

INTRODUCTION

In 1984, in reviewing a selection of studies on the Chinese in Australia, Jennifer Cushman lamented the myopic focus which had characterised Australian scholars' concern with the Chinese presence. Research and writing, she argued, had largely been preoccupied with discovering and analysing the roots and nature of Australian attitudes to the Chinese.¹ Without denying the importance of these studies, Cushman maintained that what was needed were closer analyses of the histories and experiences of the Chinese themselves. In particular, she emphasised the need to examine

... how the Chinese situated themselves within the Australian social and political order, the extent to which their values and customs clashed with those of Australians, and the kinds of adjustments they made so that they could fit more comfortably into what was to become a hostile environment...²

These were areas which, for Cushman, were noticeably lacking in an Australian scholarship still essentially imbedded in colonial issues.

In the late 1980s, historian, Henry Chan, reiterated Cushman's concern although, by then, he could identify a number of projects and publications adopting a focus on Chinese communities in Australia and exploring some of the issues raised by Cushman.³ He included on his list Cathie May's work on the Chinese in North Queensland, Jan Ryan and Ann Atkinson on the Chinese in Western Australia, Helen Vivian's inventory of Chinese archaeological sites in Tasmania, and Ian Jack's historical archaeological research. He also pointed to the establishment of the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne, a social history project initiated by the Australian Chinese Community Association of New South Wales, and the ongoing research by Eric Rolls.⁴ He heralded these as good beginnings,

¹ Jennifer Cushman, 'A "Colonial casualty" : the Chinese community in Australian historiography', *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, 7/3, April 1984, pp.100-101. In his review article a year earlier, Andrew Markus was less critical. He identified the work by Kathryn Cronin, Cathie May, Yong Ching-Fatt, Wang Sing-Wu, Choi Ching-Yan and Arthur Huck as providing some contribution to the understanding of the Chinese communities as opposed to focusing solely on the reactions of the Europeans. See Andrew Markus, 'Chinese in Australian history', *Meanjin*, 42/1, 1983, pp. 89-92.

² Cushman, 'A "Colonial casualty"', p.100. In his 1985 book E.M. Andrews emphasised that one of the consistent gaps in the study of the Chinese in Australia was studies on Chinese communities themselves. E.M. Andrews, *Australia and China: The ambiguous relationship*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1985, pp.248-251.

³ 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, pp. 51-66 (revised and published in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 10/1, 1989, pp.33-44); and Henry Chan, 'The social history of the Chinese communities in Australia: towards a new historiography', Paper to the Inaugural Conference of the Australian Association of Chinese Studies, University of Melbourne, 1989, 12pp.

⁴ Chan, 'The Chinese in Australia', pp.51-52 and Chan, 'The social history of the Chinese communities', pp.1-3. Henry Chan also kindly included in his list the research I had commenced on the Chinese in New England. For details about the various publications produced by the researchers and projects mentioned by Henry Chan, consult the Bibliography at the end of this thesis.

and then identified specific areas which needed attention. In particular, he called for more 'detailed studies in depth of the various Chinese communities in Australia'⁵ as a route to documenting and understanding the diversity of the Chinese experience in Australia.

In a 1994 paper Henry Chan updated his survey of approaches to the history of the Chinese in Australia.⁶ While carefully specifying topics and areas which still needed attention, he praised the evident growing awareness and promotion of the study of the Chinese in Australia. Signifiers of this development were the inclusion of sessions on the Chinese in Australia in the Chinese Studies Association of Australia biennial conferences;⁷ an inspiring and interdisciplinary inaugural conference entitled 'The history of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific' held at the Chinese Museum, Melbourne, in 1993;⁸ a day devoted to the history of the Chinese in Australia at the 1994 Australian Historical Association Conference in Perth;⁹ the commissioning of City of Sydney historian, Shirley Fitzgerald, to research and write a history of the Chinese in Sydney; and the formation in 1995 of the Association for the Study of the Chinese and their Descendants in Australasia and the Pacific Islands.¹⁰

Within this framework, it is apparent that there is a continued concern to research and analyse the history of Australian racism and the formation, administration and application of the immigration legislation.¹¹ However, increasingly, the centre stage is being occupied by those who are more concerned with documenting, analysing and understanding the histories and legacies of the Chinese and their communities from within those communities. This focus brings together researchers and writers from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds. Archaeologists, artists, community writers, family historians, heritage consultants, museum

⁵ Chan, 'The social history of the Chinese communities', p.3.

⁶ Henry Min-Hsi 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, pp.106-117.

⁷ Henry Chan was an initiator of this dating from the inaugural conference in 1989.

⁸ The papers from this conference are in the process of publication under the editorship of Paul Macgregor. See also my brief report on the conference Janis Wilton, 'The history of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific: Conference Report', *Oral History Association of Australia (NSW) Bulletin*, 41, November 1993, p.3.

⁹ The papers from this conference were published in Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand*.

¹⁰ This Society was formed at the 1995 biennial conference of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia held at Macquarie University. Its formation was later announced in *ISSCO Bulletin* (Newsletter of the International Society for the Study of the Chinese Overseas), 3/2, 1995, p.1.

¹¹ For example, at the 1993 Melbourne conference, Andrew Markus presented a paper entitled 'Chinese in Australia and The State, 1900-1975' which reflected his continued interest in the administration and ideological underpinnings of Australian immigration regulations in relation to the Chinese. In this paper he was particularly concerned to establish when there was a significant change in the administration of the White Australia policy. His earlier work is listed in the Bibliography at the end of this thesis. Barry York's paper to the same conference, 'Chinese exclusions and admissions to Australia, 1901-1957' demonstrated that there was still a great deal of detail to be gained about immigration patterns from the government records. Sean Brawley, *The White Peril: Foreign relations and Asian immigration to Australasia and North America 1919-1978*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 1995 demonstrates contemporary extensions of the concern with immigration legislation through his research and exploration of the maintenance and ultimate abolition of the White Australia Policy.

curators, oral historians, and sociologists have joined the historians and other scholars more traditionally associated with the area.

From this interdisciplinary mixing and matching is emerging a rich documentation of the complexity and diversity of the Chinese experience in Australia. There are insights into the adaptation, survival and significance of the material culture of the Chinese in specific localities.¹² There is an increasing interest in the business and economic enterprises and networks of the Chinese.¹³ Attention is being paid to a variety of Chinese language sources.¹⁴ Attempts are being made to identify and, if at all possible, provide details about some of the individuals who have previously simply been numbers and statistics in census data, government reports, racist diatribes, and material and documentary sources.¹⁵ Family histories are being researched and presented through diverse mediums - histories, art, performance, poetry.¹⁶ The memories of individuals are being tapped and recorded as a means to uncover Chinese-Australian perspectives on the more recent past.¹⁷

This thesis fits into this evolving strand of interdisciplinary, localised and community-based approaches to the study of the Chinese in Australia. In particular, it considers the strengths and weaknesses of incorporating oral history as a central methodology, and of focusing on the experiences of a particular group of Chinese in a particular region in Australia. It also contributes by examining a period and an area in which the number of Chinese was relatively small.

The period on which the thesis focuses is the first half of the twentieth century when there was a gap between the high numbers of Chinese attracted to the mining booms of the

12 At the 1995 Chinese Studies Association biennial conference, for example, Peter Bell reported the successful acquisition of a grant to document Chinese archaeological sites throughout Australia, and Barbara Pedersen spoke about the establishment of a database on Chinese sites in the Northern Territory. This joins work already being done by researchers like Ian Jack and Gordon Grimwade some of whose work is listed in the Bibliography at the end of this thesis. For an overview see R. Ian Jack, 'The contribution of archaeology to the history of the overseas Chinese' in Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand*, pp. 21-29.

13 C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, Raphael Arts, Adelaide, 1977, especially Part II provided an early example of interest in this area. More recently, both Cathie May and Ann Atkinson paid some attention to business networks and practices in their respective studies of the Chinese in Cairns and Western Australia. Their work is listed in the Bibliography at the end of this thesis. At the 1993 Melbourne conference Bon-Wai Chou and Sophie Couchman reported on their research into aspects of the banana trade in Melbourne and its importance to the Chinese communities there.

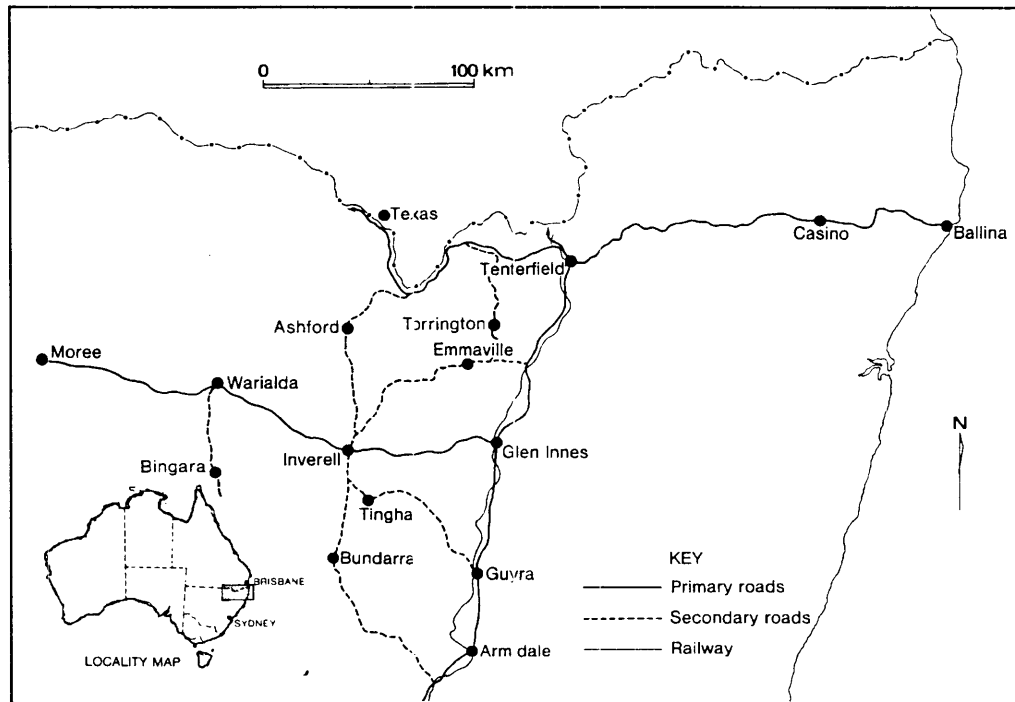
14 At the 1993 Melbourne conference, for example, James Hayes revealed the insights available from a Chinese-English word book from 19th century Sydney. See also Yu Lan Poon, 'The two way mirror: contemporary issues as seen through the eyes of the Chinese language press, 1901-1911' in Shirley Fitzgerald and Garry Wotherspoon (eds), *Minorities: Cultural diversity in Sydney*, State Library of NSW Press in association with the Sydney History Group, Sydney, 1995, pp.50-65.

15 Morag Loh has consistently done this. Her work is listed in the Bibliography at the end of this thesis, and is mentioned further in Chapter 1, pp.19-20 following. A quite different example is the work initiated by Linda Brumley in identifying and naming as many of the Chinese buried at Ballarat cemetery as possible. The results of the project are in Linda Brumley, Lu Bingqun and Zhao Xueru, *Fading Links to China: Ballarat's Chinese gravestones and associated records 1854-1955*, (Melbourne University Research Series, 2), Melbourne University, 1993.

16 See Janis Wilton, 'Chinese-Australian family histories', *Congress Papers of the 7th Australasian Congress on Genealogy and Family History*, Brisbane, July 1994, pp.59.5-59.6 for details on some of the work being done in Chinese-Australian family histories.

17 For a more detailed discussion of the use of oral history in the study of the Chinese in Australia see Chapter 1, pp.19-21 following.

mid and late nineteenth century, and the new wave of Chinese who came after the Second World War.¹⁸ The area is that part of rural northern New South Wales encompassing the towns of Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield and indicated on the following map. This was an area which, in the 1880s and 1890s, saw an influx of Chinese attracted by tin mining booms, and which saw a rapid and consistent drop in the number of Chinese as the tin was mined out and the first few decades of the twentieth century advanced.¹⁹



Map 1: Northern New South Wales showing Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield and surrounding districts.

The choice of focus was triggered initially by the presence in the district of five Chinese stores whose origins dated back at least to the turn of the century.²⁰ In the mid-1980s these stores were still owned and managed by descendants of Chinese who had settled in the area during the first half of the twentieth century.²¹ They were also icons in the local knowledge and mythology about the Chinese contribution to the towns and area.²² At the time, the

18 For overviews of this pattern see, for example, Morag Loh, 'Historical overview of Chinese migration' in Hanks and Perry (eds), *The Chinese in Australia*, p. 1; and F.L. Jones, 'Labour market outcomes among the Chinese at the 1986 census' in Christine Inglis, S. Gunasekaran, Gerard Sullivan and Chung-Tong Wu (eds), *Asians in Australia: The dynamics of migration and settlement*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp.120-121.

19 See Chapter 4, p.85 following, and Appendix B in this thesis for more details about the number of Chinese in the district.

20 The stores were Kwong Sing and Company in Glen Innes, Wing Hing Long in Tingha, Hong Yuen and Company in Inverell, Sam Kee and Company in Inverell (formerly in Tingha), and Hop Sing and Company in Tenterfield.

21 Details on the families involved and on the histories of the stores are provided in Part 2 of this thesis. For profiles of the stores and of individuals consult Appendices C and E following.

