"Reconsidering Race": How Far has Barry McGowan's "Refreshing Sea Breeze" Blown?

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Abstract: In considering my contribution for this special issue, I kept returning to an article Barry McGowan published in 2004 in *Australian Historical Studies*, "Reconsidering Race: The Chinese Experience on the Goldfields of Southern New South Wales". This article is arguably even more relevant today than when he wrote it. Barry was an archaeologist and professional historian with a valuable insight into the intersection of academic and public history. In "Reconsidering Race", Barry identified a gap between popular impressions of Chinese-Australian goldfields history and those newly emerging within the academy, and argued that the Lambing Flat riots in colonial New South Wales are often elevated to an archetype of Chinese-Australian race relations despite evidence of very different experiences on other significant goldfields such as Braidwood and Kiandra. This research note reflects on Barry's article through a discussion of four examples of how Chinese-Australian history has been interpreted for the public. In it I argue that we need find ways to communicate succinctly the complexity of Chinese goldrush race relations and history for the general public and, in particular, to be cautious when discussing anti-Chinese violence on the goldfields. Finally, I reiterate the need to challenge and breakdown clichéd historical narratives that circulate in popular impressions of Chinese-Australian goldfields history.

Keywords: race relations, Chinese-Australian history, goldrushes, Australian history, public history, professional history, Australian archaeology

Popular impressions of Chinese-Australian goldfields history

> Over the past year or more there has been a refreshing sea breeze passing through the area of Chinese Australian history … This scholarship will contribute to a much more precise and informed discourse on the history of the Chinese people in Australia, particularly in the fields of historical archaeology, material culture and racial identity, and the momentum is poised to continue.[1]

The "refreshing sea breeze" Barry McGowan described blowing through Chinese-Australian history in 2004 in "Reconsidering Race: The Chinese Experience on the Goldfields of Southern New South Wales" referred not just to a resurgence of scholarship in the history and archaeology of Australia's Chinese history but also to new ways of viewing that history. From the 1960s onwards, histories began to be written which acknowledged and explored the role of racism in Australia's history for the first time. The work of historians like Andrew Markus, Ann Curthoys and others spearheaded this ground-breaking research in Chinese-Australian history.[2] By 2001, when I started my doctoral thesis with John Fitzgerald at La Trobe University, I joined a loose coalition of historians who wanted to move beyond race as the principal lens through which Chinese lives in Australia were viewed.

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[1] Barry McGowan, "Reconsidering Race: The Chinese Experience on the Goldfields of Southern New South Wales," *Australian Historical Studies* 36, no. 124 (2004): p. 312.

[2] For example: Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850–1901* (Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger, 1979); Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus, eds., *Who Are Our Enemies: Racism and the Australian Working Class* (Neutral Bay: Hale and Iremonger, in association with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1978).

We sought to build on this earlier bedrock of scholarship, conceding that Australia was a country shaped by both structural and petty racism, but wanted to explore new ways of thinking about Australia's Chinese history.[3] The aim was not to deny the significance of racial attitudes and their impact on Chinese Australians, which are profound, but to examine what else might have shaped their lives—and to consider what the concerns and values of Chinese Australians themselves might have been, not just white Australians. We wanted to find ways to link Chinese-Australian experiences to other Australian historical narratives beyond race and White Australia and to explore the place Chinese Australians had in other kinds of history such as transnational, global, feminist and labour histories, heritage studies, and whiteness studies. The resulting scholarly output has been rich, and it has changed how we think about Australia's Chinese past.[4] Barry's views in "Reconsidering Race" captured the mood and attitudes of many of us in 2004. But, as he warned in this same article, these new understandings and knowledge have yet to "filter down into popular impressions of the Chinese people in colonial Australia, particularly on the goldfields".[5]

I would argue that there is still a significant gap between research in the academy and public understandings of Chinese-Australian history, and I would like to use this research note to open up a dialogue about the nature of this disconnect and the challenges we face in overcoming it. As Barry observed, to varying degrees Chinese are still:

