Not so Mug Mugshots: Behind the Portraits of Series B6443

Sophie Couchman
Asian Studies, La Trobe University
sophiec@smartchat.net.au

Historical photographs offer a rich source of information about the lives of Chinese Australians. However, they have largely been ignored by researchers of Chinese Australian history, except for illustrative purposes. Since the late 1970s, theorists of photography, sociology, and history have discussed the problematic nature of the photograph as truthful, self-explanatory representations of the past. More detailed understandings of Australian photographic history have since emerged, but these have not necessarily resulted in the broader and more complex uses of photographs outside this field. (Damousi 2004, p.iv) Scholars of cultural exchange and colonialism have been the one exception. Their studies of colonial photographs have suggested that there exists more complex relationships between the colonist and the colonised. [1] They emphasise the power relationships reflected in imagery and the fluid meanings images can hold within different contexts. By following these approaches to photographic analysis, this paper will explore the meanings that can be drawn from a series of government photographs held by the National Archives of Australia (NAA), series B6443 entitled 'Photographs and negatives of Chinese entering Australia'. [2]

The only information known about the series is that it 'consists of photographs of Chinese entering Australia taken for immigration control purposes'. (NAA, B6443 series notes) It was created by the Collector of Customs, Melbourne, Victoria between late 1899 and early 1901. The series contains 269 photographs of Chinese Australians. [3] However, a close reading of these photographs reveals a great deal more about the series' creation and operation. Such a reading first reveals that this photograph series is the only surviving part of a larger exemption process required of resident Chinese Australians that wished to leave and re-enter Victoria without being subject to the restrictions in the *1890 Chinese Act*. It also offers glimpses of the lives of Chinese who created these photographs. The irony of early Chinese Australian history is that for a group of people who were so closely monitored by the government and press we know so little about them as people.

The B6443 series primarily illustrates the Victorian Colonial government's monitoring and control of Chinese immigration between 1899 and 1901; a short period that precedes the adoption of the *1901 Immigration Restriction Act*. It forms part of the evolution of systems in nation-states world-wide to regulate the movement of their populations. (Torpey 2000) Australian research on restrictive immigration policy has tended to focus on the *1901 Immigration Restriction Act*, with much less written about the practical application of earlier nineteenth-century legislation. (Willard 1967; Huang 1954) The B6443 series provides an insight into the administration of the *1890 Chinese Act* in Victoria and is clearly a precursor of systems adopted under the *1901 Immigration Restriction Act*. It appears to be the first systematic use of photography for immigration identification purposes in Australia, thereby providing a further insight into the evolution of passport and visa systems. Victorian authorities were probably influenced by those in the United States who, drawing on practices of police rogue galleries, introduced identity photographs on Chinese exclusion documentation in 1882. (Gordon 2002, p.42) As in the United States, the types of acceptable photographic portraits under the Australian *1901 Immigration Restriction Act* became increasingly regulated and uniform. Australian prison portraits in the 1890s had already evolved into head and shoulder 'mugshots' that conformed to set standards. Unlike these mugshots, the portraits contained in the B6443 series were taken in photographic studios under the direction of the subject. This suggests Chinese were not yet being treated with the same thoroughness as criminals. Only the numbers, dates, names, and occasional notes (such as return dates and ship names) appearing on these photographs provide any indication of their bureaucratic function.

Format and style of photographic portraits

Figure 1: NAA(Vic), B6443, 1005, Ah Loy

Interpretation of note:
Shanghung, *Xianggang*, *Guangtailong shu*[?], *Meilipanfu*, [?][?][?], *Xinning*. (Sheungwan district of Hong Kong, Guangtailong bookshop [?], Melbourne, village name [?], Taishan [Guangzhou province China])
(left to right, top to bottom)

The vast majority of portraits in the series are in the popular cabinet card format of the time. Fifteen of them are in the economical, slightly older *carte-de-visite* format. Four of the five non-card photographs are photographic prints with no mount or backing. The other, Figure 1, is a photographic portrait of Ah Loy printed on a small sheet of metal [see figure 1]. It is a tintype or ferrotype photograph. (Willis c1980, p.7) Tintypes were introduced into Australia in 1858 but were not popular until several decades later. (Willis 1988, p.48) There are two known studios in Melbourne that produced tintypes and others in rural Victoria, but all appear to have ceased operating by the mid-1880s. (Davies 1985; Barrie 2002; Safier) This process was also popular with itinerant photographers, as it required little capital to establish, the images were quickly and cheaply produced, and they were a robust enough to be posted or mounted in an album. (Leggat 2001) The outdoor setting and picket fence in Figure 1 suggest that it was taken in Australia by an itinerant photographer. The photograph's age is further underscored by the fact that it shows Ah Loy as a relatively young man. However, the Victorian *Government Gazette* reveals that by the time this photograph was submitted to the authorities (1899), Ah Loy was a retired Little Bourke Street merchant. (1899, p.4373)