22 It is the stores and their owners who are among the few Chinese named and identified in local histories of the district. See Chapter 1, pp.14-17 following for examples and references. Also, on asking local

concern was to compile a school resource package which documented and presented aspects of the experiences and contributions of Australians from non-English-speaking backgrounds to rural New South Wales. The Chinese stores were obvious symbols of this contribution, and one of those stores, Hong Yuen in Inverell, was selected for a case study.²³

The research for the case study offered initial insights into the complexity and diversity of the history of the Chinese in this specific part of northern New South Wales. In particular, it raised questions about the nature of the Chinese contribution, and about the mechanisms and strategies which were adopted and which evolved in order to ensure commercial success in what was, at the very least, a suspicious environment. There were also largely unanswered questions about the nature and extent of the networks, business and otherwise, which underpinned the livelihoods and lifestyles of this small number of Chinese who lived in areas isolated from the hub of Chinese life established in the Chinatowns of Sydney and Brisbane. Clearly there was an opportunity to explore, document and present the memories and reflections of Chinese-Australians themselves about their contributions and experiences during this period.

This thesis considers these initial questions in some depth. In seeking information and answers, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the oral histories of Chinese-Australians who lived and worked in the area during the first half of the twentieth century. It is, in many ways, their story. Yet, the final shape, tone and form of that story has been influenced and largely controlled by my reading of the evidence, and by my constructing and analysing that evidence into a form appropriate for a PhD thesis. Imbedded in this joint authorship and ownership are methodological, intellectual and ethical dilemmas which characterise all oral history work. These dilemmas revolve around the need to listen and to hear what participants are recalling and saying and to respect their wishes and privacy while presenting a balanced and analytical account of all the evidence which becomes available.

Part One of the thesis explains the research methods, conceptual and theoretical concerns, and ethical and intellectual issues which were addressed and resolved in order to pursue an oral history based account and analysis of the Chinese presence in a particular part of rural New South Wales. Consequently, Chapter One focuses on the need to adopt an oral history approach. It begins by surveying existing literature, and demonstrating the limitations of the frameworks and sources which, for a long time, structured approaches to the history of the Chinese in Australia. Attention then turns to recent studies which have adopted different perspectives, asked different questions and analysed different sources.

residents for memories and information about the Chinese contribution to the district, the stores and the families associated with them were almost always mentioned.

23 Janis Wilton, *Hong Yuen: A country store and its people*, Armidale College of Advanced Education, and NSW Multicultural Education Coordinating Committee, Armidale, 1988. For more details on the project which produced this material see, for example, Helen Andreoni, Janis Wilton and Myra Catchpole, 'Immigrants in the Bush: the case studies', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 8, 1986, pp. 56-66.

This analysis leads to an appreciation of a community based approach which begins through recording individuals' recollections of their family histories and their own experiences.

Chapter Two addresses the methodological processes and issues which are involved in collecting the oral histories which provide the foundation for the thesis. The chapter begins with an overview of the time frame and practicalities required to collect the material. It then explores the role of the oral historian and the strategies and factors which establish credibility. This is followed by a description and analysis of the backgrounds of the participants, the process of interviewing, the nature of the interviews conducted, and the variety of family and personal papers and memorabilia which emerge as a result of working with community members. The chapter concludes by demonstrating that, as a result of oral history based fieldwork, archival and other documentary sources in the public domain take on added meaning and provide details informed by personal recollections and papers.

Chapter Three concentrates on examining the messages and meanings which emerge from the oral history material, and how those messages and meanings influence the arguments, structure and organisation of the history. The chapter starts with an overview of debates about the nature of the evidence available in oral history interviews, and the place and use of theory in oral history research. Having established this broad framework, the chapter goes on to explore ways in which different theoretical and conceptual approaches have informed the analysis and use of the oral history interviews conducted for this thesis. The discussion begins with an examination of the subjective nature of oral history by employing a focused analysis of participants' recollections of racism as a case study. It then specifically examines the impact of collective memory and public ideology on the narrative structures adopted by participants to explain their immigration and settlement in Australia. From these analyses it emerges that there is a wealth of hidden meanings imbedded in the oral history material. The chapter then issues a warning about the dangers inherent in exposing such hidden meanings and structures. It demonstrates that there is also a range of evidence and information which can be accepted and used on its face value provided strategies are adopted to ensure, as much as possible, that the details, patterns and interpretations which emerge can be substantiated. The chapter concludes by examining the issues which have to be addressed in order to ensure that the range of messages and meanings found in the oral history material can be effectively and ethically incorporated into the form, structure and organisation of the history which occupies Part Two of this thesis.

Part Two provides a history of the Chinese presence and contribution in a specific part of northern New South Wales during the first half of the twentieth century. In so doing, it also demonstrates how focusing on the experiences of a group of people at a local and community level can inform and expand our understanding and appreciation of the complexity of the histories of the Chinese in Australia.

Chapter Four introduces the specific part of northern New South Wales which provides the geographical focus for the study. It also introduces and examines the Chinese presence in the district. In particular, similarities, differences and links are drawn between

the pre-1900 wave of Chinese immigrants in the district and those who came during the first half of the twentieth century. The chapter also introduces some of the men who were the first members of their families and clans to settle in the district and who, as grandfathers, fathers and uncles, played an important role in shaping the immigration and settlement of relatives and fellow villagers.

Chapter Five demonstrates that stores were central to the livelihoods and lifestyles of Chinese who settled in the district during the first half of the twentieth century. It examines why and how stores acquired this role, and it analyses the strategies used to establish the stores. Emphasis is placed on the role and significance of partnerships as a means to setting up business and as symbols of the various factors which shaped the decisions and lives of Chinese in the district. Emphasis is also placed on the discriminatory legislation and attitudes which structured the social and economic environment, and which challenged and influenced the strategies adopted by the Chinese to establish their businesses.

Chapter Six continues the focus on the stores. They became the main means of livelihood for the Chinese in the district and, consequently, the concern was to ensure that they prospered. This chapter examines the strategies adopted to ensure successful marketing and expansion of these business enterprises. In so doing, it reveals how Chinese storekeepers managed to accommodate traditional Chinese business practices, attempts at restriction under the immigration legislation, and the peculiarities and demands of providing goods and services in relatively isolated rural towns in northern New South Wales. The result was the expansion of the businesses, an increase in the number of Chinese working in the stores, and a growing, if measured, acceptance of the Chinese in their local communities.

Chapter Seven moves away from analysing the nature of the stores and turns to the lifestyles which the Chinese storekeepers and their employees developed around these stores. It begins by establishing and analysing the isolation and loneliness which confronted many newcomers to the district. In so doing, factors creating that sense of alienation become apparent - the experience of migration, the smallness of the Chinese population, the hostility of the local environment. The chapter then examines strategies adopted to combat such isolation. In the first instance, there was the inward looking nature of the Chinese as evidenced through practices which had their origins in the largely all male Chinese communities of the mining era. There was also the social life which evolved along the Chinese network which encompassed the stores and spread through other parts of New South Wales, to Sydney and, to a lesser extent, to Brisbane and parts of Queensland.

Paralleling the focus of activity within the Chinese network, were strategies and activities geared to lowering the barriers and building bridges between Chinese and non-Chinese. The chapter examines these strategies and activities. It starts with the role of the storekeepers for whom good relations and positive profiles in their local communities were needed to ensure business and customers for their stores. It ends with the increasing involvement of the storekeepers in local community affairs, and with patterns of marriage,

which suggest at least a slight lowering of the barriers between Chinese and non-Chinese, and a move towards accepting settlement in Australia as the future for families.

Chapter Eight focuses on the experiences and contributions of the small, but growing, number of Chinese women in the district. It takes as its starting point silences about the experiences of Chinese women in Australia. It then examines the factors which determined that only a limited number of women born in China could settle in Australia, and how, at least in a small way for the Chinese whose histories lie at the core of this thesis, those factors were circumvented. It also establishes that, as the century progressed, the number of Chinese females in the district was boosted by an increasing number of Australian-born daughters. The chapter then turns to an examination of the factors which shaped the lives of these women, and how they negotiated and balanced the different demands which confronted them. Emphasis is placed on the traditions and expectations which had their roots in China, on the relative isolation which greeted the women on their arrival in rural northern New South Wales, and on their encounters with the different and changing demands of living in Australia.

Chapter Nine explores the significance of contacts with China, and the impact which changing political climates in China had on the Chinese in the district. It highlights that, despite clear moves to accommodate to the local Australian social and cultural environment, many Chinese retained their links to China and to Chinese practices. The chapter then establishes that decisive factors in altering this orientation were the Sino-Japanese War, the Second World War and the Communist Revolution in China.

Chapter Ten moves beyond the period of specific focus for the history and examines the extent to which events and developments since 1950 have shed light both on pre-war experiences and on the ways in which participants have recalled their histories. In this way the chapter returns to some of the issues addressed in Part One of the thesis, and extends these into an analysis of how perceptions of past experiences have helped to shape current identities. The chapter also acts as an epilogue to the history itself by bringing the histories of the stores, families and individuals up to date.

The final section of the thesis draws the various strands together. It provides a commentary on the ways in which the research, through the adoption of an oral history methodology, has added to the documentation and interpretation of the history of the Chinese in Australia. It also highlights the patterns and complexities which emerge from such a history, and the ways in which these add detail to and occasionally challenge perspectives and interpretations offered in existing literature. It concludes by suggesting further areas of research and analysis which could extend and enhance the approach adopted in this thesis.

Ultimately it is hoped that the thesis, in its own small way, demonstrates the valuable insights, details and perspectives which can be obtained by spending the time as well as the physical and intellectual effort required in adopting an oral history approach to documenting, analysing, and presenting the histories of Chinese-Australians at the

community and local level. It is also hoped that the thesis in its entirety will meet with the approval of its academic audience and, as well, that the history presented in Part Two will satisfy the expectations of the individuals and families who so willingly and generously shared their recollections, their personal and family memorabilia, their time and their trust with me.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

THE STUDY OF THE CHINESE IN AUSTRALIA

This thesis takes as its starting point the pleas by scholars like Jennifer Cushman and Henry Chan to move beyond the confines of a colonial perspective in relation to the study of the Chinese in Australia, and to research and document the history of the Chinese from within Chinese communities themselves.¹ These pleas immediately confront a number of challenging obstacles with regard to the accessibility and nature of relevant evidence. Documentary sources available in the public domain primarily offer material about Australian attitudes and behaviour in relation to the Chinese, and are couched in terms which cast the Chinese in the role of objects or victims. Attention necessarily and logically turns to sources within the Chinese communities themselves. Yet here the documentary sources available are fragmentary and scattered. There is, consequently, a need not just to locate as many documentary and material sources as possible from within Chinese-Australian communities but also to record the memories of Chinese-Australians through oral history interviews. This process identifies new sources which can assist in the re-focusing of perspectives on the study of the Chinese in Australia.

The purpose of this first chapter is to describe and analyse the context of the methodological framework and approach which informs the thesis. In the process, it also provides an overview of the state of the study of the Chinese in Australia. The chapter begins with an analysis of the limited view of the Chinese provided by documentary sources available in the public domain. It emphasises the way in which such sources shape and reflect the preoccupations of researchers concerned to expose and explain the nature, patterns and effects of Australian immigration policies and the attitudes underpinning them. Attention then turns to local histories which focus on the area of interest to the thesis. In their documentation and account of the Chinese presence, local histories are similarly limited by the sources used and particularly by the restricted perspectives which guide their narratives. The chapter then confirms the need to seek different perspectives and information by discovering and using documentary, oral and other sources from within Chinese-Australian communities. Examples of studies already conducted from within communities lead to a discussion of the role of an oral history approach which focuses on personal experiences and on family and community histories.

¹ The relevant articles by Jennifer Cushman and Henry Chan were introduced and discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, see pp. 1-3 previously.

- **Traditional Sources and Frameworks**

Aspects of the history and experiences of the Chinese in Australia are richly documented in a variety of readily available sources many of which have been accessed and used by scholars concerned to plot and explain the Chinese presence. Among the sources which have traditionally been heavily used are census and other official statistical records, national and local newspapers, court reports, national and state archival documents, parliamentary debates, government legislation, royal commissions, and contemporary pamphlets and books. These documents are well endowed with evidence of the formation, implementation and purpose of Australian attitudes and behaviour towards Chinese immigration and settlement. They, for example, provide vivid evidence of the evolution and expression of Australian racism, the construction and implementation of immigration policies, and the demographic characteristics and settlement patterns of the Chinese in the various states and over time. They offer, by contrast, limited information on individual Chinese and the lifestyles which the Chinese brought and adapted to Australia.²

The topics well documented in the traditional sources have been subjected to analysis and revision, and they have dominated the study of the Chinese in Australia for a long time.³ Tellingly, they are also topics which cast the Chinese in the role of objects, if not victims.⁴ The focus and concern of studies set within these parameters has not been to document and reconstruct the histories and experiences of the Chinese themselves, but to determine the way in which the Chinese presence has reflected and possibly influenced the emergence of Australian attitudes, values and practices.

This thesis does not aim to extend this critical review of specific studies of Australian attitudes and policies. It aims to emphasise that those studies have been shaped, if not trapped, by the sources available to them and by the historians' preoccupations with particular research agendas. For example, scholars such as Myra Willard, A.C Palfreeman, A.T. Yarwood, H.I. London, Charles Price, E.M. Andrews and, most recently, Sean Brawley, have found ample evidence in government archives and records for analysing aspects of the

² There has been some discussion and analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and uses of traditional documentary sources. See, for example, C.Y. Choi, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1975, pp.116-118; Charles A. Price, *The Great White Walls Are Built*, Australian Institute of International Affairs in association with the Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974, pp.18-22; Kathryn Cronin, *Colonial Casualties: Chinese in Early Victoria*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1982, p.1; Jennifer Cushman, 'A "colonial casualty": the Chinese community in Australian historiography', *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, 7/3, April 1984, pp.105-106; Morag Loh, 'Australians of Chinese descent and family history - some issues', *Ancestor*, 20/3, September 1990, p.2; and Janis Wilton, 'Chinese-Australian family histories', *Congress Papers of the 7th Australasian Congress on Genealogy and Family History*, Brisbane, July 1994, pp.59.2-59.3.