> often portrayed as the hapless and submissive victims of European racial prejudices and violence, subsisting, at best, on poor and abandoned ground. Despite some notable scholarship to the contrary, "digger" society is still portrayed as hopelessly racist, and instances such as the Lambing Flat riots are cited continually as proof of this proposition.[6]

This point is not new to those working in Chinese-Australian history. In fact, it has become so commonplace that the gap between scholarly accounts and popular representations – those appearing on websites, and in radio and television documentaries, exhibitions, newspaper articles, artworks, and works of historical fiction – looms all the more startling. To overcome this gap, historians need to ensure that recent findings in Chinese-Australian history are more broadly known and appreciated outside the academy. We need to encourage those working on public-facing projects to be smart about the hooks they use to draw the public into stories about Chinese Australian lives, helping them to avoid exaggeration and extremes and encouraging the introduction of complexity and diversity.

To illustrate my argument I have selected four cases or examples for closer examination: one relating to general claims found in historical exhibitions and documentaries; the second about

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[3] Sophie Couchman, "Introduction," in *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance*, ed. Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (Leiden Boston Brill, 2015).

[4] For an overview of work published within Chinese-Australian history see: Sophie Couchman, "Introduction," in *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance*, ed. Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (Leiden Boston Brill, 2015). Monographs focussed on Chinese-Australian history published and in publication since 2011: Sophie Loy-Wilson, *Australians in Shanghai: Race, Rights and Nation in Treaty Port China* (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2017); Joanna Boileau, *Chinese Market Gardening in Australia and New Zealand* (Switzerland : Springer International Publishing, 2017); Michael Williams, *Returning Home with Glory: Chinese Villagers Around the Pacific, 1849 to 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018); Kate Bagnall and Julia Martinez, *Locating Chinese Women: Historical Mobility Between China and Australia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, [in publication]).

[5] McGowan, "Reconsidering Race," p. 313.

[6] McGowan, "Reconsidering Race," p. 313.

claims of violence and killing on the goldfields; the third considering my own experience appearing in a television documentary; and the fourth touching on the history of the queue.[7]

Example One: Historical Exhibitions and Documentaries

Let me begin with a concrete example. "Many Roads: Chinese on the Goldfields" is a large digital story commissioned and published by Culture Victoria in 2017.[8] Material on the website is available open access and it is widely promoted and used in Victorian schools. The project was the product of a collaboration of many cultural organisations including the Golden Dragon Museum, the Gum San Cultural Centre and the Chinese Museum, with support from the Victorian government.[9] Many fine historians and museum professionals contributed their time and scholarship, and their contributions stand out in this digital story. And yet even in the best of circumstances, final outcomes can be less than optimal.[10]

The text of the first paragraph of the introduction to the website reads:

> Fleeing violence, famine and poverty in their homeland Chinese goldseekers sought fortune for their families in a place they called "New Gold Mountain". Chinese gold miners were discriminated against and often shunned by Europeans. Despite this they carved out lives in this strange land.[11]

In light of recent historical insights, this orthodox historical framing of Chinese-Australian history is problematic at several points. First, why is it that Chinese goldseekers are assumed to "flee violence, famine and poverty" when we do not attribute comparable push factors to, say, Irish goldseekers? Why do Chinese need a secondary motivation to come to the goldrushes? Why can they not be excited about the prospect of striking it rich like everyone else? Home background matters for migrant miners from every continent, and it is not clear that those coming from China were "fleeing" any more than those from other source countries. Framing Chinese migrants as reluctant or involuntary fugitives constructs them as different from other migrants to the goldfields. This difference is further reinforced by the use of the phrase "New Gold Mountain", a literal translation of the Chinese phrase for the Australian goldfields (新金山). Phrases such as "New Gold Mountain" and "Celestial" are often used to make writing more "interesting", but they have the effect of accentuating the differences between Chinese and other nineteenth-century immigrants, all of whom referred to the goldfields by different terms in their own languages.[12] I am similarly uncomfortable with words such as "influx", often used to

[7] I would like to thank Professor John Fitzgerald, Dr Kate Bagnall and Dr Karen Schamberger for their valuable feedback and discussions in the development of this research note.

