

Chinese Goldfields Migrants Make Their Mark on Victoria

By Elizabeth Denny

Chinese migrants brought their culture and their skills to the new towns on the goldfields and made their mark on Victoria in many ways.

That they contributed significantly to the economies of goldfields towns was shown in 1865, when the Dunedin business community eagerly recruited experienced Chinese miners from Victoria to revitalise the Otago goldfields in New Zealand. John Alloo, famous for establishing a popular Ballarat restaurant among other ventures, [\[i\]](#) went to work for the Otago goldfields administration in 1865. He and his Ballarat-born family then settled in New Zealand. [\[ii\]](#)

Chinese entrepreneurs like John Alloo who could liaise between the multicultural populations were often reported on in the newspapers, and are still known today. Men such as On Say and Ah Sing, whose water races and dams were essential to the mining industry, are mostly only known from the mining maps in the archives. [\[iii\]](#)

Chin Kit was another of the many adventurous and entrepreneurial Chinese migrants on the goldfields. He was a well-known interpreter for many years. [\[iv\]](#) In 1859, he and nine other local community leaders signed a petition representing 5000 Chinese residents in Ballarat, protesting the unfair taxation of Victorian Chinese residents. [\[v\]](#)

In Ballarat in 1860, you might have seen Chin Kit riding his short-tailed, brown horse, going off to an interpreting job or to check on one of his mining ventures. [\[vi\]](#) He was an agent for Chinese mining and agricultural workers, [\[vii\]](#) and ran a pub, briefly and unsuccessfully, in Ballarat East. [\[viii\]](#)

He was prosperous enough to marry and raise a family in Ballarat.

Marriages between Chinese men and British women were not uncommon on the goldfields, and there are many Australians today whose ancestors came from China at this time. [\[ix\]](#)

Londoner Sarah Bowman migrated to Ballarat and married Chinese merchant Lee Hang Gong in Creswick in 1869. Unusually for a married woman at that time, she not only owned property but was listed on the council Burgess Roll, the list of property owners who could vote in council elections. Sarah was confident enough to petition the Creswick council for better conditions on the Black Lead Chinese Camp. [\[x\]](#) The Hang Gongs had five children when they moved from Creswick. They travelled to China and back, finally settling in the Northern Territory. Sarah Hang Gong's sister Elizabeth also married a Chinese merchant. Elizabeth Young's family, however, stayed in Ballarat. [\[xi\]](#)

Chinese traditional medicine is a heritage from the gold rush that is still valued by Victorians.

Doctors trained in traditional Chinese medicine came to Victoria with the miners and were popular with European patients, if not with European doctors.

In 1873 Henry Quock Ping settled in Ballarat, treating both Chinese and European patients. Henry applied to have his Chinese medical training recognised by the Medical Board of Victoria so he could legally use the title 'doctor'. The Board refused to register him. [\[xii\]](#) Henry and Lo Kwoi Sang, another Chinese doctor in Ballarat, with the support of the Chinese community in Victoria, took the Board to court.

When this failed, Chinese doctors in Victoria had to rename themselves herbalists. [\[xiii\]](#) Victorians have continued to consult Chinese herbalists and Morag Loh suggests that Chinese medicine was more popular in Victoria than in other parts of Australia. [\[xiv\]](#)

In 2000, with the *Chinese Medicine Registration Act 2000* Victoria was the first jurisdiction outside China to set up a registration system for trained practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

The Chinese who came to the goldfields also brought with them a culture of supporting charitable causes. In Ballarat and other goldfields towns, Chinese residents made substantial donations to the local hospitals and orphanages. Their enthusiastic involvement in fundraising made these events much more profitable and also much more fun.