³ For an overview of some of these studies see Andrew Markus, 'Chinese in Australian history', *Meanjin*, 42/1, 1983, pp.87-89. For further references consult footnote numbers 6 to 10 following and the accompanying discussion in the text.

⁴ A point also made by Markus, 'Chinese in Australian history', p.88.

history and nature of Australian immigration legislation.⁵ The questions they asked of those sources also meant that references to lives and lifestyles within the Chinese communities primarily emerged only when they could be cast as reactions to, or confirmations of, Australian actions. Similarly, scholarly writing and debates about the construction of Australian racism in relation to the Chinese based on evidence drawn from government records, newspapers and other contemporary documents remain preoccupied with the ways in which the Chinese presence reflected or highlighted specific ideologies, power relations and structures within Australian society.⁶ Finally, the demographic characteristics and patterns of settlement determined from census and other statistical records and from surveys by historians like Arthur Huck and C.Y. Choi demonstrate primarily the extent to which Chinese patterns were shaped by Australian immigration regulations and the ways in which, over time, they conformed to what could be broadly described as Australian demographic and settlement patterns.⁷ In early studies this adaptation was measured in terms of assimilationist theories popular in the literature of the time.⁸ In later studies, when assimilation as a policy and as a conceptual framework became outdated, the focus became measuring the 'success' or 'satisfaction' of Chinese-Australians in their Australian lives.⁹

These analyses of the Australian social structures and contexts of Chinese immigration and settlement provide essential background for research and analysis of the histories of

5 Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1923; A.C. Palfreeman, *The Administration of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967; A.T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia: The background to exclusion 1896-1923*, Melbourne University Press, London, 1967; H.I. London, *Non-White Immigration and the 'White Australia' Policy*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1970; Price, *The Great White Walls Are Built*; E.M. Andrews, *Australia and China: The ambiguous relationship*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1985; and Sean Brawley, *The White Peril: Foreign relations and Asian immigration to Australasia and North America 1919-1978*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 1995.

6 Discussions and analyses of these concerns inform many of the references cited in footnote 5 previously. An early and significant study in this vein was Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders and Kathryn Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*, ANZ. Book Company, Sydney, 1975. A later edition (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988) includes a new preface which locates the book in the political and social movements of the 1970s and in the subsequent historiography. It is also published under an inversion of the title and subtitle. Other examples of this preoccupation with the origins and nature of Australian racism include Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds), *Who Are Our Enemies?: Racism and the Australian working class*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1978; Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850-1902*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1979; Verity Burgmann, 'Writing racism out of history', *Arena*, 67, 1984, pp.78-92; Andrew Markus, 'Explaining the treatment of non-European immigrants in nineteenth century Australia', *Labour History*, 48, May 1985, pp.86-91; and Verity Burgmann, 'Who our enemies are: Andrew Markus and the baloney view of Australian racism', *Labour History*, 49, 1984, pp.97-101.

7 Arthur Huck, *The Chinese in Australia*, Longmans, Melbourne, 1968; and Choi, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia*. See also articles by Choi listed in the Bibliography at the end of this thesis.

8 Huck, *The Chinese in Australia*, and Choi, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia* used this framework. So too did Christine Inglis's early work on the Chinese in Darwin. See her 'Notes on the assimilation of the Darwin Chinese', *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 4/1, 1968, pp.49-54 which drew on her PhD thesis. These studies are very much reflections of the ideologies and conceptual frameworks of their times see, for example, Arthur J. Vidich and Stanford M. Lyman, 'Qualitative methods: their history in sociology and anthropology' in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, California, 1994, pp.35-36.

9 See, for example, Lawrence W. Crissman, George Beattie and James Selby, 'The segmentation and integration of the Chinese in Brisbane, Australia', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 16/2, 1985, pp.181-203; and George Beattie, *The settlement and integration of the Chinese in Brisbane*, PhD, University of Queensland, 1986.

specific Chinese communities in Australia. They offer broad patterns, insightful understandings of the workings of immigration policies, a sense of the rise and decline of the number of Chinese in Australia, and a view which emphasises the ability of the Chinese as a whole to acquire socioeconomic profiles which parallel if not outshine those of the overall Australian population. Such narrow perspectives, however, harbour dangers which relate particularly to the ways in which the Chinese are perceived and presented. They remain very much as statistics and objects moved and shaped by Australian immigration patterns and attitudes.

- **The View from Local Histories.**

An opportunity to redress the imbalance evident in studies which cast the Chinese primarily in the role of objects and statistics, is available at the level of local histories. Here historians have the chance to use evidence which documents the contributions of specific individuals and groups. Indeed, focused research for this thesis early turned to local histories in order to get a sense of the Chinese presence in the district. It is apparent, however, that, by and large, the existing local history view of the Chinese is limited by the nature of the sources used and by the perspectives informing the research and narratives.

The research, documentation and analysis found in the local histories is varied. At the very least, as a group of publications dating from the 1940s to the present, they do provide a record and public documentation of aspects of the localities' histories. Most tend, however, to be cast in the mould of local histories concerned to track and show the progress of a specific town or district, and to identify the achievements of pioneers and notable personalities. Within this context, the contributions and achievements of a handful of Chinese settlers and their descendants are briefly described.¹⁰ Among those introduced in this way are men like Wong Chee, Percy Young, Harry Fay and Harry Gee Hon and their descendants who were associated with the stores which emerged during the first half of the twentieth century. They are applauded as examples of Chinese who succeeded in Australia by providing services and a public presence which conformed to Australian norms and expectations.

More often Chinese are individually identified in the context of providing lists of people in particular occupations or identifying people in photographs. Hence, for example, Helen Brown's *Tin at Tingha*, abounds with the names of Chinese shops and businesses: Harry Howchin's saddlery, Chin Ah Song's general store, Ah Gun's peanut shop, Mrs Tet

¹⁰ See, for example, Elizabeth Wiedemann, *World of its Own: Inverell's early years 1827-1920*, Devill Publicity, Inverell, 1981, pp.187-8 on Harry Fay and the Hong Yuen store in Inverell; *Land of the Beardies History House Bulletin*, 10/4. December 1982, pp.23-26 on Wong Chee, Percy Young and the Kwong Sing store in Glen Innes; A.W. Cameron, *A Short History of Glen Innes and District*, Glen Innes and District Historical Society, Glen Innes, 1987, pp.18-19 on the Young family and the Kwong Sing store; Ken Halliday, *Call of the Highlands: The Tenterfield story 1828-1988*, Tenterfield Shire Council and Tenterfield and District Historical Society, Tenterfield, 1988, p. 32 on the achievements of Tenterfield storekeeper Harry Gee Hon's son, Ted Hon.

Fong's Cafe.¹¹ In this way, some Chinese have been named and incorporated among the 'successful' inhabitants of a particular locality. The majority of Chinese, however, are only identified by generic labels relating to their ethnicity and occupation. From this it becomes apparent that in the nineteenth century there were Chinese shepherds, shearers, labourers and cooks on many of the large properties.¹² It also becomes apparent that the Chinese appeared in large numbers on the tin mining fields of the late nineteenth century and, from then and on into the twentieth century, they were also present, albeit in dwindling numbers, as market gardeners, hawkers, storekeepers and shop assistants.¹³

Statistical records, graziers' diaries, local newspapers, local memories, and court reports are variously cited as the sources of information on the Chinese. Patterns emerge, but their interpretation is underpinned by an ethnocentrism which at best applauds those individuals seen to adopt Australian norms and values and which, at worst, endorses the prejudiced and often racist views evident in the sources on which the histories are based. This, in turn, produces an overgeneralised and very one-sided view of the Chinese presence and contribution.

In her history of Inverell and its surrounding district Elizabeth Wiedemann, for example, observes that some Chinese were in the area in the 1860s working as shepherds and farm labourers but that it was the tin mining booms of the 1870s and onwards which witnessed a rapid increase in their number. By 1881, she argues, there were nine hundred Chinese miners to the six hundred Europeans.¹⁴ She then notes the industrious work habits of the Chinese and the resentment this caused among their European counterparts. She also devotes space to quoting contemporary descriptions which painted the standard nineteenth century Australian picture of the Chinese as having poor and unhealthy living conditions, heathen customs, violent natures and criminal habits.¹⁵ Unfortunately, Elizabeth Wiedemann does not analyse these sources. It would appear that she has failed to acknowledge their ethnocentric and often racist bases. More disturbingly the nineteenth century language and assumptions have become a part of her own text. At one stage, for example, she asserts that 'their [the Chinese] *strange* [my emphasis] habits frequently alarmed those of English origin.'¹⁶ By absorbing and using nineteenth century language and accounts she risks legitimising stereotyped images of the mysterious and sometimes suspect and threatening behaviour of the Chinese as factual and balanced descriptions.

¹¹ Helen Brown, *Tin at Tingha*, The author, Armidale, 1982, pp.100-101 and 108-109

¹² See, for example, 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; Wiedemann, *World of its Own*, pp.152-153; and Phillip A. Wright, *Memories of a Bushwhacker*, University of New England, Armidale, 1972, p.8.

¹³ See, for example, Brown, *Tin at Tingha*, pp.33-35; Ken Halliday, *Tenterfield Reflections*, The author, Tenterfield, 1981, pp.41-42; Ian Lobsey, *'The Creek': A history of Emmaville and district 1872-1972*, Emmaville Centenary Celebrations, Emmaville, 1972, pp.30-37; Walker, *Old New England*, pp.96-7; and Wiedemann, *World of its Own*, pp.83-85.

¹⁴ Wiedemann, *World of its Own*, p.84.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp.83-85.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.84.

In her *Tin at Tingha*, Helen Brown displays a similar tendency to accept dated descriptions. She evokes the perception of the Chinese as exotic and unusual when she states that 'For Tingha's isolated community, Chinese ceremonies were lively occasions which were looked forward to eagerly'.¹⁷ She goes on to describe specifically 'one long remembered ceremony' which 'involved a huge paper marquee from China' which

...housed a display of papier-mache statues of the various gods and devils, and life-size human figures receiving punishment from these gods and devils according to their sins.¹⁸

The failure to date the event or to explore its religious and cultural significance highlights the lack of interest in establishing anything more than the exotic nature of the Chinese presence.

The preoccupation with the threatening strangeness and foreignness of the Chinese is tempered a little by the occasional exploration of contemporary evidence which suggests that not all Australian observers saw the Chinese in a negative light. In his regional history, *Old New England*, R.B. Walker, for example, refers to an 1881 report in which the Chinese living quarters were described as comfortable and the Chinese diet as better than its European counterpart.¹⁹ In her survey of the records on the Chinese in the New England district, Evadene Swanson is concerned to uncover evidence of the 'curiosity, tolerance, and even friendship' between Chinese and non-Chinese as a contrast to prevailing accounts which focused on 'attitudes of fear, antagonism, and bitterness on the part of both groups'.²⁰ But again the evidence is not probed. At best it is suggested that there are different perspectives and sources to those traditionally used.

Another narrowing element of the view of the Chinese from these local histories is the emphasis on the transitory nature of the Chinese presence. In his history of the tin mining town of Emmaville, for example, Ian Lobsey devotes a section to 'The Chinese Phase'. It focuses on the Chinese when their numbers were large, and concludes with the dismissive statement that 'The Chinese dwindled away, the majority having died or left by the late thirties'.²¹ Lobsey does not explore the impact of factors other than the passing of mining booms on settlement patterns, and he pays little attention to those who did remain and who became a part of the early twentieth century history of the town.

For scholars concerned specifically with the history of the Chinese in Australia, these local histories could be discarded as lacking the specialist interest, research rigour and analytical power needed to draw more incisive and perceptive conclusions. In some instances, such a criticism could be well substantiated. However, the point here is that the view from local histories offers an opportunity to provide some insight into the histories, lifestyles and contributions of individual Chinese residents. Yet, to date, that opportunity

17 Brown, *Tin at Tingha*, p.35.

18 *ibid.*

19 Walker, *Old New England*, p.96.

20 Evadene Swanson, 'Chinese immigrants in New England', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, 11, 1968, p.26.

21 Lobsey, *The Creek*, pp.33-36.

has not been pursued. The local histories, when they do discuss the Chinese presence, remain largely focused on Australian attitudes to and treatment of the Chinese, and on broad settlement patterns. Their interest is in plotting the Chinese presence as a passing phenomenon in the development of specific localities.

It is at this point that the need for seeking out sources and information from within Chinese communities and from personal and private collections and archives becomes apparent. It is here that material can be found which helps to balance the picture, and which provides insights and perhaps challenges the extent to which Australian attitudes and policies did shape the lifestyles and futures of the Chinese in Australia. The perspectives from within Chinese communities might also challenge those studies which remain focused on measuring the success of the Chinese in Australia.

- **Views from within Chinese Communities.**

Some scholars have already ventured down the path of seeking out sources and perspectives from within Chinese communities. In the early 1970s, for example, C.F. Yong published an analysis of the internal dynamics of Chinese communities in Australia during the first two decades of the twentieth century.²² Using a combination of Australian government sources, English and Chinese language newspapers, and records of a number of societies from within the Chinese communities, Yong demonstrates that the Chinese were not passive victims of Australian policies and attitudes. Rather, there were at times vigorous and effective responses by Chinese individuals and groups to the legislation.²³ Within the Chinese communities there were also extensive and successful commercial, political and social organisations and networks.²⁴ Yong's account consequently provides significant details about the social, political and economic conditions and organisations of the Chinese communities, and moves some way towards establishing that the Chinese should not simply be put in the role of victims. Although, as Jennifer Cushman argues, despite his move in these directions and despite his use of Chinese sources, much of Yong's argument and analysis is still shaped by determining responses to Australian structures and pressures. Less attention is paid to factors related to Chinese traditions or practices.²⁵

Historian Cathie May offers a similar revision of the Chinese contribution to Cairns and district in north Queensland.²⁶ Like Yong, she is concerned to uncover the internal characteristics and structures of the Chinese communities, and then to analyse the relations between Chinese and non-Chinese. She manages to do this employing sources which,

²² C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain. The Chinese in Australia 1901-1921*, Raphael Arts, Adelaide, 1977.

