**Interactions between Aboriginal people and Chinese people on the Victorian goldfields**

By Fred Cahir and Ian Clark

There is strong evidence indicating that Victorian Aboriginal people prior to and during the gold fields period viewed Chinese people in a disparaging light for from an Aboriginal cosmological perspective they were neither ngamadjidj (resuscitated clans people), as many Victorian Aboriginal people in the colonial period considered whites to be, nor mainmait foreign undesirable Aboriginal people. [[1]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1)

P.E. Costello, a shepherd in the western district of Victoria during the 1840s recounted the first instance that an unidentified Wadawurrung Aboriginal elder encountered a scarecrow, and upon recognition that it was foreign, mute and immutable, he pronounced with some fear 'Mine think it Chinaman'. [[2]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2)

The uneasy notion Costello noted that Aboriginal people had of Chinese people being foreign and not easily placed in their worldview is more apparent in later documents. For instance a newspaper report titled 'Arrival of Strangers' from the Argus in July 1853 commenting on the appearance of exotic animals (monkeys, exotic birds) into Victoria also noted how the arrival of Chinese immigrants: 'excited the attention of the Geelong blacks, who held a public meeting in the road in Moorabool street, where they came to the resolution, after much “yabber”, ... that as they did not understand such changes in public affairs, it would be best not to fraternize with the strangers.’ [[3]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn3)

Further evidence which indicates some degree of Indigenous prejudice is sourced from the Reverend Arthur Polehampton, who spent much time in western Victoria in the 1850s: 'The blacks are said to have a strong prejudice against the Chinese, whom they accuse of being neither black nor white'. [[4]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn4)

Polehampton's view is supported by a number of newspaper reports in this period such as a Ballarat Star article which reported in 1862 on an 'exchange of insults' between an Aboriginal and a Chinese man in Avoca. Four years later, on 1 December 1866, an Aboriginal man (presumably Djabwurrung) at the Moyston diggings, named 'Black Peter' was sentenced to seven days imprisonment for 'assaulting a Chinaman whilst drunk'. [[5]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn5)

Muriel McGivern, in her history of the Rutherglen district, has commented that 'The Aborigines, making their peace with the Europeans, could never bring themselves to like the Chinese. In the earliest days of colonization, when Aborigines were still in a savage state, Chinese often fled when natives were about, the faster if shown signs of the Aborigines chasing them.' [[6]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn6) McGivern's summary of the negative relationships between Chinese and Aboriginal people is somewhat contradicted later in her publication where Aboriginal guidance and assistance in dealing with bushfires [c.1880s] was sought by European and Chinese residents.

'The Aborigines one evening warned Carl Butcher of a bad bushfire approaching from the north. All night the wind screamed and raged furnace-hot. About fifteen tribesmen arrived at the homestead the next morning ... and Carl discussed the fire threat with them. It was decided to make a firebreak at once on their advice, to run it from the orange grove down to the Chinese camp . Carl and the Aborigines, with the Chinese to help, started the firebreak, getting it well down in a triangle; the Victoria swamp tribe was brought up and went into the cart and buggy as the wind grew stronger.’

McGivern goes on to describe how closely the Chinese followed Aboriginal instruction and that by virtue of paying attention to local Aboriginal ecological knowledge the Chinese community had been able to preserve their lives and property from the bushfire.

In the Melbourne suburb of Mordialloc too the Boonwurrung assured Government officials in 1860-1 that Chinese people are a 'peaceable sober people' and 'they were so quiet, and liked them better than the whites.' [[7]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn7) George Sugden's (c.1849-1870) 'Reminiscences of pioneering life in outback stations of Victoria' refers to the worker's camps being populated by numerous Aboriginal and Chinese workers. [[8]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn8)

The mixing of Aboriginal and Chinese workers also extended to the stage where Chinese acrobats (Chin Foo Lam Boo) and Aboriginal performers such as Mongo Mongo and Harry Cardella appeared together in Australian based circus troupes such as Ashton's circus in 1861. [[9]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn9)

Much evidence exists too of Aborigines trading with Chinese diggers on the gold fields, particularly in possum skin rugs and emu eggs. [[10]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn10)

[[1]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1) I.D. Clark and D. Cahir, 'Understanding Ngamadjidj: Aboriginal perceptions of Europeans in nineteenth century western Victoria', Journal of Australian Colonial History, Special Issue Frontiers and Pioneers: Old Themes, New Perspectives, vol. 13, 2011, pp. 105-124.

[[2]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref2) P.E. Costello, Days when the world was wide, SLV MS 12784, c.1850s

[[3]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref3) Argus, 'Arrival of Strangers', 6 July 1853, p. 3

[[4]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref4) A. Polehampton, Kangaroo land, Richard Bentley, London, 1862, p. 249.

[[5]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref5) Central Board of Aborigines [CBA], Sixth Report of the Central Board appointed to watch over the interests of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1869, p. 45. The incident was reported as 'This noble scion, who is called Peter, bears, it appears, a deep rooted aversion towards the children of the Celestial empire; and as the antipathy which possesses him was roused by rum and the unexpected appearance of a Tartar conjointly on the day in question, Peter gave expression to his feelings by striking him in the eye with a brick-hat'.

[[6]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref6) M. McGivern, Big Camp Wahgunyah History of the Rutherglen District, Spectrum Publications, Melbourne, 1983, pp. 72-3, 102-3.

[[7]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref7) M. Stephens, The Journal of William Thomas: Assistant Protector of the Aborigines of Port Phillip & Guardian of the Aborigines of Victoria 1839 to 1867, Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, Melbourne, 2014, volume 3, p.94.

[[8]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref8) G. Sugden, Pioneering Life in Outback Stations of Victoria, MS 301, RHSV, Melbourne.

[[9]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref9)  H. Gilbert and J. Lo, Performance and cosmopolitics: cross-cultural transactions in Australasia, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

[[10]](https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/interactions-between-aboriginal-people-and-chinese-people-on-the-victorian-goldfields/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref10)Public Records Office of Victoria, Inquests, VPRS 24/P0/280, 1053, Na Hock Inquest Deposition Files, 1872, Melbourne. Also see: Argus, 21 July 1864, p. 5.