Figure 1 is also unusual insofar as it also includes an incomplete scrap of paper (that may or may not be part of the backing of the frame). Intriguingly, the characters on this scrap provide the name and location of a business, probably a bookshop in Hong Kong (*Shanghung, Xianggang, Guangtailong shu*[?]) [4]; the old characters for Melbourne (*Meilipanfu*) and probably the name of a village in Taishan (referred to by its pre-1914 name of *Xinning*) in mainland China's Guangzhou province. Given what is known about the nature of Chinese movement to and from China, it is likely that the Hong Kong bookshop named was the organisation assisting Ah Loy in his travels from Australia to Hong Kong and on to his home village in Taishan.

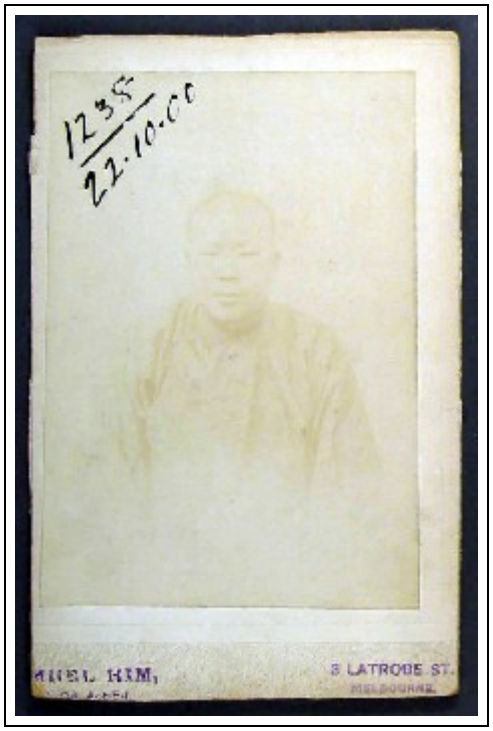

Figure 2: NAA(Vic), B6443, 1238, Ah Young

Aside from three images, the photographs in B6443 are all studio portraits. A considerable range of photographic studios created these portraits, suggesting that applicants did not necessarily concentrate their business with a 'Chinese-friendly' studio. Each of the studios identified on the prints were located in Australia. Many of these studios were near Melbourne's 'Chinatown' area in central Melbourne, with a further two from Tasmania. At least one of the portraits (Figure 2) was taken by a Chinese photographer, Samuel Him of 3 La Trobe Street in Melbourne. This photograph is the only evidence that Samuel Him was a photographer. He was one of the earliest Chinese photographers in Australia. [5] The portraits also contain a mix of different styles. These include full-length portraits with studio furniture (commonly cane) and accessories (such as umbrellas or books); three quarter-length portraits (both sitting and standing), waist-up portraits, and head and shoulder shots. Corresponding with the gender imbalance of the Chinese population in Australia, the portraits overwhelmingly feature men aged between twenty and fifty. However, there are six portraits of young boys (four of these are the children of George Young of Bendigo), one unknown family grouping of a father with two daughters and a son, and two portraits of what appears to be the same woman (Mrs Lih Moon) and her daughter, one in western dress (see Figure 3) and the other in Chinese dress (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: NAA(Vic), B6443, no number (b/n 1234 and 11235), unknown woman and girl - western dress

Figure 4: NAA(Vic), B6443, no number (b/n 1234 and 11235), unknown woman and girl - Chinese dress

Figure 5: NAA(Vic), B6443, 1251, Ah Toy

In most portraits, subjects wear western clothes typical of the period – commonly a hat, a dark suit and waistcoat, and often a watch-chain. (Frost 1996) Only twenty-five portraits feature subjects in Chinese dress [6], and in a further twenty photographs they wear a mix of Chinese and western clothing. As Figure 5 demonstrates, this was commonly a Chinese jacket, trousers, and shoes, with a western hat (there were various other variations). By the turn of the century, traditional dress was also being abandoned in a rapidly modernising China, whilst Chinese influences were finding their way into western dress, notably female clothing. Figure 6 stands out and is worthy of special mention. It is a portrait of William Nean posed on one of the symbols of nineteenth-century modernity, a bicycle, in full cycling attire. It is difficult not to speculate on the type of personality that would choose such a photograph to give to government authorities for identification purposes! Like William Nean, individuals photographed in this series generally chose to represent themselves as confident and modern. Given that these men were generally returning to their home towns in southern China, it is little surprise that they would wish to show off their success.