²³ *ibid.*, especially Chapters 1 and 3.

²⁴ *ibid.*, especially Chapters 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 11.

²⁵ Cushman, 'A 'colonial casualty'', p.106.

²⁶ Cathie May, *Topsawyers: The Chinese in Cairns, 1870-1920*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1984. For articles and book chapters drawn from her research see the Bibliography at the end of this thesis.

traditionally, have been used to document and analyse Australian attitudes and policies. However, as the questions she is asking are different and entail exploring and explaining the nature of the Chinese communities, she demonstrates that government records and other official sources, along with local newspapers and the occasional personal memoir (including some by or about Chinese) could shed some light on the history of Chinese communities. For example, she documents the significant part the Chinese played in developing agriculture in the district.²⁷ She also examines social organisation within the Chinese communities in order to establish the extent to which it reflected practices brought from China, and the ways in which those practices were adapted to the particular circumstances and characteristics of the Chinese communities in Cairns.²⁸

In Western Australia Anne Atkinson and Jan Ryan have adopted similar approaches.²⁹ Their concerns are to document and explore the evolution and nature of the Chinese communities in that state, and to invite individual Chinese as well as their communities to be recognised and acknowledged. Like Cathie May, they approach archival and other official sources with questions informed by their understanding of the pressures, influences and demands of immigration and of Chinese cultural and social practices, values and expectations. Their histories ring with the innovative strategies adopted by Chinese networks to negotiate restrictive and discriminatory legislation and attitudes.³⁰ They introduce and explore the lives and contributions of specific individuals and groups, detailing aspects of individual lives, networks, livelihoods, work patterns, and internal divisions and tensions.³¹ They also document and detail previously under-examined patterns and experiences. Jan Ryan, for example, pays attention to death and disease and to burial practices among nineteenth century Chinese communities.³² Anne Atkinson plots the evolution and characteristics of small commercial enterprises in the first two decades of

27 May, *Topsawyers*, Chapter 2.

28 *ibid.*, Chapter 3.

29 Anne Atkinson's research and publications include 'Perth's Chinese laundry workers 1900-1920: the effects of the Factories Act of 1904', *Time Remembered*, 5, 1982, pp.64-83; 'Chinese labour in Western Australia', *Time Remembered*, 6, 1984, pp.164-178; 'Chinese market gardening in the Perth metropolitan area, 1900-1920', *Western Geographer*, 8, 1984, pp.32-52; 'Some socio-economic aspects of the Chinese community in Perth, 1900-1920', *Early Days* (Journal of the Western Australian Historical Society), 9/2, 1986, pp.96-103; *Chinese labour and capital in Western Australia, 1847-1947*, PhD, Murdoch University, Perth, 1991; and 'Illegal immigration: a method of acquiring labour for Chinese firms' in Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand*, pp.83-91. Jan Ryan's publications include 'Chinese burial practices in Western Australia in the nineteenth century' in Richard Bosworth and Margot Melia (eds), *Aspects of Ethnicity in Western Australia*, University of Western Australia (Studies in Western Australian History, XII), Perth, 1991, pp.8-16; *Ancestors: Chinese in colonial Australia*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1995; and 'An historical approach to the study of morbidity and mortality amongst Chinese in Colonial Western Australia' in Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand*, pp.92-105.

30 See, for example, Atkinson, 'Illegal immigration', pp.83-89.

31 See, for example, Ryan, *Ancestors*, pp.12-13 with her descriptions of the lonely life and death of market gardener Wong Chue. Throughout her history, Ryan adopts this practice of naming and providing details about individual Chinese. In a different way, but with a similar intent to ensure that the Chinese become named individuals in the records, Anne Atkinson compiled a list of biographical profiles of Chinese which were a part of her *Asian Immigrants to Western Australia 1829-1902: Bicentennial dictionary of Western Australians*, Volume 5, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1988.

32 Ryan, *Ancestors*, Chapter 8. See also Ryan, 'Chinese burial practices'.

the twentieth century, noting the adaptation of traditional Chinese obligations and business practices to the discriminatory circumstances in Australia.³³

In all these studies, another characteristic which makes their detailed and often insightful revelations possible, is that they focus on Chinese communities in specific localities. C.F. Yong concentrates on the Chinese communities in Sydney and Melbourne; Cathie May focuses on Cairns; Anne Atkinson and Jan Ryan on Perth.³⁴ In so doing, they have been able to document and detail the lives and lifestyles of particular individuals and communities in depth, exploring and presenting aspects which have largely been neglected in other studies of the Chinese in Australia. They have also gone some way towards demonstrating that broad patterns about the Chinese in Australia, which focus on structural factors and reasons, can hide not only variations in those patterns but can also hide the ways in which individuals and communities responded to, negotiated and sometimes worked outside those structural factors .

Such research and writing also shows that aspects of the Chinese side of their history in Australia are available through documentary sources, even through the same sources which have provided the raw material for studies focused on Australian attitudes and policies. What scholars like C.F. Yong, Cathie May, Anne Atkinson and Jan Ryan have done is adopt a different research framework and ask questions which have explored aspects of the internal organisation, tensions, lifestyles and adaptations of specific communities in specific districts in Australia.

- **Oral History Approaches.**

There is another emerging body of work which is taking this exploration of the histories and experiences of Chinese communities in slightly different directions. Researchers and writers like Morag Loh, Diana Giese, Norma King Koi, William Yang, and Eric Rolls have set out not just to uncover existing material and understanding from within the Chinese communities.³⁵ They have also, through oral history interviews, managed to reveal new sources and evidence as well as different ways of interpreting and presenting the history and experiences of the Chinese in Australia.

Morag Loh stands tall among this group of researchers in that she began her interviewing, recording and writing back in the 1970s. Her co-authored book, *The Immigrants*,³⁶ is recognised as among the first, if not the first, publication in Australia which clearly and avowedly promoted the new wave of oral history typified by Studs Terkel in the

³³ Atkinson, Chinese labour and capital in Western Australia, especially pp.153-173 and Atkinson. 'Some socio-economic aspects of the Chinese community in Perth', pp.98-99.

³⁴ Shirley Fitzgerald's current research on the Chinese in Sydney should be added to this list.

³⁵ For references to publications by these researchers consult footnotes 38 to 47 following and the accompanying discussion in the text.

³⁶ Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh, *The Immigrants*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1977.

United States of America and proclaimed by Paul Thompson in England.³⁷ Morag Loh's subsequent work on the Chinese in Australia has always taken as its core focus the view from within Chinese communities and has invariably included oral history interviews. As a result she has provided documentation and insight into the construction of Chinese-Australian family histories, the lives and experiences of women married to Chinese men in Australia, the contributions of Australians of Chinese descent to the armed forces, and the importation, adaptation and use of Chinese medical practices in Australia.³⁸

Diana Giese more recently has turned her attention to documenting and reconstructing the history of the Darwin Chinese.³⁹ She also adopts oral history as the main source and organising focus for her publications and broadcasts. As she asserts in her 1995 book *Beyond Chinatown*:

*Oral history extends what we know about the past beyond what the officially validated, the literate, the articulate have to offer.*⁴⁰

Diana Giese's argument resounds with the early desires and intentions of the oral history movement to correct the imbalance in history writing and to ensure that those whose voices and experiences were previously left out, should be heard.⁴¹

In a different vein but still regarding oral history as a main route to information and inspiration is the work of Norma King Koi and William Yang.⁴² The motivating force behind their research, writing and, in William Yang's case, performances is their desire to discover and understand their own family histories in order to come to terms with their identities as

³⁷ For accounts of the emergence of oral history as a technique and methodology connected to the new social history of the 1970s see, for example, Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past, Second Edition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, Chapters 2 and 3. For an account of Morag Loh's early contributions to oral and ethnic history see Janis Wilton, 'Ethnic oral and local history', *Break Through*, 15/16, February/May 1987, pp. 1-4; and Janis Wilton and Santina Rizzo, 'Limina: a Sicilian village and Australia' in Gianfranco Cresciani (ed.), *Australia, the Australians and the Italian Migration*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1983, pp.54-56..

³⁸ Morag Loh's publications in these areas include 'John Egge - champion of the rivers', *Hemisphere*, 28/1, 1983, pp.35-39; "'You're my diamond, Mum!": some thoughts on women married to immigrants from China in Victoria from the 1850s to the 1920s', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 6, 1984, pp.3-10; 'Victoria as a catalyst for western and Chinese medicine', *Royal Historical Society of Victoria*, 56/3, September 1985, pp.38-46; (with 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; and 'Fighting uphill: Australians of Chinese descent and the defence forces, 1899-1951' in Ian Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in New Zealand and Australia*, pp.59-66.

³⁹ Diana Giese's publications include 'Proud to be Territorians', *Migration* (Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, Canberra), 83, 1991, pp.11-14; 'A wave maker and rocker of boats', *Migration*, 84, 1991, pp.1-20; 'The ancestral village: the Top End Chinese, ourselves and others', *Voices* (Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia), 1/3, Spring 1991, pp.74-90; *Beyond Chinatown*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1995; and 'In the presence of living beings ... many, in fact, dead: struggling with Chinese oral histories', in Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand*, pp.35-44.

⁴⁰ Giese, *Beyond Chinatown*, p. 12.

⁴¹ For an account and references to this aspect of the oral history movement consult Chapter 3, p.47 following.

⁴² See, for example, William Yang, *Starting Again*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1989; Norma King Koi, 'My Chinese family history from 1800s', *Congress Papers of the 7th Australasian Congress on Genealogy and Family History*, Brisbane, 1994, pp.28.1-28.6; and Norma King Koi, 'Discovering my heritage: my Chinese family history' in Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand*, pp.45-53.

Chinese-Australians. Both travelled to north Queensland tracking down relatives and people who remembered relatives. They interviewed, recorded, photographed, and reflected on their experiences. For Norma King Koi, her personal and research discoveries are documented in university assignments and in conference papers in which she explains the significance of the journey and the ways in which oral history interviews accompanied by archival and other research are finally leading her to a sense of self, family and place in Australian history.⁴³ For artist, photographer and performer, William Yang, the experiences and their findings have been presented in monologue slide performances and in publications.⁴⁴

Both Norma King Koi and William Yang recognise and want to enhance the links between their own lives, experiences and feelings and those of their ancestors. They are pursuing personal objectives which, fortunately, they are willing to share with a wider audience. In so doing, they illustrate the extent of the appreciation of the Chinese experience in Australia as it is uncovered through encouraging Chinese-Australians to share their memories and memorabilia, and through focusing on individuals, families and communities.

Straddling these various approaches and falling into a category on its own is the work of Eric Rolls.⁴⁵ His epic history of the Chinese in Australia is about providing the big picture and about giving a sense of the vast and varied movements of Chinese and their traditions in and out of Australia. He does this by tapping into sources at a variety of levels. The statistics and information on immigration legislation and the broad patterns of Chinese immigration and settlement are there. So too are insights into the individual, family and community lives and lifestyles of Chinese at different times and in different localities in Australian history. The epic quality of his history is composed from the details of (largely unreferenced) traditional documentary sources as well as visits to locations in Australia and in China and through oral history interviews. His sweep through the Chinese presence in Australia provides a living, vivid and accessible sense of the variety of that presence, and of the Chinese contribution to Australian history.

The contributions of scholars, writers and artists like Morag Loh, Diana Giese, Norma King Koi, William Yang and Eric Rolls have highlighted the importance of involving Chinese-Australians in the investigation and presentation of their own histories, and of employing approaches which cross disciplinary boundaries. In particular, they have effectively demonstrated the use of oral history as a significant, if not central, means to record aspects of the patterns and complexities of the Chinese presence in Australia.

⁴³ King Koi, 'Discovering my heritage', pp. 45, 47 and 51.

⁴⁴ For comments about his performances see, for example, Pamela Payne, 'Golden opportunities for fair-dinkum types', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 1993, pp.23-24.

⁴⁵ Eric Rolls's history is being published in two volumes. The first is already available; the second is awaited. Rolls has also written a number of articles and book chapters emanating from his research. The first volume of the history is *Sojourners: The epic story of China's centuries old relationship with Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992. See also his 'The Chinese in Australia' in Paul Foss (ed.), *Island in the Stream*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1987, pp. 83-99.

- **Conclusion**

This survey of existing studies on the Chinese in Australia began with an exploration of the narrowing effect traditional sources and frameworks have had on the research and presentation of the history of the Chinese presence and contribution. With their concern to establish and analyse the broad patterns of Chinese immigration, and the nature of immigration policies and attitudes, these approaches have cast the Chinese largely in the roles of nameless objects and victims. A focused look at local histories which provided accounts of the Chinese presence in the area of interest to this thesis, emphasised the dangers in accepting too readily the evidence offered in traditional sources and in utilising an approach concerned primarily to establish broad patterns. Attention then turned to research and writing which has, in the last decade, moved away from these established frameworks and sought to discover and use sources and perspectives from within Chinese communities. Scholars like C.F. Yong, Cathie May, Jan Ryan and Anne Atkinson have indicated that, by asking different questions, sources traditionally used to document and analyse the history of immigration policies and attitudes, have opened new areas of enquiry and understanding. They have, for example, revealed a great deal about the internal workings of Chinese communities, about the differences between and within communities, and about the contributions of individuals and groups to aspects of Australian life. They have also gone some way towards introducing individual Chinese as active participants in their own history rather than leaving them as passive victims or nameless objects. This re-focusing and deepening of the study of the Chinese in Australia has also been enhanced through the work of another group of researchers, writers and artists. Morag Loh, Diana Giese, Norma King Koi, William Yang and Eric Rolls have sought, collected and used a variety of sources from within Chinese communities. Alongside documentary sources, they have placed oral histories, family photographs, and personal reflections. From their histories and presentations emerge previously neglected aspects of the experiences of Chinese communities in Australia and aspects which rarely surface or can at best be fleetingly glimpsed in more traditional sources. They invite the subjective, the individual, and the personal side of experiences to be revealed and presented. They demonstrate that individuals' perceptions of their histories and experiences offer a far more positive view of the place of the Chinese in Australian history than that which is imposed by the outsider and structured within a framework focused on determining immigration policies and attitudes.