[8] "Many Roads: Chinese on the Goldfields," Culture Victoria website, https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/project-acknowledgements.

[9] In the interests of full disclosure, I may also have provided advice for this project in my capacity as Curator at the Chinese Museum.

[10] I might have chosen other examples, some more extreme than this. My intention is not to cast blame on any particular individual, institution or project, but to provide a concrete example of the kind of subtlety that I think is now needed to write about the history of Chinese in Australia.

[11] "Many Roads: Chinese on the Goldfields," Culture Victoria website, https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields.

[12] Henry Yu has deconstructed the meanings of "Gold Mountain" – the term used for both California/United States and British Columbia/Canada (each of which had their own Cantonese names) from which the term "New Gold Mountain" originated – as a phrase which captures "a persistent geographic imaginary", a geographic ideal through which patterns of movement of goods and people revolved, through which dreams and aspirations could be pinned, and "Gold Mountain" stories told. Henry Yu and Stephanie Chan, "The Cantonese Pacific: Migration Networks and Mobility across

describe the scale of Chinese arrivals, as this was also a term used in colonial-era anti-Chinese legislation that restricted Chinese immigration.[13] We need to be wary of adopting the nineteenth-century language of white Australia in our writing as twenty-first century historians.

Further, why is it that Australia is described as a "strange land" for arrivals from China? Few accounts of European prospectors make claims of this kind. Were the Indigenous peoples, eucalypts and kangaroos more familiar to German or Welsh immigrants? Again, this kind of language emphasises Chinese difference, and in emphasising difference suggests that the likelihood of Chinese arrivals turning this "strange land" into a "home" would be more difficult than for other immigrant groups. Why?

We are also left wondering at the end of the paragraph why it might be that Chinese "carve out lives" for themselves in Australia when they "were discriminated against and often shunned by Europeans"? The paragraph implies that, downtrodden by violence, famine, poverty and discrimination, Chinese had little choice but to put up with whatever injustices was dealt them by colonial society. No individual persons are mentioned in the paragraph. Chinese are assumed to operate in unison, as a group, unlike other immigrants. In these ways Chinese come to be constructed, ever so subtly, as "hapless and submissive victims" devoid of personality and agency.

As historians, we also need to be able to capture the complexity of cross-cultural relations on the goldfields in a more sophisticated way than simply stating: "Chinese gold miners were discriminated against and often shunned by Europeans". If we want our work to be included in public spaces – in exhibition text or as sound bites in the media – we need to be able to do this in one sentence, perhaps two. What might such an alternative look like?

I have been surprised at how difficult it is to find a one-sentence statement that accurately describes the place of the Chinese on Australia's goldfields. Challenging a straw-man argument about previous historical writing does not work for a general public that knows neither the history nor the straw men that populate it. Within historical scholarship it may make sense to say that "Chinese experiences of diggings life were more integrated with their European (predominantly British) counterparts than has previously been accepted"[14] or that by "emphasising unrelenting European intolerance and aggression toward Chinese settlers, historians have tended to overlook Chinese agency and the permeability of racial boundaries".[15] The difficulty with these kinds of statements, as many a documentary producer has told me, is that the target audience for popular history has no idea of the historical record that is being corrected.

In attempting to construct a sentence that better describes Chinese race relations on the goldfields, I have selected a sample of statements written by historians and paraphrased them. I hope they forgive me for taking the liberty of doing so.[16] Here are some suggested alternatives

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Space and Time," in *Trans-Pacific Mobilities: The Chinese and Canada*, ed. Lloyd L. Wong (Vancouver: UBC Press 2017), pp. 25–48.

