

The Grey Areas Between 'Us' and 'Them'

By Anna Kyi

When looking at the Chinese protests against discriminatory legislation of the 1850s, it is important not to forget the Europeans who supported their cause.

Together with the petition that the Ballarat Chinese presented to Governor Barkly in 1858, was a signed petition of support attesting to the good character of the Chinese.^[1] This had been signed by forty-three prominent Europeans from Ballarat. Consideration of these grey areas decreases the chances of perpetuating simplistic interpretations of 'Chinese versus Europeans', an 'us and them' mentality. More importantly, the various motivations for this support provide an insight into the factors that enabled some to be more inclusive than others.

Support for the Chinese did not always come from a genuine sense of fairness, in some cases self-interest was definitely apparent. Businessmen and tradesmen who feared for their economic survival if they lost the custom of the Chinese offered their support. This was particularly evident in Castlemaine in 1859 and Ararat in 1861.^[2] Sometimes capitalist interests took a while to surface. Peter Lalor who led the miners in the Eureka Rebellion and was elected a member of the Legislative Assembly, initially opposed the proposed residence tax claiming it 'would affirm the principle of slavery, with the imposition of a license tax on any class of people'^[3], but in 1873, when he was director of a mine in Clunes, he used Chinese miners to try and break a strike. This resulted in the Clunes Riots.^[4]

It would be wrong to suggest that all supporters of the Chinese were motivated by economic concerns. William Henry Foster, Ballarat's Chinese Protector, seemed to demonstrate a more genuine concern. Although he did not believe the miners were justified in their fight against the goldfields license, Foster supported the Chinese in their protests against the immigration poll tax and the residence tax.^[5] He recognised the hardships the Chinese faced when their claims were taken from them and their inability to pay the residence tax in addition to the immigration poll tax.^[6] He eventually managed to help one particular group of Chinese miners, who were working on the Red Streak Lead, win back their claim through a loophole in the legislation.^[7] Foster was just one of several people in Ballarat's civil administration willing to support the Chinese. Is it possible that his actions were generated by a genuine sense of multicultural democracy, acceptance without any strings attached, without having to pander to a dominant culture? This was not always the case with Europeans who supported the Chinese cause: take for example prominent Ballarat identity James Oddie.

Oddie attended the Chinese protests meetings and supported their petitions regarding the residence tax. However, reading between the lines, it is evident that his support and acceptance was dependent on Chinese adopting the practices of the dominant culture and obeying their laws. Oddie was one of the founding members of the Geelong and Western Chinese Evangelisation Society that established its first chapel on Clayton's Hill in Ballarat in 1858.^[8] During the Ballarat Chinese protest meeting against the residence tax in 1857, Oddie along with another European supporter, explained the conditions for acceptance and protection.

... [T]hey assured the Chinese that if they behaved well, there were plenty of people who would see that they should not be wronged. If the Chinese were good subjects as other people, the law must protect them, and that would be the best way to make them better. It was desirable, however that they should have brought their wives with them, and then they might have saved money, brought land, be now growing tea and rice, and live much more happily than at present. They must keep their camps in good clean order, and avoid gambling, especially on Sundays. Let them work hard, and behave well, and plenty of English would be ready to befriend them'. [9]

In exploring these grey areas do we find the genesis of some prevalent attitudes towards immigrants today?

Recognition and exploration of the grey areas can be of great value in breaking down the 'us' versus 'them' barrier that tends to emerge when racial tension flares up. However, it is during these times that many people choose to become blind to the grey areas, those places where certain people don't fit the dominant stereotype and have the potential to undermine it. It's not just that the grey areas are complex; they can also be challenging. They can call into question the simplistic explanations that are often used to justify racial hatred.

[1] 'Petition of the Chinese Residents of Ballarat setting forth the Hardships caused by the Chinese Residents Act', 18 January 1858, VPRS 1189 P0000, Unit 502, File 58/598, Public Record Office Victoria. *Ballarat Times*, 22 January 1858, p. 2.

[2] Storekeepers and Traders Resident in Castlemaine, 'Influx of the Chinese Petition' E -no. 68, *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly Session 1856-1857*, vol. 3, J. Ferres Government Printer, Melbourne. Petition Against the Residence Tax 1859 from the Professional Men, Storekeepers, Mechanics and other European Inhabitants of Castlemaine to Governor Barkly, printed in D. Wickham and C. Gervasoni 1998, *Castlemaine Petitions*, Ballarat Heritage Services, 'Petition of Council Bankers, Merchants, Traders and other Europeans and Chinese inhabitants of Ararat and its Vicinity', 18 June 1861, VPRS, 1189/ 525, File N61/4997, Public Record Office Victoria.

[3] 'Legislative Assembly 25 September 1857, Chinese Resolution', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 28 September 1857, p. 2.

[4] G. Blainey, 1963, *The Rush that Never Ended*, CUP, London and New York, p. 89.

[5] Summary of William Foster's letters to his Father, 4 September 1853, MS 11488, Box 59/1, State Library of Victoria. 'Petition from Chinese For the Repeal of the Immigration Poll Tax' received 11 December 1856, VPRS 3253P, Unit 32, Public Record Office Victoria, 'Petition of the Chinese Residents of Ballarat setting forth the Hardships caused by the Chinese Residents Act', 18 January 1858, VPRS 1189 P0000, Unit 502, File 58/598, Public Record Office Victoria.

[6] 'Petition of the Chinese Residents of Ballarat setting forth the Hardships caused by the Chinese Residents Act', 18 January 1858, VPRS 1189 P0000, Unit 502, File 58/598, Public Record Office Victoria. William Foster, Report for Fortnight ending 30

January 1858, in Letters, Reports and Diaries of William Foster, Chinese Protector, VPRS 751, Vol. 1, Public Record Office Victoria (Ballarat).

[7] 'Court of Mines Monday 15 March 1858', *Ballarat Times*, 16 March 1858, p. 2.

[8] 'Chinese Mission', *Ballarat Star*, 27 January 1858, p. 2

[9] *Ballarat Star*, 14 August 1857, p.2.