This thesis fits into this exploration and use of oral histories as a means to extend the study of the Chinese in Australia and of ensuring that, increasingly, studies of policies, attitudes and broad patterns are complemented and widened by studies which focus on, and work from within, Chinese communities. There is, however, an aspect of this oral history based approach which has, as yet, not received much attention in the literature. This is the processes and issues involved in asking different questions and in locating and

uncovering new sources.⁴⁶ These processes and issues necessarily impinge on the shape and nature of the sources and the ways in which they are ultimately used and presented. This is particularly the case when oral history interviews become a core element in the discovery and construction of history because, in this instance, the researcher and writer is not only involved in interpreting available sources but also plays a central role in reconstructing some of the primary material on which those interpretations draw. With this in mind, the next chapter examines in some detail the oral history process as it was used and developed in relation to recording recollections relevant to the history and contributions of the Chinese in and around the towns of Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield during the first half of the twentieth century.

⁴⁶ Some researchers have begun to explain and address methodological issues. See, for example, Giese, 'In the presence of living beings...!', and King Koi, 'Discovering my heritage', pp. 45-47.

Chapter 2

COLLECTING MATERIAL

An oral history approach to the research and writing of the history of a particular group of Chinese-Australians requires moving beyond the confines of traditional documentary historical research. It entails utilising and adapting skills and approaches more familiar to the social sciences. It requires addressing methodological issues which can ultimately extend the historical imagination and the appreciation of the relationship between past and present. This chapter turns its attention to these issues. It focuses specifically on a description and analysis of the oral history process as it was used in relation to recording recollections and collecting material relevant to the history of the Chinese in and around the towns of Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield during the first half of the twentieth century.

The chapter begins with a descriptive overview of the steps generally followed to approach participants, and to record and process their oral histories. It establishes the motivation, time frame, geographical locations, and practicalities involved. The chapter then analyses the methodological issues imbedded in this process. It starts by examining the role of the oral historian as a researcher who seeks participation from people willing to share their memories and to expose their experiences and perceptions to the scrutiny of an outsider. This is necessarily a fairly personal discussion as it requires confronting personal baggage, preconceptions and expectations. As such, this section of the chapter is written in the first person. The next section introduces the participants. It explains how and why they became participants, and provides profiles of their backgrounds.

With the parties to the research introduced, the chapter describes and analyses the nature of the interviews which produced the oral histories. Here attention is paid particularly to the variability and unpredictability which is a part of oral history research, and to some of the factors which influenced the interaction between researcher and participants and which determined the content of the interviews. Finally, it is established that the interviews produced more than oral histories. They also triggered the discovery and sharing of a variety of other sources, and they offered directions which informed the reading and analysis of more traditional historical sources. A discussion of the ways in which the oral histories opened doors to other sources occupies the last sections of the chapter.

- **Overview of the Oral History Process**

The oral history interviews¹ which provide the basis of this thesis were conducted at two different times. The first group which consisted of interviews with people associated with the Hong Yuen store in Inverell were conducted in 1983 and 1984, with follow up interviews in subsequent years. These were part of an earlier project² and triggered the interest to research in more detail the histories and experiences of the Chinese in and around the tin mining towns of Tingha and Emmaville. The second group of interviews was conducted mainly between 1989 and 1991, again with follow up interviews and contact in subsequent years. These interviews focused on recording the recollections of other Chinese-Australians who had lived and worked in the district during the first half of the twentieth century.³

The process adopted to seek assistance from potential participants generally followed the same pattern. They were initially contacted by phone, the project and its purpose explained, and a request made for a meeting with a view to conducting an interview. Sometimes a time and place were decided on the first phone call. At other times, a possible future date was indicated and had to be confirmed. Phone calls were usually followed up by a letter which formally introduced the project and the researcher, and requested assistance.⁴

Initial interviews resulted in one to three hours of recorded material with anything up to a further three hours being devoted to informal conversations, morning or afternoon tea, and meals. Each interview was then followed up with a letter of thanks which also reminded participants that, as soon as possible, they would receive a copy of the transcript to check and correct.

The next task was to transcribe fully the interviews. Introductory descriptions and evaluations of the interview process, context and content were written to accompany the transcripts. The transcribing was carried out by skilled transcriptionists.⁵ Each transcript was then audited against its recording and, once satisfied that it captured as accurately as possible the tone, texture and content of the interview, a copy of the transcript was sent to the participant. A covering letter requested that participants should check the transcript and, if necessary, correct spelling and information, delete details which they did not want

¹ The term 'oral history interviews' used in this thesis refers to interviews conducted with one or more participants for the specific purpose of accessing and recording participants' recollections and evaluations of living and working in and around Glen Innes, Inverell and Tenterfield during the first half of the twentieth century. The interviews were recorded either on audio cassette tape or, occasionally, through notes. Subject to the permission of participants, the original recordings, transcripts, notes and correspondence relating to the oral history interviews will be deposited in the oral history collection at the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, with copies deposited in the University of New England Regional Archives.

² See Introduction, pp.4-5 previously for details about this earlier project.

³ The Bibliography at the end of this thesis lists the interviews, their dates and locations.

⁴ See Appendix A at the end of this thesis for examples of the correspondence and other documentation relating to the oral history process.

⁵ The transcriptionists were Helen Bryant, Helen MacKinnon, Jan Skuthorpe, and Janis Wilton.

made public, and add information and memories. It was stated clearly in the letter that it was the version of the transcript which they approved which would be used in constructing a history of the Chinese contribution to the district.⁶

Once the checked transcripts were returned, the corrections and alterations were entered on to a new version of the original transcript. This new version included an explanation and account of the nature of the corrections and additions and, when necessary, advice about the way in which participants wanted their material used or not used.

With sixteen of the fifty five participants⁷ it was appropriate and possible to conduct further interviews. The process followed the same format of phone calls, interviews, continuing contact, sending a copy of the transcript to check and processing the returned transcript.

As much as possible, participants have also been kept informed of the progress of the research. Some have been sent drafts of articles and papers which draw on their experiences and oral histories.

Throughout this process, attention was paid to keeping careful records and documentation. To this end, the recordings of the oral history interviews were supplemented by field notes constructed immediately after visits. These field notes contain accounts of conversations which were not recorded on cassette; further descriptions and evaluations of the context, process and content of the recorded interviews; evaluations and reflections on various aspects of the research process and on various factors shaping the content and structure of the interviews; and notes on leads suggested in the course of interviews and in conversations surrounding those interviews. Imbedded in these evaluations and reflections is recognition of specific examples of the limits, variability and unpredictability of the research and the way in which these impacted on the material recorded.

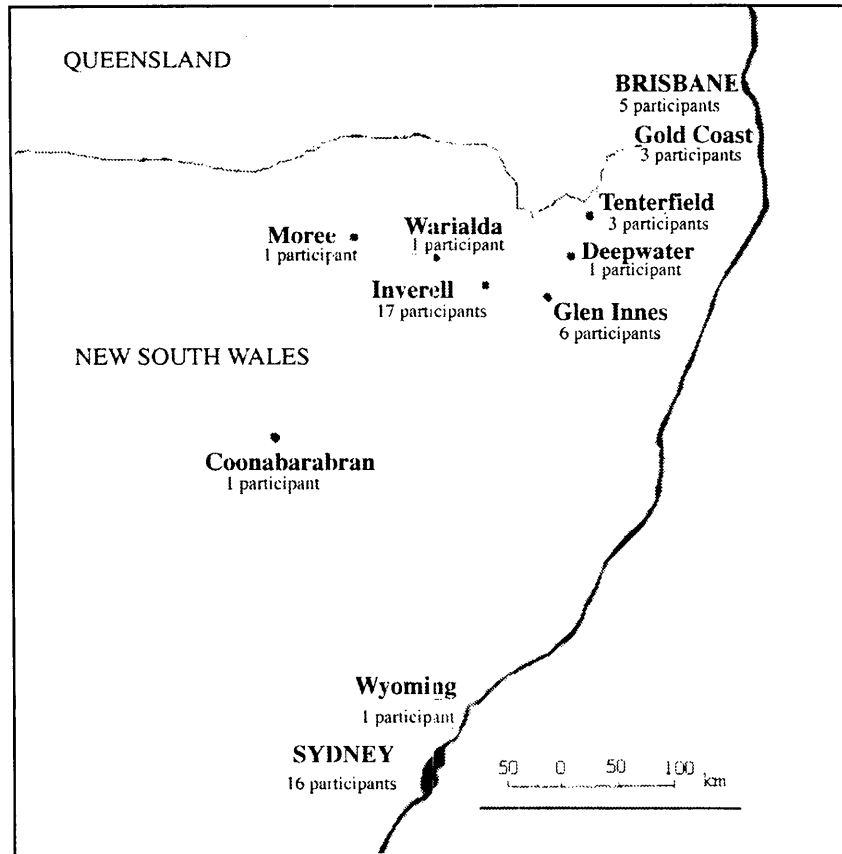
A further stage in the collection and processing of the oral history interviews and other material used in the thesis, was the construction of a series of Hypercard databases. These provided a means for cross-referencing interview contents, and for consolidating details about individuals and about the stores.⁸

The process as outlined above consumed a great deal of time, required frequent and lengthy travel, and generated a mass of paperwork and new documentation. A sense of the energy, time and distance involved can be provided by noting the participants' places of residence at the times of their interviews. It should be remembered that a single visit to a particular city or locality did not result in conducting all the interviews done in that city or locality at that time, and that sixteen participants had follow up interviews which were obviously conducted on subsequent visits. It should also be emphasised that, apart from one occasion, only one interview was conducted per day.

⁶ See Appendix A at the end of this thesis for an example.

⁷ Details about participants are given on pp.36-37 following in this Chapter.

⁸ See Appendix A at the end of this thesis for examples of these databases.



Map 2: Participants' places of residence at time of interviews.

A further sense of the amount of work involved can be gained from observing that the interviews resulted in a total of seventy hours of cassette recordings. Added to this were the six 158 page exercise books filled with handwritten field notes, and the 1,245 pages of typed transcript.

As well as the work involved in organising, conducting and processing the oral history interviews, there were also the other sources uncovered through working with participants - family photograph albums, personal papers, family trees, scrapbooks, immigration documents, business records. When possible, photocopies were made on the day of the interview or, on some occasions, were provided by participants. More often, participants gave permission for documents and especially photographs to be borrowed so that copies could be made. The photographs and some documents were professionally treated so that quality negatives and photographic prints resulted.

Some of the personal and business papers which were made available were written in Chinese characters. In one instance, the Mar Letters, the entire bundle of 549 letters, business invoices and documents was in Chinese. The letters were read, their contents summarised and selected letters fully translated into English by four colleagues proficient in Chinese languages.⁹ The letters have also been indexed.

⁹ The translators were Vivian Lai, Lu Wen Qian, Charles Wong and Yao Kuan-Rung.

This discovery and processing of new source material which emanated from working with participants was flanked by more traditional documentary research in federal and state archives in Sydney, local history archives and collections throughout the region of interest to the thesis as well as library research.

A discussion of the methodological issues involved in adopting this oral history based approach to research provides the substance of the remainder of this chapter.

- **Establishing Credibility**¹⁰

At the centre of the oral history research as it was conducted for this thesis is the role of the researcher, not just as someone who uncovers and interprets existing material but as someone who also actively sets out to record new evidence through conducting interviews with people whose memories tap relevant life experiences. An analysis of the process, and ultimately of the material emerging from that process, consequently requires a close look at the researcher's motivations, biases, expectations, skills and impact.¹¹

In the case of the oral history material on which this thesis is based, the researcher was myself - a female university lecturer with no Chinese ancestry. I was inspired to undertake the research by the richness of sources and the complexities of the experiences initially observed through work conducted for the earlier project which documented aspects of the histories of Australians from non-English-speaking backgrounds in a particular part of rural New South Wales.¹²

The methodological issues raised by my own baggage need to be confronted. They begin with an examination of the extent to which an outsider can hope to uncover and present an account of Chinese-Australian experiences which genuinely invites and presents Chinese-Australian perspectives. It is an issue related to the ongoing debate about the role, acceptability and ability of outsiders to research and write the history of a minority group. In Australia it is a debate which is particularly prevalent in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history.¹³ It is also an issue which is being addressed in oral history literature and which, for a long time, has been of concern in the social sciences.¹⁴

¹⁰ To emphasise the need to analyse the shaping influence of my role as researcher, this section of the thesis is written in the first person.

¹¹ There is a growing literature in the oral history world offering self-critical analyses of the researcher's role and impact. See, for example, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), *Women's Words*. Routledge, New York, 1991, especially Part III.

¹² Details of this project have already been provided. See pp.4-5 and p. 25 previously .

¹³ See, for example, 'Aboriginal history and the Bicentennial Volumes', *Australia 1939-1988: A bicentennial history bulletin*, 3, 1981. pp.21-25; Peter Read, 'Come on in, the water's fine', *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, 64/65, 1990, pp.33-42 where he discusses the issue in the context of developing a code of ethics for historians; Ruby Langford, 'Other people's stories, other peoples' voices', *Artlink*, 11/2 and 2, 1991, p.41; and Ann McGrath, 'Aboriginal history calls for dialogue', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 January 1996, Opinion Supplement p.9.