Chinese kites often flew above the mining towns. In 1872 the Ballarat Star reported "The Chinese residents of Golden Point (Ballarat East) were amusing themselves by kite-flying on Sunday. Some of the kites which were of a curious pattern, went to a great height, and the sounds proceeding from them caused a good deal of astonishment to those who had never seen the performance before." [\[xv\]](#)

All over Victoria, these fascinating Chinese kites brought crowds to charity fundraisers. In 1873, for example, Chinese residents raised money for the Sebastopol Fire Brigade with exhibition flights of their "rare and beautiful kites, on the construction of which they have been busily engaged for three months past." [\[xvi\]](#)

The Ballarat Chinese community was always ready to take up new opportunities as well as make use of traditional skills. In 1892, when Australian Rules football had become a passion on the goldfields, the Chinese in Ballarat began a tradition of very successful, charity football games.

The first Chinese footy match, between the Gardeners and the Miners "in orthodox football costume" was played on the Eastern Oval, with lots of fireworks let off during the game. [\[xvii\]](#)

When mining died in Ballarat in the early twentieth century, the local Australian Chinese community still sustained community values which the Chinese miners had brought with them. In the 1916 Ballarat Benevolent Asylum report, four Chinese–Australian Life Governors are listed, and the Chinese community contribution that year is equal to that of the local banks. Among the individual donors in that year was J Sang, herbalist and son of Lo Kwoi Sang. [\[xviii\]](#)

[i] Interior and exterior views of John Alloo's restaurant in 1855 by S T Gill have been digitized by the State Library of Victoria.

[ii] James Ng, "Otago Chinese Goldminers: factors that helped them survive" pp 101 – 104 Lloyd Carpenter & Lyndon Fraser (eds) *Rushing For Gold: Life and Commerce on the Goldfields of New Zealand and Australia* Otago University Press Dunedin NZ 2016

[iii] Mining Surveyor's Surveys, Ballarat East Division 1871 -1872 PROV VA 3800 VPRS 1019 P0 Unit 1 (available as a digitised record on the Public Record Office Victoria website)

[iv] Argus Wednesday 30 July 1862 p 6

[v] Petition from Chinese Residents of Ballarat against the 1859 Chinese residence tax PROV, VA 475 VPRS 1189/ P0 Unit 522 file 59/M7364

[vi] Star Ballarat Tues 18 Dec 1860 p1

[vii] Ballarat Star Thursday 1 Feb 1866

[viii] Ballarat Star, Monday 20 December 1869 p 4

[ix] Kate Bagnall, 'Rewriting the History of Chinese Families in Nineteenth Century Australia' *Australian Historical Studies Vol 42 number 1 2011 Special Issue: Dragon Tails: New Perspectives in Chinese Australian History*

[x] Elizabeth Denny, "Mud, Sludge and Town Water: Civic Action in Creswick's Chinatown", Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria, issue no. 11, 2012.

[xi] For a family history of Lee Hang Gong and Sarah Bowman, see V Lee with J Godwin and A O'Neil, 'Lee Hang Gong/Sarah Bowman family history research: a progress report', *Journal of Chinese Australia*, issue 1, May 2005

[xii] The minutes of the Board record it's responses to the applications of Henry Quoak Ping and of Lo Kwoi Sang. PROV, VPRS 16389/P1, unit 2 Medical Board of Victoria Minutes

[xiii] Loh, Morag, 1995, 'A country practice: Thomas Chong — herbalist of Bairnsdale, Victoria; his place, his practice, his peers', in Macgregor, P. (ed.), *Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific*, Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne, pp. 15-25.

[xiv] Morag Loh, "Victoria as a catalyst for Western and Chinese medicine" pp 38-46 *Victorian Historical Journal* Vol. 56 (3) Issue: 220 1985

[xv] Ballarat Star Monday 1 Jan 1872 p 2

[xvi] Ballarat Courier Monday 7 April 1873 p 3

[xvii] Leader (Melbourne) Saturday 3 Sep 1892 pp 16 – 17

[xviii] The Fifty-Ninth Report of the Committee of Management of the Ballarat District BENEVOLENT ASYLUM AND LYING-IN HOSPITAL (incorporated) Year Ending 30th June 1916 pp 12- 15