Hong Kee, 1938, unpublished manuscript, Kwong Sing Papers; *Northern Magazine*, 25 May 1986; and Interviews with Eileen Cum, 14 February 1984, and Marina Mar, Sydney, 18 January 1984.

<sup>42</sup> This account of Percy Young's early years has been pieced together from a variety of sources including Autobiography of Mr Kwan Hong Kee; Percy Young's (under name Puck Sing) Naturalisation Certificate, 15 May 1883, Kwong Sing Papers; *Glen Innes Examiner*, 20 October 1903 and 2 June 1942; and Interviews with Stanley Young, Glen Innes, 15 February 1990 and, Brisbane, 24 September 1991.

<sup>43</sup> See Chapters 5 and 6 following.

<sup>44</sup> Harry Fay Photographs, and Kwong Sing Photographs.



### Early Twentieth Century Arrivals

The new arrivals who came after the turn of the century, came from Chungshan in China and from other parts of Australia. Again, the pattern is illustrated through the profiles of individuals, and the family and clan networks along which they moved.

Ken Gett's father, Walter Gett, was born in Wing Ho, Chungshan, in about 1883. He arrived in Glen Innes in 1901 sponsored by his uncle, Percy Young, who was working at the Kwong Sing store in Glen Innes. Over the next ten years, Percy Young also sponsored Walter Gett's brothers, James Hoon and Sam Yett, and his cousins, Harry Yee, Frank Fatt, and Robert Kong. A photograph taken in about 1915 shows Percy Young surrounded by his nephews as well as some of his Australian-born sons. All the nephews worked for some time at the Kwong Sing store in Glen Innes before they branched out to establish their own stores in other parts of northern New South Wales. They, in turn, sponsored relatives and fellow villagers to immigrate from China.<sup>45</sup>



Percy Young with his nephews and sons, Glen Innes, c.1915.<sup>46</sup>

A similar pattern emerged at the Hong Yuen store in Inverell. The store was established in 1899. Through the networks which brought Chinese to work in the store, Australian-born Harry Fay joined the staff in about 1910. By 1916 he was the manager of the store and, eventually, the major shareholder.<sup>47</sup> He also set about sponsoring family and clan members,

<sup>45</sup> For more details on these networks see Chapters 5 and 6 following. Also consult Appendices C and E: at the end of this thesis.

<sup>46</sup> *Kwan Reunion Newsletter*, 2, November 1985. In the photograph are back row, left to right, Henry Young, Harry Yee, Leslie Young, Jimmy Hoon, Sam Yett and front row, left to right, Robert Kwan, Walter Gett, Roger Young, Percy Young, Norman Young, Frank Fatt, Stanley Young.

<sup>47</sup> Harry Fay's early years are described in *Inverell Times*, 19 March 1941, 16 and 18 July 1973, and 15 October 1976. His children also provided details. Interviews with Eileen Cum and Marina Mar, and Interviews with Harry Fay (II), Inverell, 6 October and 23 November 1983, and Thelma Loy, Inverell, 14 February 1984. For a lengthier account of his life see Janis Wilton, *Hong Yuen: A country store and its*

and fellow villagers from his village of Dau Tau in Chungshan. His brothers, George Ping Kee and Ernest Lun, and his nephews, Lawrence Ping Kee, Sidney Ping Kee, and Joe Mah were among those who came with Harry Fay's assistance. So too were clan and village members Harry Day, Louie Man Hing, Louie Yun Lum, Wah Sun Ping Kee, and Percy So Quan. All, for shorter or longer periods of time, worked at Hong Yuen or, later, one of its branch stores. Most then moved on to establish their own businesses or to find other employment.<sup>48</sup>

In Tenterfield, John Hong of Hop Sing and Company and Harry Hon of Sun Sun and Company fulfilled similar roles. So did Jack Joe Lowe of Wing Hing Long and Tommy Young of the Sam Kee store, both in Tingha.<sup>49</sup> Established in business, these men, like Percy Young and Harry Fay, sponsored relatives and fellow villagers from China to staff their stores and, eventually, to branch out and establish their own businesses.



Chinese store owners who arrived in the district after the turn of the century. *Clockwise from top left:* Harry Fay c.1916; Harry Hon, c.1910; Jack Joe Lowe, 1939; John Hong, c.1932; Tommy Young, c.1915(?).<sup>50</sup>

*people*, NSW Department of Education Multicultural Education Coordinating Committee and Armidale CAE, Armidale, 1988.

48 For more details on these individuals see Appendix C at the end of this thesis.

49 For more details on these individuals see Appendix C at the end of this thesis.

50 Fay Photographs; Hon Photographs; Gibbs Photographs; Hong Photographs; and Australian Archives (NSW): SP1122/1: 1959/956. For profiles of these men see Appendix C at the end of this thesis.

These men joined the earlier arrivals who had already settled down to business in the district. Between them and through the stores they established, they provided the base which attracted other Chinese, both overseas and Australian-born, to the district throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Most also settled with their families, and their descendants lived and worked in the district, at least for the next generation.

- **Conclusion**

Chinese first came to the district in and around the towns of Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield during the 1840s and 1850s. They came as shepherds, cooks and farm labourers and, among their ranks, were a number from Amoy and the Fukien district in China. These early arrivals were small in number and their presence was soon eclipsed by the influx of Chinese men who came to the mining areas, especially the tin fields around Emmaville and Tingha, during the 1870s and 1880s. These Chinese were noticeable because of their numbers, and the distinctly Chinese service towns which they created. They came mainly from southern China, but from a number of different districts.

The majority of the Chinese attracted to the mining fields did not stay in the district. As the mining booms died, they were lured to find their fortunes elsewhere in Australia. Many eventually followed the traditional path of Chinese emigrants of the time and returned to China. The exodus was heightened by the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act which aimed to 'keep Australia white'. The numbers of Chinese in the district declined, and continued to decline until the middle of the twentieth century. However, this decrease in absolute numbers hides the fact that a new wave of Chinese came into the district from the late nineteenth century and continued to come after the turn of the century. Their arrival is documented through the family histories and life stories of Chinese-Australians who lived in the district. These new arrivals did not come as farm labourers or miners. They came as storekeepers who set up business in the larger towns in the district. They also came primarily from the Chungshan district in China. Such men - the grandfathers, fathers and uncles of Chinese-Australians whose oral histories supplied the direction and substance for this thesis - were to play a central role in providing foundations and a framework for the development of the Chinese community and contribution in the district during the first half of the twentieth century. It is the development and nature of these contributions which provide the substance for the history which follows.