¹⁴ See, for example, 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, 1981, pp.8-14; Lynn Echevarria-Howe, 'Reflections from participants: the process and product of life history work', *Oral History*, 23/2, 1995, p.43; Nicola North, 'Narratives of Cambodian refugees: issues in the collection of

On one side of the debate are those who maintain that only members of minority groups themselves can hope to understand experiences from the community's perspectives. They argue that it is only an insider who can overcome the narrow and often insensitive tunnel vision of a researcher born and bred in different cultural traditions and expectations, especially if those traditions belong to the dominant group in society. American academic Melford Weiss, after working for some time documenting the history and experiences of Asian Americans, encountered an extreme expression of this attitude when a group of Chinese-Americans demanded:

*What makes you, a white man, an expert on the Chinese? ... If we want people to know about us, then we'll do the writing. We don't need you anymore.*¹⁵

An opposite view, while acknowledging the importance of an insider perspective, especially in relation to ownership of the material and in relation to understanding the norms and values of the community, emphasises that there are dangers inherent in people researching their own community. One of the drawbacks identified is that community members may be too close to their subjects and, hence, less likely to be able to stand back and analyse. They share too much assumed knowledge and information with the people whose stories and experiences they are collecting. Consequently they leave out or ignore possibly important elements. There could also be internal divisions and tensions within a community that cannot be bridged or accommodated by someone identified with specific factions, families or interests within that community.¹⁶

The line taken in the research for this thesis was not an either/or choice. As Japanese-American Akemi Kikumura observed when addressing the insider/outsider debate in the context of evaluating her work on her mother's life history:

*... the choice is not between an insider or an outsider but evaluating the distinctive advantages and limitations of each perspective in relation to the problem of research at hand.*¹⁷

Kikumura's advice entails recognising the advantages and limitations of one's status as insider or outsider, and then maximising the advantages and minimising the disadvantages.¹⁸

refugee stories', *Oral History*, 23/2, 1995, p.38; Derek Reimer (ed.), *Voices: A guide to oral history*, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Victoria, 1985, p.19; and Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, *Listening for Change: Oral testimony and development*, Panos Books, London, 1994, p.148. In the social sciences, especially anthropology, the debate has emerged from discussions about the relative theoretical and methodological merits and demerits of the emic and etic approaches. An early example of the discussion is provided in Pertti J. Pelto, *Anthropological Research: The structure of inquiry*, Harper and Row, New York, 1970, pp.67-86.

¹⁵ Melford Weiss, 'The research experience in a Chinese-American community', *Journal of Social Issues*, 33/4, 1977, p.130.

¹⁶ See, for example, Slim and Thompson, *Listening for Change*, p.148

¹⁷ Akemi Kikumura, 'Family histories: a collaborative venture', *Oral History Review*, 14, 1986, p.3.

¹⁸ North, 'Narratives of Cambodian refugees', p.33 and Echevarria-Howe, 'Reflections from participants', p.43 adopted a similar position. See also Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The life and words of a !Kung woman*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1983, pp.17-43 for an example of an anthropologist coming to terms with her position as an outsider.

In accord with this stance, from the beginning of the fieldwork for this thesis, I was acutely aware of the disadvantages of my status as an outsider in that I had no Chinese ancestry and could not even claim an expertise in Chinese studies let alone speak or even understand Chinese languages. As a result, I had to learn appropriate behaviours, acquire at least a rudimentary knowledge of, for example, things as basic as Chinese naming practices, and learn to retreat when I strayed into inappropriate territory. I also had to circumvent the possible suspicion or at least curiosity of potential participants about why an outsider should show an interest in their personal, family and community histories. It was necessary to compensate for these disadvantages by building on positive aspects of my status as outsider and, ultimately, by recognising that, in some areas, the dividing line between insider and outsider was blurred.

One of the advantages was that I was not as obviously constrained by community expectations, in particular the respect accorded to elders which entails that asking questions and enquiring about their lives is not acceptable behaviour.¹⁹ It was a barrier which Norma King Koi encountered when she sought to interview older relatives for her family history research. For her it was such a barrier that, as a consequence,

..many older Chinese refused to see me or help in any way and most relatives communicate with me via my mother, not directly with me.²⁰

In the fieldwork for this thesis it is possible that the restraints imposed by this tradition played some part in tempering the memories participants shared. The restraints may also help to explain the reserve displayed by some older participants, at least on first meeting. However, there was never a clear remonstrance or indication that it was inappropriate to seek memories and information from older members of the community. Indeed, if anything, there was an encouragement to seek out older members as those most likely to remember.

Another advantage attached to my status as an outsider was that I was seen, at least by some participants, as being outside the rivalries, tensions and disagreements about the past and present which, as with any group of closely connected people, characterised the particular Chinese-Australian family and community networks involved. This was the sentiment which clearly underpinned a discussion with two participants, a husband and wife, about putting the history together. The husband began by observing:

There are so many rivalries and biases within the family. You know, we all still get together but the rivalries and tensions are there. I guess the story I'm giving is biased.²¹

¹⁹ This tradition is explored in more detail in a different context in Chapter 3, pp. 56-57 following.

²⁰ Norma King Koi, 'Discovering my heritage: my Chinese family history' in Jan Ryan (ed.), *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand: A multidisciplinary approach*, New Age, New Delhi, 1995, p.45.

²¹ Field notes, 22 September 1991. It should be emphasised that, in Chapters 2 and 3 of the thesis, when participants are quoted or referred to they, as a rule, are not identified by name nor are their interviews referenced. This is to respect their privacy and confidentiality. A different approach is adopted in Part Two (Chapters 4 to 10) where naming and identification are integral to the history. The issue of anonymity is discussed and explained in more detail in Chapter 3, pp.69-70 following.

My response was to indicate that representing the different viewpoints without offending anyone, was one of the challenges in constructing the history. The discussion continued:

Participant : *How do you do that?*

Janis Wilton : *Well, I guess sometimes if I write something rather than attribute it to a particular family member. Also, you can let every one have their say...*

Participant : *And let the reader decide? ... You'll do this better than any one of us could. You're from outside. Only you can do it.*²²

There were also other elements in my background and experience which ameliorated the disadvantages of having no Chinese ancestry or expertise in Chinese languages or studies. In the first instance, my status as an academic enhanced the perception that I belonged to the category of outsider most able to stand back, analyse and balance the material which was being offered. After all, that was my profession and, among most of the participants in the project, education and professional careers were seen as respectable and desirable and were goals which many family and community members had achieved.²³ I also came to the task with some years of experience in documenting, analysing and presenting oral histories and other evidence on the history and contributions of Australians from non-English-speaking backgrounds.²⁴

Another factor was that, in some respects, I was an insider in that I lived in the New England region and was familiar with the localities, businesses and people who figured in participants' memories. I also appreciated the advantages and disadvantages of living in rural New South Wales. Conversations invariably included discussions of factors dear to rural hearts - distance, drought, flood, fluctuations in rural productivity and their impact on business. In talking, it also became apparent that, as Australians, we shared many values, expectations and experiences and that the line between insider and outsider became blurred.²⁵ The blurring was, on occasions, assisted by details relating to my husband's background as an Israeli-born Jew. This brought me a step closer to being seen to have some understanding of the experience of mixed marriages, and of the pressures and tensions experienced by members of minority groups.²⁶ A final aspect of my personal background

²² Field notes, 22 September 1991.

²³ For details on the occupational profiles and achievements of family and community members see Chapter 10, pp.239-241 following.

²⁴ See, for example, Janis Wilton, 'Europeans in Australia: A Tower of Babel?', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 3, 1981, pp. 24-35; Richard Bosworth and Janis Wilton, 'A lost history? The study of European migration to Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 27/2, 1981, pp. 221-231; Janis Wilton and Santina Rizzo, 'Limina: a Sicilian village and Australia' in Gianfranco Cresciani (ed.), *Australia, The Australians and Italian Migration*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1983, pp.48-66; Janis Wilton, *Balancing the Books: Oral History for the Community*, Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW., Sydney, 1983; Janis Wilton and Richard Bosworth, *Old Worlds and New Australia: The post-war migrant experience*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1984; and Janis Wilton (ed.), *Internment: The diaries of Harry Seidler May 1940 - October 1941*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1986.

²⁵ The issue of identity and the absorption of Australian values is taken up in Chapter 10 following.

²⁶ Weiss, 'The research experience in a Chinese-American community', p.127 observed that his Jewish ancestry helped remove barriers to discussions about racism with Chinese-Americans of his own generation.

which helped to bridge barriers was my role as a parent. Conversations readily turned to the joys and tribulations of children, and particularly to the prospects for children in rural areas.

A further important element in establishing my acceptability in the role of researcher of the Chinese contribution to the district was the approach taken to the ownership and control of the material collected.²⁷ From the outset, I explained to participants that I was seeking their emphases and their recollections. I had certain topics which I thought should be covered but I recognised that these might not be the topics or issues on which they wanted to concentrate. I also explained that they would be provided with copies of the transcripts of their oral history interviews so that they could check the content, and make corrections and alterations on the understanding that it was the version of the transcript which they approved which would be used as the basis for writing the history. On those occasions when no tape recording was made, participants were provided with a copy of my notes with the same request to check, alter, delete, and approve the contents. Later in the process, as articles and papers were drafted, key participants were sent copies, again with the request for comments and corrections.²⁸

The willingness to participate was also enhanced by the publication and distribution of the case study on the Hong Yuen store in Inverell.²⁹ The publication was well received by participants. A good part of the text, for example, provided the substance for a liftout section of the local newspaper on the occasion of the store's ninetieth anniversary,³⁰ and Harry Fay, the managing director of the business, ordered an extra print run for his store, associates, family and friends. The case study also became a calling card for new participants and provided an example of how their memories and memorabilia were not only relevant but could be presented in a way with which they felt comfortable.³¹ At times, this entailed having to explain that it would not be possible to produce similar end products on each store or family!

27 Ownership and control are issues which are attracting increasing discussion and debate in oral history literature. Among the publications found useful and inspiring as the research for this thesis evolved were Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*; Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist theory and personal narratives*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989, especially Part 4; Read, 'Come on in, the water's fine', pp.33-42; and Lynd Staughton, 'Oral history from below', *Oral History Review*, 21/2, 1993, pp.1-8.

28 In the context of discussing the emphases participants placed on their recollections, pp.40-41 following provide examples of the types of corrections and alterations made when transcripts were returned. Chapter 3, pp.67-72 following addresses the issue of ownership and control in relation to the writing of the history.

29 Janis Wilton, *Hong Yuen: A country store and its people.*, NSW Department of Education Multicultural Education Coordinating Committee and Armidale CAE, Armidale, 1988. The case study was part of the resource package *Immigrants in the Bush* designed for use in New South Wales school classrooms. See pp.4-5 and 25 previously for further details and references.

30 *Hong Yuen 1899-1989*, Supplement to *The Inverell Times*, 18 October 1989.

31 Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 378-379 documents a similar experience in relation to her work with Amoskeag millworkers in Manchester. There was an initial reluctance on the part of the millworkers to show an interest or see relevance in the collection of their oral histories. However, an exhibition utilising some millworkers' photographs, material culture and oral histories changed the perception and provoked a willingness to assist and participate.



JANIS WILTON, the author of the book tracing Hong Yuen's and the Fay family's history, enjoys a reunion party chat with Connie Fay and her son Harry III, who has opted out of merchandising to go into the computer and office equipment business at Armidale.

With members of the Fay family at Hong Yuen's 90th anniversary celebrations, October 1989.³²

All these factors - my status as an academic, my previous research experience with members of different ethnic communities, my residence in the New England district, my familiarity with life in rural areas, my personal background, my approach to ownership of the material collected, and the emergence of an example of the way in which the oral histories could be used - assisted to balance the disadvantages imbedded in my role as an outsider seeking to research and write the history of a specific group of people by interviewing, recording and analysing their experiences.

- **Introducing the Participants**

Oral history research centres on the interaction between the researcher and the participants. Consequently it is important not just to explore and analyse the background and status of the researcher but to introduce the participants and to provide details about their backgrounds and expectations. Furthermore, it is necessary to explain how and why particular individuals were invited to become participants.

Some oral historians have adapted social science quantitative approaches and set out to establish rigorous sampling methods to ensure that those interviewed represent a cross-section of the people who witnessed a particular event, lived through a particular period or underwent a specific experience.³³ Other oral historians have adopted the approach used in the research for this thesis. This entailed seeking personal contacts and introductions, networking from participant to participant and, in the process, attempting to ensure some

³² *Hong Yuen 1899-1989*.

³³ See, for example, Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past, Second Edition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, pp.125-128.

very rough sampling pattern.³⁴ Both approaches are limited by the fact that, as the concern of oral history interviews is to open windows on aspects of the past, the passage of time has meant that many possible participants have died, moved away or made themselves untraceable through marriage, migration, change of identity, or choice of lifestyle. Both approaches are also limited by the fact that, as good oral history interviews should tap individual responses and recollections and as each individual's experiences and recollections have different emphases, then the extent and variety of individual perspectives, emphases, textures, tones and nuances can never be fully captured.

The resolution of the inherent limitations to seeking appropriate participants for this thesis was to interview a sufficient number and cross-section of people to ensure that the overall patterns of the remembered experiences were repeated patterns, and that there were adequate explanations for individual memories which did not conform to the patterns.³⁵

Initial participants were met through local contacts. Each participant usually then provided introductions to other people whose remembered experiences could add to the store of information. The network of introductions meant travelling not just throughout the district but also to Sydney and Brisbane.³⁶ The process entailed conducting a number of interviews in a specific location, returning home, processing those interviews and then seeking interviews with other participants and, sometimes, follow up interviews with those already involved. The important point is that as new participants became involved and their individual stories recorded, often new and different emphases emerged. Subsequent interviews were informed by the perspectives and details provided by earlier participants. The research became propelled and shaped by alterations, leads, contacts, topics and issues raised by participants as well as those determined from research and reading of relevant literature. At a certain point, the patterns of experiences became predictable. Evidence mounted indicating that, for example, the stores in the district were the focal point for the networks and lifestyles which evolved during the first half of the twentieth century. It also became clear that visits to and contacts with China were an integral part of the lives of Chinese-Australians living in the district.