Figure 6: NAA(Vic), B6443, 1139, William Nean

Operation of the series

Seven photographs are crucial to uncovering the operation of the entire series. Each carries a printed list of exemptions granted to Chinese people under the *1890 Chinese Act* (a consolidation of the *1888 Chinese Act)* with one individual on the list highlighted. The date of exemption and name of individual on the list matches that handwritten on the photograph. These sheets are offprints from the *Government Gazette* which published exemptions from 1889 (just after the passing of the *1888 Chinese Act*) to mid-1902 (when the *1901 Immigration Restriction Act* came into operation). The *Act* covered 'every person of Chinese race' who had not been exempted. Automatic exemptions were granted to Chinese officials, crewmembers, those currently exempted, and those who had been naturalised. Under the *1890 Chinese Act*, the Governor in Council was also able to 'from time to time by proclamation to be published in the *Government Gazette* exempt any person or class of persons from the provisions of this Part of this Act' which could similarly be revoked. The offprint lists attached to these seven photographs in the B6443 series are the product of this requirement. Those exempt from the *Chinese Act 1890* were free to re-enter Victoria without being subject to tonnage restrictions that limited one Chinese person per five hundred tons of tonnage of the vessel.

An examination of the published exemption lists reveals that there is a relationship, though not entirely straightforward, between nearly all the portraits in B6443 and the people granted exemptions under the *1890 Chinese Act*. The lists provide a printed version of the subjects' names, addresses, occupations, the length of their granted exemption and the date the exemption began which can be matched with the names and dates written on the photographs in B6443. Exemptions tended to be granted to people in groups on particular days. In almost every case, the dates written on the photographs in the B6443 series correspond to the date on which the individual was granted an exemption. By comparing names in these smaller subgroups matches can be made, even with generic names like 'Ah Toy', 'Ah Man'. (See Figure 7) Between 27 February 1900 and 18 June 1900, the dates have either not been provided or seem inaccurate. However, as the series is numbered and remains in chronological order, it is still possible to match most of the names on photographs with names in the *Gazette*s. Of the 262 unique photographs in B6445, all but fifteen could be matched with a name listed in the *Gazette*. This fifteen includes three photographs without identification numbers and an unidentified family grouping (it is possible that these four do not actually belong to the original series). Another five photographs have annotations indicating that this was not the subjects' first exemption. It is likely that their exemption may have been published much earlier.

Click here for the table.

It is important to note that not all people who were granted an exemption had a photograph in the B6443 series. Exemptions were granted for a period of 36, 24, 18, 12 or 6 months. The vast majority of exemptions granted were for 36 months. Almost all of those individuals who had been awarded exemptions for less than 36 months did not provide a photograph (only six out of 81 have a photograph in B6443). Most of these shorter exemptions were for 6 or 12 months (over 90 percent). It may have been felt that such a short period would pose little trouble to authorities when identifying these individuals upon their return. Perhaps officials were showing sensitivity towards photographing women and children, given that almost all of those granted six month exemptions were women and children. This could possibly account for the lack of photographs of women and children in series B6443.

Of those without photographs who were granted 36-month exemptions, there appears to be no pattern to those whose photograph was not taken. The list includes: gardeners (19), cabinetmakers and carpenters (7), storekeepers (4), various hawkers (3), cooks (2), laundrymen (2) and a tea importer (1). A number, but not all, are reasonably well-known Chinese figures such as: [Chin] Wah Moon (a Little Bourke Street storekeeper and Chinese medicine wholesaler); the wife of L. Tye Shing (furniture manufacturer in Little Bourke Street) and their eight children; and Yung You, the wife of George Young (mining manager of Bendigo) and their three children. This suggests that the exemption system was still quite flexible at this time. However, it may also be that some of these individuals, like some Chinese Americans, objected to being photographed as criminals were and that their objections were discretely addressed. (Gordon 2000, p.42)