[13] For example: *Influx of Chinese Restriction Act 1888* (NSW).

[14] Keir Reeves and Tseen Khoo, "Dragon Tails: Re-Interpreting Chinese Australian History," *Australian Historical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2011): p. 7.

[15] Alan Mayne, "'What You Want John'? Chinese-European Interactions on the Lower Turon Goldfields," *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 6 (2004): p. 2.

[16] I have no doubt that given the task of writing this sentence, they would come up with a much more elegant and concise alternative.

to the statement that "Chinese gold miners were discriminated against and often shunned by Europeans":

> *Paraphrasing Alan Mayne who examined the Lower Turon goldfields (NSW):* "Chinese prospectors joined a geographically dispersed, democratically volatile, and culturally kaleidoscopic community where life was as much about bickering and ostracism as it was about sharing milk and having a friendly chat".[17]
>
> *Paraphrasing Keir Reeves who explored the Mount Alexander diggings (Victoria):* "Relations between Chinese and others on the goldfields were typified by racism and hostility but also characterised by cooperation and sometimes brutal friendship and also everything in-between".[18]
>
> *Paraphrasing Valerie Lovejoy who looked at the Chinese mining community in Bendigo (Victoria): "*The things that united Chinese miners with others were greater than the things that divided them—all dreamed of making their fortunes, all were migrants living in a harsh environment far from their homelands, and all relied on networks of friends and family to support them".[19]
>
> *Paraphrasing Kate Bagnall about women and families based on her research on the Jembaicumbene goldfields (NSW):* "The goldfields that Chinese became a part of were places where cross-cultural families and communities were forged through physical proximity, geographic isolation, and economic and social co-dependence".[20]
>
> *And finally, paraphrasing Barry McGowan's research on the Braidwood and Kiandra goldfields (NSW):* "On the goldfields Chinese faced tension, aggravation and prejudice, but not unrelenting discrimination and violence, or situations in which they were always the hapless victims".[21]

In this exercise, I have focussed on the New South Wales and Victorian goldrushes in the 1850s and 1860s. There were also goldrushes later in the century in Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Tasmania. While each colony ultimately chose to restrict Chinese immigration in response to the arrival of large numbers of Chinese migrants, when and how this was done varied from colony to colony with the result that the experiences of Chinese in these colonies also varied. And, as Barry argued in "Reconsidering Race", the characteristics of each particular goldrush and each particular goldfield within each particular colony also varied and shifted over time. It is therefore vital that we find ways to communicate this diversity of experience in how we write about Chinese goldrush history for the general public.

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[17] Mayne, "'What You Want John'?" pp. 7–8.

[18] Keir Reeves, "A Hidden History: The Chinese on the Mount Alexander Diggings, Central Victoria, 1851–1901" (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2006), p. 18.

[19] Valerie Lovejoy, "The Things That Unite: Inquests into Chinese Deaths on the Bendigo Goldfields 1854–65," *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria* 6 (2007): p. 16.

[20] Kate Bagnall, "'To His Home at Jembaicumbene': Women's Cross-Cultural Encounters on a Colonial Goldfield," in Jacqueline Leckie, Angela McCarthy and Angela Wanhalla, eds., *Migrant Cross-Cultural Encounters in Asia and the Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 67.

[21] McGowan, "Reconsidering Race," p. 329.