To go beyond the emerging patterns and reveal more than individual variations, it became necessary to analyse and look for gaps, discrepancies, negative case analyses and then to construct specific questions directed at specific participants. At times this meant more in-depth interviews with the same participants; at other times it meant seeking out individuals from a particular family or work background. The process was action based:

³⁴ See, for example, Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p.226. See also Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History*, Hutchinson, London, 1987, pp.31-37 for an overview of different sampling techniques in oral history.

³⁵ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1985, pp.198-202 and Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods, Second Edition*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1990, pp169-186 provide a social science perspective on this method of sampling and establishing a series of checks and balances in the methodology.

³⁶ See Map 1, p. 4 previously which shows participants' places of residence at the time of the oral history interviews.

each step building on material already collected and evaluated.³⁷ Eventually, it became apparent that there was sufficient material to construct a history which indicated patterns, addressed certain issues, and explored some new territory.

Given the time involved in the process and the extent of the material already collected, the 55 participants who were interviewed provided a sufficient core of material. Of these 55 participants, 29 were female and 26 were male. All but five (4 female, 1 male) were of Chinese ancestry. Of the 50 with Chinese ancestry, 7 (2 female, 5 male) were born in China, 6 migrated to Australia before 1940 and 1 (a female) arrived after the Second World War. The remaining 43 participants were born in Australia. All participants were born between 1895 and 1950, and they spent varying amounts of time in the district of particular interest to this thesis. Table 1 on the following page sets out participants' names and provides some brief biographical data.

- **The Interviews**

In oral history research the main site of interaction between the researcher and participants is the interview. It is here that expectations, perceptions, hopes and agendas initially meet and are negotiated. The experience and the material which emerges are consequently shaped by the baggage brought by both parties to the interview and by the nature of the interaction itself.³⁸ To this end, the next section of this chapter provides a description and analysis of some of the factors which influenced the nature of the interactions which occurred in the oral history interviews recorded for this thesis. In particular, attention is paid to the preparation undertaken by the researcher, the impact of the number of interviewees at any one session, the awareness on the part of participants that they were contributing to the creation of a public record of their experiences, the different ways in which participants recalled and related their experiences, the emphasis on sharing experiences, and, finally, the ways in which these factors coalesced to create a growing wealth of material.

Preparation

Preparation for the interviews required familiarity with existing literature on the Chinese in Australia and in New England, and with a series of fairly broad topics informed by this reading and by previous oral history work with other groups of Australians from

³⁷ In the social sciences this is the approach advocated and detailed by scholars such as Guba and Lincoln, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, and Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*.

³⁸ Ronald Grele, 'History and the languages of history in the oral history interview: who answers whose questions and why?' in Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers (eds), *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1994, pp.1-18 provides a focused analysis of the interview as a site for negotiating different expectations, values and perspectives.

Table 1: Participants' Profiles:
Gender, Year and Place of Birth, Residence in District and Visits to China

Participants	m/fm	Year of Birth	Place of birth	Residence in district	Visits to China (approx. dates)
Au, Valmai	fm	1929	Glen Innes	1929-1957	1936, 1979, 1986
Chiu, Bessie	fm	1912	Emmaville	1912-1936	1991 (HK)
Chor, Betty	fm	1934	Shekki, Chungshan	1948-1952 (1948)	3 visits, early 1980s
Choy, Constance	fm	1924	Sydney	1941-1942	
Cum, Eileen	fm	1918	Inverell	1918 to date	1931-2, 1984
Duck Chong, Robert	m	1900	Tingha	1900-1922	1910, 1985, 1989
Fatt, Oscar	m	1916	Glen Innes	1916-1929	1921, 1986? (HK)
Fay, Connie	fm	1929	Johnstone, Queensland	1953 to date	(HK)
Fay, Harry	m	1929	Inverell	1929 to date	1931-2, 1986?
Fay, Ivy	fm	1916	Adelaide	1953-1974	1920-24, 1929 (HK)
Fong, Eric	m	1928	Inverell	1928 to date	
Gan, Olma	fm	1934	Glen Innes	1934-1950	1935, 1979, 1986
Garr, Kevin	m	1929	Emmaville	1929-1946	
Gett, Ken	m	1932	Glen Innes	1932-1952	1986?, 1993
Gibbs, Alvena	fm	1915	Emmaville	1915 to date	
*Higgins, Jessie	fm	19?	Inverell		
Hon, Dulcie	fm	1910	Glen Innes	1910-1974	1913-4, 1916-8, 1935-8
Hon, Merle	fm	1912	Glen Innes	1912-1974	1913-14, 1916-1918
Hong, Henry	m	1929	Sydney	1929-1993	
Hunnam, Marie	fm	1941	Tingha	1941-c.1960	
Jack, Trevor	m	1917	Glen Innes	1917-1945	
Jang, Elaine	fm	c1929	Shekki, Chungshan	1938-1954 (1938)	
Louie Yun Lum	m	c1913	Dau Tau, Chungshan	1940-1948 (1940)	?
Loy, Thelma	fm	1920	Inverell	1920 to date	1931-2, 1984, 1986?
Loy, Thomas	m	1914	Toowoomba, Queensland	1931-1991	1984
Lumbewe, Ted	m	1911	Sydney	1932 to date	1914-15
Lun, May	fm	1910	Ilumba, Queensland	1930-1950	1922-30, 1932-6
Mah, Joe	m	c1911	Sar Chong, Chungshan	1928-1991 (1928)	1985, (HK)
*Manuel, Tom	m	1922	Glen Innes	1922 to date	
Mar, Marina	fm	1934	Inverell	1934-1955	1984, 1986 (HK)

Table 1: Participants' Profiles (continued)

Participants	m/fm	Year Birth	Place of birth	Residence in district	Visits to China (approx. dates)
*O Chee, Terri	fm	c1935	Brisbane,	visits only	
Pang, David	m	c1910	Chungshan	1938-1961 (1938)	?? (HK)
Pang, Edna	fm	1912	Glen Innes	1912-1961	1926?, 1929-1938 (HK)
*Petrie, Maisie	fm	1905	Tenterfield	from 1905	
Ping, Ronald	m	1929	Sydney	1942-1943	
Ping Kee, Lawrence	m	1914	Dau Tau, Chungshan	1927 to date	1936 (HK)
*Rose, Dulcie	fm	1906	Tenterfield	from 1906	
So Quan, Percy	m	1926	Dau Tau, Chungshan	1939 to date (1939)	?
Sue Fong, Ernest	m	1916	Emmaville	1916 to date	
Sue Fong, Joyce	fm	1923	Inverell	1923 to date	1931-2
Tong, Leona	fm	1940	Glen Innes	1940-1965	1985?
Winmill, Beatrice	fm	1897	Inverell	1897-1990	
Winmill, Gordon	m	1921	Inverell	1921 to date	
Wong, Alice	fm	1908	Gundagai	1938 to date	
Woo, Sam	m	1906	Georgetown Qld	1930-1937	
Yee, Daisy	fm	1906	Glen Innes	1906-1973	1910-1911, 1926-27
Yee, Derrick	m	1930	Bundarra	1930 to date	
Yee, Pat	fm	1932	Bingara	1932 to date	
Young, Barry	m	1948	Glen Innes	1948-1965, 1975 to date	
Young, Betty	fm	1931	Sydney	1947 to date	
Young, Eugenia	fm	1939	Sydney	1968 to date	1985, 1986
Young, Grace	fm	1909	Melbourne	1928-33, 1933 to date	1915-1927, 1986
Young, Harvey	m	1932	Glen Innes	1932 to date	1985, 1986, 1988
Young, Stanley	m	1905	Glen Innes	1905-1933, 1939 to date	1910-11, 1926-27, 1936, 1986
Yum, Albert	m	1914	Sydney	1932-1936	1980s (2 visits)

NOTES:

- * (asterisk) denotes a participant with no Chinese ancestry
- **Place of Birth.** Unless otherwise stated, all small towns listed are located in NSW, Australia.
- **Residence in District and Visits to China** - often these are approximate dates only. '?' indicates acknowledged uncertainty about dates.
- **Residence in District.** The date in brackets in entries for participants born in China, indicates the approximate year of their arrival in Australia.
- **Visits to China.** Includes visits to mainland China only. (HK) indicates one or more visits to Hong Kong in addition to any visits to China. Blank indicates no visits.
- **More detailed profiles** of participants are provided in Appendix C at the end of this thesis.

non-English-speaking backgrounds.³⁹ Early on a questionnaire was constructed which incorporated expectations about the types of topics which would be covered and the types of questions which could be used to elicit responses. Past experience, as well as oral history literature, warned against the use of this questionnaire as anything other than a preparatory exercise. It did, however, serve to indicate the thinking which directed initial interviews.⁴⁰ It was very much a framework guided by a life history approach which, within the context of that approach, was concerned to focus in detail on the period of time an individual had spent in the particular part of New South Wales of interest to this research.

Informed by preparatory research and reading, experienced in oral history interview skills through ten years practice, and aided by a sheet of paper identifying broad topics, the interviews were conducted with the hope that participants would be able not just to address topics and questions already contemplated, but to provide suggestions and memories which could open doors on previously neglected or poorly documented aspects of the Chinese presence in the district.

More Than One Interviewee

The majority of the interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and were recorded in participants' homes. In those instances when other family members were in the house, they stayed away from the room in which the interview was being conducted. There were, however, ten occasions when the participant was joined by other family members. The material generated from these encounters was shaped as much by the exchange between participants and family members as by the interaction between participant and interviewer.

On one occasion, for example, an interview was organised with a particular participant. On arrival, it was evident that there was enthusiastic support for the project as another four members of the extended family had been invited along and a sumptuous lunch had been prepared. One approach would have been to accept the event as an introduction to each of the family members, and to follow up with individual interviews later on. Experience, however, had taught that time, distance, health and availability meant that the most should be made of the opportunity. All the participants willingly shared memories and information. The recording reflects their enthusiasm and interest. Inevitably, there is little of the detailed descriptions and insights into personal experiences which emerged from the more focused one-to-one interviews. However, this joint exercise did provide substantial material on the collective values and attitudes, and areas of disagreement and agreement

³⁹ An analysis of the literature on the Chinese occupiers Chapter 1 of this thesis. For publications relating to previous oral history work with Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds see p.31, footnote 24 previously.

⁴⁰ See Appendix A at the end of this thesis for a copy of this initial questionnaire. For discussions about the inappropriateness of using questionnaires in oral history interviews and on the strategies which are most appropriate see, for example, Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, pp.198-203.

about those values and attitudes, held by these five family members.⁴¹ It also provided useful lists of names and relationships constructed from the sharing of information about different family members and their descendants.

A similar triggering, sharing and cross-checking of memories was provided in those situations in which there were two participants, most usually a husband and wife or, in one instance, two sisters. In these circumstances, there was a tendency to take turns in providing detailed descriptions and to appeal to each other for confirmation of details or for filling in aspects which were elusive. The following beginning of an exchange between two sisters, Valmai Au and Olma Gan, provides an example. They were recalling the family store, Kwong Sing and Company, in Glen Innes during the 1940s.

- Janis Wilton : *And what was the shop itself like...?*
 Valmai Au : *Well, there's been big changes now, over the years.*
 Olma Gan : *..well... that's a new section where the guns are.*
 Valmai Au : *The showroom was more*
 Olma Gan : *hardware and just the ladies wear.*
 Valmai Au : *There was a big selection of garments and underwear in the showroom.*
 Olma Gan : *They sold shoes .. quite a big shoe selection and hats...*
 Valmai Au : *A lot more underwear and stockings.*
 Olma Gan : *Yes. Dresses, they had furniture too, which was upstairs*
 Janis Wilton : *Which stairs?*
 Olma Gan : *Where Harvey is*
 Valmai Au : *But they've moved the stairs now.*
 Olma Gan : *But there were two sets of stairs weren't there, in the shop?*
 Valmai Au : *Yes, well, ...where Dad's office was there used to be stairs going up.*
 Olma Gan : *Yes, on one side, and then the big stairs going up from the grocery side.*⁴²

The exchange continued for some time with each sister's contribution becoming more detailed in response to a request from the other.

On the two occasions when a younger relative sat in on the interview the effect was positive and supportive. In one, it was a daughter-in-law who was present. She was possibly invited in the first instance to vet the outsider. The meeting began with explanations about the project and its purpose over a cup of coffee. The daughter-in-law emphasised her need to get away to cook for a church dinner that night. The recording got under way. An hour later, she remarked to her mother-in-law:

I really shouldn't be here but I mean a lot of the stuff that you've said, I really don't know myself. Never mind. I'll stay a bit longer.

⁴¹ For an example of the agreement and disagreement about values refer to the quote on pp.259-260 following.

⁴² Interview with Valmai Au and Olma Gan, Sydney, 19 July 1990.

The other instance was a return visit to one participant. This time it was held in his son's home with son and daughter-in-law present. It was through his son's gentle prompts and sanctions that this participant decided to provide details and recollections which, on the previous occasion, had not been forthcoming. Both father and son commented that they wanted to record the experiences so that future generations could learn what it was like and gain a better understanding of the past.⁴³

For the Public Record

In all the interviews, whether one-to-one or those involving two or more interviewees, participants were aware that they were sharing their memories and experiences for the public record.⁴⁴ This arguably had both positive and limiting effects.

On the one hand, there were participants whose willingness to be interviewed was partly motivated by the fact that, at last, their stories were being recorded and presented as a part of Australia's history. The limiting aspect of this was, quite understandably, that the emphases, details and views given in oral history interviews were those which participants felt were appropriate for a public record. As a result there was an absence in most interviews of details about such things as racism, exploitation, family rivalries and tensions, and illegal immigration, and there was an emphasis on such things as the success and achievements of family members. These absences and emphases were partly due to the desire to ensure that what was preserved and passed on were those aspects of the past which presented family and community members in a positive light and which show that they are respectable members of Australian society.⁴⁵

Overt evidence of this desire to avoid the negative can be found in the ways in which some participants corrected and altered the transcripts of their interviews. The covering letter encouraged participants to correct spelling (especially of proper names) and details, to add information or memories, and to ensure that they would be happy for the material presented in the transcript to be used in a publication or other medium for presenting a history of the Chinese contribution to the district.⁴⁶ The majority of participants made minor alterations, corrections and additions. Some, however, deleted and altered clearly with the intention to remove certain sentiments, opinions and information from the public record.