Although the published lists name the people exempt from the *Act* and their length of exemption, the conditions under which the Governor in Council (or his representative/s) granted such exemptions were not tabled in the *Government Gazettes*, nor do they appear to survive in extant immigration files. However, anomalies within the series help to further illuminate how the system operated. Five of the seven photographs with attached exemption lists on them also include a handwritten note. The note on the exemption list attached to Chung Wai's portrait read: 'Handed to the Rev. D. Soong Sam for transmission to Chung Wai

who left for China per S.S. Changsha on 23rd December 1899'. Other people used for transmission of photographs were Rev. Cheok Hong Cheong, Rev. James Moy Ling and Leong Lee. These people were a prominent Chinese Christians in the Victorian Chinese community and were also leaders in the Christian Chinese Union of Victoria. (Couchman 2000, pp. 71-2) The notes on these photographs clearly demonstrate their involvement as intermediaries between the Chinese communities and government authorities.

Of the same seven photographs with exemption lists, six also have a duplicate print in the B6443 series. These duplicates also share similar markings to the rest of the photographs in the series. This suggests that individuals were required to provide at least two copies of their portrait to authorities. One was kept in the B6443 file in Australia, and the other (with the exemption list attached to it) was returned to the applicant, most likely via people such as Rev. Soong Sam and Rev. Cheong and Moy Ling. The applicant then showed it to authorities for matching when they re-entered Australia. A number of photographs in the rest of the series have notes on them indicating the ship the subject returned on and the day they returned. In the case of these six duplicate photographs, it seems that something occurred whereby the photographs were not passed on to their owners before departure (this is certainly the case for five of them) and they consequently ended up back in the file with their duplicates.

Although there is no paper file to accompany the photographs in the B6443 series, two missing files (for Poon Gooey and the Young family) have been located in another series of miscellaneous immigration documents. (NAA, MP56/12, item 6) It is clear from these files that the exemption application process was derived from an earlier naturalisation one. (NAA, A712) Chinese Australians were granted exemption if they were of good character (shown in European character witnesses of high standing and a police report) and had been resident in Victoria for at least four years. The application process firstly required a written application to Governor in Council for an exemption. This included a statutory declaration often witnessed by another Chinese-Australian of standing and two character references. The Governor in Council then obtained a police report verifying information provided by applicant. For exemptions longer than 12 months, two signed photographic portraits were provided by the applicant to customs authorities. If the application was approved, an exemption notice would published in the *Government Gazette*. The photographs provided by the applicant would then be annotated with a sequential number and the date the exemption was granted. One portrait was kept by customs authorities. Individuals signed their name (in Chinese or English) and sometimes the name of the departing ship was written on the portrait. These photographs were presumably consulted when the individual returned to Victoria. The other portrait was returned to the applicant via a 'respectable' Chinese Australian intermediary, such as a Christian missionary. An annotated off-print of the exception list published in the *Victorian Government Gazette* was folded and stuck to the back of the portrait.

This paper has concentrated on the interpretation of the bureaucratic meanings of the photographs in the B6443 series. By seeking to enrich the meagre information currently available about the context of its creation, this analysis not only sheds light on this neglected aspect of Chinese Australian history, it also locates this series within broader developments occurring in modern bureaucracies. However these photographs are more than just bureaucratic data. They were not created by official government photographers, nor do they appear to have been taken with any specific guidelines or requirements in mind beyond the need for a portrait. As such, they can be viewed as self-representations and offer a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which some two hundred and sixty Chinese of varying backgrounds chose to represent themselves in a nineteenth century studio photographic portrait. While they provide clues about the individual's age, wealth and personality, they also raise further questions about the person are behind the portraits.

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EndNotes

1. For a recent example of a range of this research see Pinney & Peterson 2003.
2. This series was originally number MT33/7 but was converted to B6443 in November 2000. NAA(Vic), B6443/1. In 2000 a set of negatives of the original prints was made which are identified as NAA(Vic), B6443/2. Research for this paper is part of a PhD dissertation in Asian Studies at La Trobe University exploring the use of photographs by and about Chinese Australians. The PhD is supported by the Australian Research Council.
3. The series also includes a seemingly out of place photograph of two Indian men (probably Sikhs) in front of a horse-drawn wagon
4. Many thanks to Dr Gao Baoqiang and Professor John Fitzgerald who provided the translation for me.
5. Preliminary research shows that Chinese in Australia did not become photographers until the late 1890s, well after their counterparts in China, Hong Kong and San Francisco.
6. The labels of 'Chinese' and 'Western' are misleading and I use them very superficially here.

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