Example Two: The Lambing Flat Riots as Archetype of Australian Race Relations

In addition to writing the complexity and diversity of colonial race relations into our public histories of Chinese in Australia, we also need to write with care and specificity about goldfields violence. This means remaining true to the historical record in ways that avoid both denial and hyperbole. As Barry argued in "Reconsidering Race", "instances such as the Lambing Flat riots" are continually cited as proof that "digger society" was hopelessly racist. The characteristics of Chinese-white race relations on the Lambing Flat goldfields were not typical, yet they "continue to be elevated to the norm, as the archetype of Chinese European race relations in Australia".[22]

The exceptional character of the events at Lambing Flat has long been recognised in mainstream history.[23] In 1979, Andrew Markus pointed out that the Lambing Flat riots were the "largest anti-Chinese disturbance in either California or Australia".[24] In 1973, Ann Curthoys observed that after the most violent of the Lambing Flat riots on 30 June 1861, the New South Wales Executive Council declared martial law and the actions of the miners were "universally condemned", even by newspapers hostile to incoming Chinese miners.[25] To my knowledge this is the only time martial law was declared in response to anti-Chinese agitation on goldfields in Australia, although it was not fully carried out.[26] There was also a keen public awareness at the time that the disgruntled white miners had gone too far. The Chinese interpreter and "Special Commissioner" for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, James McCulloch Henley, reported that: "This roll up differs from all others in atrocities committed and the destruction of property".[27]

The Lambing Flat riots have a distinctive place in documentaries and exhibitions on Chinese-Australian history. With every well-intentioned documentary that is screened and every touring exhibition that pushes the boundaries of historical anti-Chinese violence, the likelihood grows that Chinese-Australian history is going to face its "Keith Windshuttle moment" – a point at which a populist commentator calls out claims of anti-Chinese violence, demands to see the evidence, and in the process challenges some of the foundational claims behind the history of these horrific events.

In *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History Volume One Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*, published in 2002,, Keith Windschuttle argued that there had been a deliberate fabrication about the extent of violence against Aborigines in Tasmania and the number of murders of Indigenous Australians by British colonists.[28] The following year, historians presented the historical evidence, defended their positions, and largely discredited Windschuttle's work and methodology in *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*.[29]

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[22] McGowan, "Reconsidering Race", pp. 313–14.

[23] When Ann Curthoys wrote her thesis in 1976 she cited ten historians who had written about the Lambing Flat riots, the earliest dating back to 1918 and 1923. Ann Curthoys, "Race and Ethnicity: A Study of the Response of British Colonists to Aborigines, Chinese and Non-British Europeans in New South Wales, 1856–1881" (PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1973), p. 312.

[24] Markus, *Fear and Hatred*, p. 41.

[25] Curthoys, "Race and Ethnicity," pp. 355, 357.

[26] By the time troops arrived at Lambing Flat it was no longer deemed necessary and so no action was taken.

[27] "By Electric Telegraph: Lambing Flat," *Sydney Morning Herald,* 4 July 1861: p. 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13067993.

[28] Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History. Vol. 1, Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847* (Paddington, N.S.W.: Macleay Press, 2002).

[29] Robert Michael Manne, *Whitewash : On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Melbourne : Black Inc. Agenda, 2003).

Chinese-Australian history needs to learn from this experience and pre-emptively prepare a rigorous history of anti-Chinese violence. As a result of the attacks by Keith Windschuttle and others on Indigenous history, we now have excellent models and approaches from which to approach this task.[30]

If we are to make claims about Chinese deaths and violence during the Lambing Flat riots or elsewhere, we need to do more than summarise Trove Newspaper search results. We need to interrogate newspaper accounts for the motivations and biases of the informants and newspaper editors of the day and place them in a broader political and social context. We need to draw on a broad range of sources, including Chinese accounts from the time such as petitions and claims for compensation made after the riots.[31] We need to interrogate the silences, as well, and weigh up the possibility that there were deaths that went unreported, as Kevin Wong Hoy did for the Buckland River riots.[32] We also need to understand more about anti-Chinese violence on other goldfields, at other times, and unravel the spectrum of anti-Chinese behaviour that occurred – from murder to physical violence to verbal intimidation – and weigh up the role that race played in these encounters.[33]

Too often public-facing accounts start by describing the Lambing Flat or Buckland River riots and then simply go on to list of other places where anti-Chinese violence occurred, implying that they were of the same scale and impact.[34] Many accounts also separate out, under different subheadings, discussion of racism and violence from discussion of friendly or positive relations. In doing so, we end up in a binary rather than a continuum, where the complexity of what happened between those two extremes, which arguably makes up the bulk of cross-cultural

[30] Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel* (Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc. Books, 2016), pp. 131–157. For an example of the kind of work done see: "Colonial Frontier Massacres in Central and Eastern Australia 1788–1930," https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres.