⁴³ Field notes, 5 July 1991.

⁴⁴ See pp.25-26 previously which explains that introductory correspondence and explanations emphasised the intention to use the material collected in publications and other public presentations. The ethical issues involved in asking people to place their memories on the public record are addressed more directly in the following chapter. See Chapter 3, pp.67-68 following.

⁴⁵ For further analysis of these absences and emphases and the messages they convey, especially in relation to memories of racism, see Chapter 3, pp. 51-53 following.

⁴⁶ Refer to p.32 previously for discussion of this approach to ownership and control as an integral part of the approach adopted in the research for this thesis.

One participant, for example, deleted all reference to her family's time at a particular location in Australia. Consistently, other members of the family also avoided mentioning this period in any detail suggesting that there were associations and memories which they did not want to make public. The same interviewee was also careful to delete a discussion of discrimination which focused on name-calling at school, and altered the expression 'a lot' to 'some' in describing the number of customers who did not pay their debts at the family store. On a different tack, another participant was particularly concerned that she might have given inaccurate information about family members and that she made some of them sound silly. Despite assurances that inaccuracy in facts and information was a characteristic of oral history and not important, and that the memories she recorded were informative and not at all negative in relation to her family, this participant ultimately decided that, while she was happy for information provided from her interview and transcript to be used, she did not want her words quoted or to be identified as the source of the information and opinions.

Recalling the Past

Another, and obvious, factor which shaped the nature of the recorded interviews and helped to create the diversity evident between them, was the ways in which different participants constructed and presented their memories. There is a growing and increasingly sophisticated literature about the impact of physical and cultural influences on the shaping of memory and on the narrative structures employed by different individuals to present their recollections. The impact of these factors occupies a part of Chapter Three.⁴⁷ Here, the point is to establish participants' attitudes to the exercise of sharing memories about the past, the form in which these memories were expressed during the interview and the type of information conveyed.

Among the participants, there were those for whom recalling the past was an activity which they declared they preferred not to pursue or who, in agreeing to participate, looked to me as interviewer for direction. As one participant observed: 'I'm not interested in the past. It's the present and future that matters.' Despite this disavowal, this same participant eventually produced a scrapbook and photograph albums filled with images and memorabilia from the past and, on being asked for specific details about events and experiences, was forthcoming with information. However, the information consisted, by and large, of direct answers to questions. The onus remained on me, as interviewer, to set the agenda and direct the recollections. Pauses in this interview were not moments when the participant was collecting thoughts or memories, but moments of waiting for the next question. As my evaluation of an interview with another participant which similarly remained in a direct answer and question format indicated:

The recording is overburdened with my questions and reactions. Her replies were

⁴⁷ See Chapter 3, pp.50-60 following.

*reasonably short, stopping suddenly. She looked eagerly to me for the next question.*⁴⁸

This was in clear contrast to those participants for whom the past was a vital source of memories which they wanted to share. Directed by the overall focus of the project and by questions asked, these participants also clearly knew those aspects of the past and those pieces of information which they wanted to include. Their recollections and responses fell comfortably into two broad categories. There were those times when body language, the images conveyed and the words and expressions used, made it obvious that participants were reliving their versions of the past. With eyes focused beyond me and minds concentrated, they offered descriptive and detailed tours of particular stores, encounters with specific individuals, evocations of sentiments and feelings in relation to a particular event or place, and accounts of daily routines. They brought into the living and dining rooms of the 1980s and 1990s the sights, smells, sounds, tastes, values, attitudes and feelings of over fifty years ago. At times, photographs or other family papers and memorabilia provided a trigger or illustration. Most often, it was the request to revisit an experience, place, event or person which somehow opened a rush of memories. Sometimes they were familiar memories and recognised as such by participants. At other times, the memories came as a surprise. A door had been opened to a room which they had not entered for a long time.

The extent to which individual participants successfully invoked and re-visited the past can be gauged through the details they remembered.⁴⁹ Trevor Jack, for example, produced a couple of photographs owned by his uncle, Les Jack. One of the photographs was of a man called See Hon. Trevor Jack thought he may have been his grandfather, Quin Jack's, brother. He was unsure. However, he could vividly recall See Hon's visit to Tingha in one detail only:

*He saw us [Trevor and his brother, Russell] running around with no boots on. He thought we were so poor we couldn't afford shoes. So he left money to buy us boots.*⁵⁰

In remembering her visits to an uncle in Hong Kong, May Lun smiled and similarly recalled one small but evocative detail:

*My uncle used to like eating the tail of the duck, just the tail, and he used to eat it in such a way that we used to sit down and watch him and love watching him eating his tail.*⁵¹

Body language, gestures and reenactments, as well as words, highlighted the ways in which individuals revisited and reconstructed the past. For Ron Ping, particular tasks in the family store, C.M.Ping and Company in Sydney, were recalled in descriptive detail. The field notes record:

Some of his memories, especially when he recalled ways of doing things in the shop,

48 Field notes, 26 June 1991.

49 A view expressed by Lummis, *Listening to History*, p.48 where he states 'recalling material detail helps the informant more readily to recapture the thought and feeling of the period.'

50 Field notes, 26 June 1990.

51 Interview with May Lun, Surfers Paradise, 23 February 1990.

*were quite graphic. And, as he explained, his hands created the actions - showing how he learnt to tap the soy sauce barrel or cut the block of cheese with string.*⁵²

The descriptions given in the interview evoke images of Ron Ping cutting the cheese:

*...cheese didn't come in a packet those days. It came in a block like a small barrel with a wax skin around it. They covered it with calico and put wax around it, and you'd have to tear the calico off and then to cut the cheese you got a piece of string to put around the waist of ... and then pull [demonstrates using his hands], you see, and that cut the cheese perfectly in half.*⁵³

Throughout the interviews, the accepted understanding in memory work that long-term memory survives better and becomes particularly vibrant as we age, was clearly apparent.⁵⁴ Among older participants, the time and detail offered about their early years was particularly evocative. As Rosalie Lun declared on hearing her mother-in-law's recollections:

*I mean it's almost like you can remember more clearly the things back years and years ago more than some of these other things more recently*⁵⁵

Some early memories were further enhanced by clear demarcation lines. Robert Duck Chong, for example, aged 90 at the time of the interviews, spent the first 22 years of his life largely in Tingha. He then left, only to visit occasionally. During those first two decades, the only two periods when he was away from his town of birth were when, at the age of 10 he spent a year in China with his mother and siblings and when, as a teenager, he worked in Sydney Chinese stores for two years. His recorded recollections capture moments and details from these early years through a mixture of descriptions of places, people, feelings and events.⁵⁶ Like other participants, he relocated himself in time and could be seen to be reliving moments from the past and describing what he was seeing, hearing, and feeling.

Sharing Information

The participants' experience of recreating the past led to a much more conscious effort to seek out information which could assist in the research project. This occurred particularly in relation to identifying individuals and details about personal and family histories. Some participants spent time naming as many Chinese as they could recall from the district, and trying to provide any snippets of information whether gathered from their own memories or passed on from other people or sources. This sometimes entailed thinking their way through employees at a particular store at a particular time, identifying people in a photograph, or referring to individual members of a specific family. On a number of occasions, the exercise continued to structure responses after interviews were over. Participants constructed

⁵² Field notes, 22 April 1991.

⁵³ Interview with Ron Ping, Sydney, 22 April 1991.

⁵⁴ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, pp.115-117.

⁵⁵ Interview with May Lun.

⁵⁶ Some examples have been used in Chapter 9, pp.210, 214 and 216 following.

written lists of names and other details and sent them by post or supplied them on a follow up visit. Return visits also prompted the passing on of further information of this kind. Often this was done in response to reading through interview transcripts, and adding details, names and possibilities. One result of this sharing of information about people was that, for a number of families, it became possible to construct family trees which displayed migration, occupation, marriage and settlement patterns across generations.⁵⁷

A Growing Wealth of Material

The reconstruction of memories and the sharing of information also produced an array of sources from family photograph albums, papers and memorabilia.⁵⁸ Some initial visits included an introduction to collections of photographs and documents. More often, it took a second or third visit before the full wealth of family papers was uncovered. Presumably at work here, was a mixture of a belief that family photographs and papers were of little interest to other people and a concern about allowing an outsider access to the privacy of family records.

Follow up visits and continuing contact also proved an essential shaping influence on the amount and nature of the remembered recollections which were forthcoming. Return visits were usually preceded by participants receiving a copy of the transcript of their interview. This provided a basis for the next round. Frequently, experiences and details recorded in that first interview were revisited. It also became possible to ask questions directed at specific aspects of experiences and, conversely, for participants to emphasise clearly those aspects of their interviews and, ultimately, their personal experiences and their family histories which they regarded as important. At this point it became particularly apparent that it was necessary to listen to *and* hear what was being said, especially when, as the research progressed, a clearer idea was developing of the patterns and history which could be constructed from the memories and material being offered.⁵⁹ In particular, participants placed emphasis on the importance of family, of religious beliefs, of respecting (while not always approving) values and practices from the past, and of not reflecting negatively on other individuals, their lives or their families. The ways in which these emphases influenced the structure and analysis of the history are addressed in the next chapter. Here, it is important to stress that the extent and nature of the recollections and other material provided, over time, by participants was at least partly shaped by the emphases which they wished to place on past and present lives as well as by their different

⁵⁷ See Appendix D at the end of this thesis.

⁵⁸ See the Bibliography at the end of this thesis for descriptions of the photographs, and personal and business papers collected through this process.

⁵⁹ The importance of listening *and* hearing is made particularly clear in Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, 'Learning to listen: interview techniques and analysis' in Gluck and Patai (eds), *Women's Words*, pp.11-25.

attitudes to the past and their different ways of recalling, reconstructing and presenting their memories.

- **Reading Traditional Sources**

What emerged from the oral history interviews and the variety of source material generated from them, was a growing documentation of the variety and complexity of the Chinese lifestyles and contributions which evolved in this particular district, and of the varied and complex ways in which those lifestyles and contributions were remembered by Chinese-Australians. The meanings and messages conveyed through these sources are the focus of the next chapter. However, here it is important to stress that the information and details offered in oral history interviews informed and shaped the subsequent reading of more traditional documentary sources. In approaching state and national archival sources, for example, it was possible to be armed with specific names (and variations of those names) and the profiles of individual Chinese. On a simple level, this meant that naturalisation or deceased estate files of specific individuals could be requested. On a conceptual level, it meant that the documents were read, not with a view to establishing, for example, evidence of the administration of Australian immigration policies or of the values and attitudes underpinning them or broad patterns of Chinese immigration. Rather it was to determine whether the documents confirmed, added to or challenged information about individual work histories, the immigration and settlement of particular people, the nature of partnerships involved in the establishment of Chinese stores, or how individual Chinese negotiated the legislation. It was also to establish the extent to which lifestyles and patterns could be seen to reflect distinctly Chinese cultural and social practices, and the extent to which they accorded to that established desire of Australian officialdom to show that immigrants who settle in Australia acquire distinctly Australian practices and patterns.

The oral history interviews, at the very least, demanded a reorientation of the questions asked of more traditional sources and they provided leads which opened new routes of enquiry. However, they also did much more than this. The content of the interviews, and the factors which shaped that content and which have been outlined in this chapter, provided a wealth and diversity of material which were used as the basis of the new approach adopted in this thesis. The evidence available from the oral histories was sufficient to provide an account which is different from the views offered in studies which focus on policy, attitudes and demographic characteristics. The oral history interviews also produced evidence which, ultimately, challenged the meaning and structure of studies which focus particularly on the extent to which Chinese have 'succeeded' in Australia, and on what 'being Chinese' means in this country.

- **Conclusion**

From the discussion in this chapter it has emerged that the oral history approach adopted for this thesis was a time and energy consuming exercise which required the generation, amassing and processing of a great deal of new material. The process also entailed coming to terms with the status of the researcher as an outsider, and the strategies adopted to establish credibility and acceptability in order to ensure that participants felt comfortable about sharing their memories and memorabilia. The participants themselves were introduced and the evolution of the interaction between the researcher and participants emphasised the networking and the action based nature of the research: participants suggested other participants, and the information and insights gained from one participant informed the questions and directions of subsequent interviews.

In the interviews themselves, which constituted the core activity of the oral history research, different situations and different participants created different responses and different types and forms of information. There was an awareness of creating material for the public record and of ensuring that the information and images conveyed were in accord with images and messages participants wanted preserved and presented to a wider public. Some participants easily and willingly found themselves able to relive aspects of their pasts; others felt constrained or unfamiliar with visiting the past and sought, instead, to assist by providing information and considered and constructed answers to specific questions.

The interviews produced an array of sources and information which defy simple categorisation or quantification. They consist of different individuals' perceptions and memories of their past experiences and of information passed on about their family and community histories. The oral history material, however, was not required to stand on its own. A variety of other family, business and personal records - photographs, scrapbooks, letters, unpublished memoirs, family trees - also became available. Traditional documentary sources - newspapers, government archives, local council records, post office directories, census data - were accessed and read in the light of insights gained through the oral history fieldwork. The evidence and information grew and occupied fat files on paper and on computer. Its very diversity and unevenness became both a challenge and a source of inspiration. Analytical and conceptual frameworks were needed to make sense of the patterns and understandings which emerged as the material was collected and, ultimately, as the history was being constructed, analysed, interpreted and presented. Most difficult of all, the research required the scholar to pursue a fundamental reassessment of the relationship between researcher and participants, and to draw on a whole range of skills involved in gaining consent, negotiating meanings, and relinquishing power. It is these frameworks and intellectual and ethical considerations which occupy the next chapter.