Australia, China and the Age of Imperialism
By Benjamin Mountford

In the eighteenth century, proponents of a new British settlement at New South Wales regularly emphasized the benefits that might accrue to the British position in Asia and to the Empire's trade with China.

By 1800 the tiny British beachheads at Sydney and Canton were little more than tenuous toeholds, perched at the edge of two enormous and inhospitable landmasses. Yet they were already connected, part of the same maritime world. After delivering their convicts to New South Wales, transports such as the *Charlotte* and the *Scarborough* proceeded to China under East India Company charter to collect tea for the return voyage to Britain. Soon maritime and commercial links were developing between British communities on the Australian and China coasts.

From Sydney ex-convicts who had moved into the commercial sphere, merchants from India, and American captains shipped seal skins, seal oil, and sandalwood to Canton by a range of legal and nefarious means. At the same time British merchants wrestling with the collapse of private trade between Calcutta and Canton began stocking their China bound ships with opium and vessels for South East Asia, South America, and Sydney and Hobart with whatever they thought might sell in those ports.

In 1819 James Matheson, a young merchant recently arrived in China from India (and who would go on to form the British China House Jardine, Matheson & Co.) despatched his first shipment of teas and other China goods from Canton to New South Wales, establishing one of a number of lasting connections between British mercantile houses in the colonies, in China, and later in Hong Kong.

In the wake of the First Opium War, there was cause to hope that the opening of China and the opening of Australia might proceed in tandem, and bring advantages to British interests at both ends of the Pacific. From the beginning, there were always those who suggested that British Australia should be developed as an Anglo-Chinese condominium, a partnership drawing together Britain's capital and oversight and China's vast reserves of manpower.

In the 1770s Joseph Banks, having witnessed the efficiency of Chinese workers at Batavia, concluded that New South Wales might draw 'any number of useful inhabitants' from China. At the same time Australian trade with China began to develop – particularly the importation of tea. Australians appear to have drunk more tea per head than almost anyone else in the world. The idea of importing Chinese labour later found its most articulate proponent in the colonial theorist Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Wakefield argued that communities of Chinese Britons would not only develop the Australian frontier but provide the British Empire with a new point of access to the China market.

Would it be no advantage to British manufacturers', Wakefield wrote in his Letter from Sydney *(1829), to enjoy free trade with millions of fellow subjects of Chinese*

origin, and, through them*, perhaps with hundreds of millions of customers in the Celestial Empire?*

During the 1840s small numbers of indentured Chinese were eventually imported to watch over colonial sheep - though the experiment was short lived. It was in the 1850s, when large numbers of Cantonese miners began travelling to the Pacific gold rushes, that these earlier visions – of Australia and China being developed in tandem – began to appear hopelessly naïve. Henceforth, the fear that a sudden wave of Chinese migration might engulf Australia hovered over colonial attitudes towards the Middle Kingdom.

The Chinese question (Who were they? Should they be admitted freely? What would their presence mean for the future of Australia?) was soon amongst the most hotly debated questions on the goldfields and beyond. Colonial leaders responded by implementing poll-taxes and passenger restrictions to limit the number of future arrivals. In Britain, prominent commentators and political leaders noted the contradiction between British aspirations to open China to Western influence and colonial efforts to close Australia to Chinese migration. 'Look at our conduct in Australia', wrote the great British radical Richard Cobden in the midst of the Second Opium War, 'where we are putting heavy discriminating taxes on the Chinese, *avowedly* to keep them out of the colony at the very moment when we are battering down their towns because they won't let us into China on our own terms'.

During the second half of the nineteenth century the issue of Chinese emigration to British settler colonies in Australasia and North America was gradually transformed into a significant imperial problem. The climax came in 1888, when Australian leaders introduced a range of measures designed to prevent the landing of Chinese passengers at colonial ports, precipitating a dramatic crisis in British imperial affairs.

Through the 1880s Western anxieties about a resurgent China had been growing. The Chinese, warned Henry Parkes, the Premier of New South Wales, 'were a powerful race capable of taking a great hold upon the country'. Emulating American attempts to limit Chinese migration via treaty, Australian leaders now demanded that Queen Victoria's government negotiate a treaty of exclusion on their behalf with the Chinese Empire. The colonies, they warned, were teetering on the brink of violence and disorder. If London refused, colonial parliaments would be forced to implement their own anti-Chinese measures – regardless of the impact on British relations with the Qing.

Events boiled over in April when the SS *Afghan* arrived at Melbourne carrying some 268 Chinese passengers. In the weeks that followed the Gillies government in Victoria and the Parkes government in New South Wales urged the British to initiate treaty negotiations with Beijing and began taking steps to prevent the landing of Chinese passengers. Moreover, they worked to ensure the return of the vessels and their human cargoes to Hong Kong, a move designed to undermine faith in the viability of the passenger trade. It would be a 'severe matter to bring a shipload of Chinamen here and then have to take them back,' explained Victoria's Premier Gillies, 'that sort of thing will not be tried a second time'.

Soon all Australia-bound vessels would be reluctant to transport Chinese, lest they ended up bearing, in Gillies words, 'a White Elephant': a shipment of passengers 'they might never be able to get rid of'.

Within days the impact of these events was reverberating around the Pacific. At Hong Kong, shipping firms and local chambers of commerce began protesting the Australian colonies' actions. Before long an array of articles, correspondence, and editorials appeared across the globe, wondering at the impact on Australian relations with Britain and the British position in China.

In London, China's representative Liu Ruifen protested over what he saw as a violation of the Anglo-Chinese treaties. Soon a series of parallel complaints rained down on London over the hardships imposed on British traders and shipowners, as well as Chinese Britons. As temperatures rose colonial leaders also continued to lobby the British government, demanding imperial support for their vision of a white Australia, insulated from the vast populations to the north.

From the imperial perspective, the Australian response to China threatened to complicate efforts to manage that larger 'China question' – the maintenance of British interests on the China coast and of the Empire's position in East Asia. Moreover, the situation raised uncomfortable questions as to the relations between Britain and the colonies themselves. The Australians, wrote Lord Salisbury the British Prime Minister and Foreign Minister upon learning of the repulse of the *Afghan*, appeared to have gone 'stark staring mad'.

For British ministers and officials looking out towards the eastern arc of their empire it must have seemed as if they were trying to reconcile two incompatible responsibilities. On the one hand, they were charged with securing an open door to China, to facilitate the expansion of British trade and influence in an age of intensifying great power rivalry. On the other, they had to contend with the prevailing anxiety of their Australian colonists that the open door might swing both ways, unleashing vast waves of outward migration from China towards the Antipodes.

The British attempt to secure a treaty limiting Chinese migration to Australia failed in 1888. Rather than waiting for the outcome of treaty negotiations between London and Beijing, colonial governments instead came together to devise and implement their own more stringent measures to limit Chinese migration. This was the first attempt to establish a 'White Australia' policy – an ideal which would become embedded in the new Australian Commonwealth after 1901.