

## The Chinese in Victoria.

The Chinese were present from the very early days of Australia's colonisation; although initially in small numbers.

For instance, we read that as early as **1827** a small number of Chinese furniture makers were noted in colonial Sydney. By the late 1840s the Sydney paper, *People's Advocate*, reported that more than **half of the furniture manufactured in Sydney was by Chinese labour**. In Victoria, **in 1851**, records show that Louis Ah Mouy, (a Chinese carpenter), was brought to Melbourne under contract to Captain Glendinning, and for whom he built six houses of Singapore oak in South Melbourne and Williamstown. Ah Muoy's arrival coincided with the discovery of gold in Victoria, and he always claimed that it was a letter he had written to his brother in Canton, that prompted the migration of many thousands of Cantonese to the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s. One of a number of successful Chinese migrants, Ah Muoy became an original Director of the Commercial Bank of Australia, in Melbourne. He prospered as a mining and land speculator, tea merchant and business man, amassing great wealth; but lost heavily in the 1890s depression. As befitted his status, Louis quickly became one of a group of influential and respected spokesmen for the Chinese community in Melbourne.

In the 1840s the Australian colonies began to "**close the door**" on **convict transportation**, but the question arose as to how best the colonists could cheaply replace this lost labour force? Hardship following the Opium Wars in Southern China, encouraged the first Chinese to come in 1848 ... to serve in the homes, and on the land. As domestics, shepherds, shearers, farm labourers; to wash and cook. They came as indentured labour, under contract to stay for four to five years, they were paid about a half to a third of European wages, and then returned home. Even at this time, some New South Welshman, (Victoria was still part of NSW), opposed Chinese labour. In 1841 a parliamentary committee stood against,

**"establishing here in perpetuity a race of different origin, colour and habits from the European, and necessarily doomed to occupy a station of inferiority"**

**But the problem was soon overwhelmed by a new opportunity.** By **1857** over 40,000 Chinese were digging for **GOLD** in Victoria.

**What were the Chinese like?** All of them were men. Most sent by their families and bound by contract to Chinese business men, or their clan leaders. In return for the cost of their passage they agreed to work to repay their debt. Almost all were country people, peasants or labourers. Most only stayed for three years, enough to pay back their debt. Few Chinese "struck it rich". However, the Chinese ingenuity, their organisation and teamwork, and in particular their ability to patiently glean gold from the tailings of "worked out" European claims, caused fear and jealousy in the European miners. Fights broke out over water rights, claims were jumped, and violent riots were organised against the Chinese.

Whilst the Chinese had some European supporters, the colonial governments feared both social unrest, and being overwhelmed by "celestials". In 1855 the Victorian government introduced new discriminatory taxes against the Chinese. Ship captains were levied **ten pounds** for every