[31] Thank you to Kate Bagnall for suggesting Chinese petitions and this line of argument, and also to Karen Schamberger who is currently researching these petitions and compensation claims. Paul Macgregor and Juanita Kwok have spoken about the politics behind compensation claims after the Buckland River and Lambing Flat riots; see Paul Macgregor and Juanita Kwok, "The Politics of Compensation for Victims of Racism: A Legal Aftermath of Anti-Chinese Goldfields Riots in Australia's First Era of Immigration Restriction," paper presented at Exclusion, Confinement, Dispossession: Uneven Citizenship and Spaces of Sovereignty, 37th Annual Conference of the Australia and New Zealand Law and History Society, University of Wollongong, 10–12 December 2018, https://cpb-ap-se2.wpmucdn.com/uowblogs.com/dist/6/431/files/2018/07/LawHist-Abstracts-Booklet-qmho8l.pdf, accessed 10 November 2019. Chinese petitions I've seen refer to Chinese being "beaten and otherwise cruelly illtreated" but do not mention deaths or scalping. For example, petition to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly for inquiry into "Alleged aggression on Chinese at Back Creek and Lambing Flat", dated 17 September 1861, quoted in: Carol Holsworth, *James McCulloch Henley : Anglo Chinese Linguist and Advocate in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland* (Bendigo, Vic. : Carol Holsworth, 2011), p. 48. Carol Holsworth mentions a number of petitions submitted by Chinese to the government related to the Lambing Flat riots and some are reproduced, see: pp. 41, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 61, 62.

[32] Inquests were held into the deaths of four Chinese from the Buckland Riots, the verdicts of which found the men to have died from drowning or environmental conditions rather than manslaughter or murder. Wong Hoy argues, however, in his carefully reconstructed "cold case" that the inquest process and investigations into the event left room for distortion and misjustice, and there were reports of twenty Chinese men who were missing and an increased mortality rate in the area over the period. Chinese were also expelled from their camps in the middle of winter, they ran in fear through and across the Buckland River (which was chilled with melted snow), and there were plenty of abandoned mine shafts to fall into. Kevin Wong Hoy, "Murder, Manslaughter and Affray: Making a Cold Case of the Buckland Riot, 4 July 1857," in *Deeper Leads: New Approaches to Victorian Goldfields History*, ed. Keir Reeves and David Nichols (Ballarat: Ballarat Heritage Services, 2008), pp. 136, 143–149.

[33] Andrew Markus' work provides an excellent start. Markus, *Fear and Hatred*.

[34] See for example: "Many Roads: Chinese on the Goldfields: Anti-Chinese Riots," Culture Victoria website, https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/conflict-and-harmony/anti-chinese-riots.

relations, is lost. We need further research on outbreaks of anti-Chinese violence in colonial Australia, but we need to do it in a way that places violence within the context of other kinds of race relations, embedded within local community contexts, specific to time and place. We also need research that examines what happened in communities in the weeks, months and years before and after violent outbursts.

When I ask people who are familiar with the history of Chinese in Australia generally, but who don't have an in-depth knowledge of the academic scholarship, how many Chinese they think died during the Lambing Flat riots, most estimate that hundreds or at the very least tens of Chinese were murdered or died as a result. In truth, the work I have done delving into the historical sources associated with the Lambing Flat riots has raised more questions than answers for me. We may never know the true extent of the violence at Lambing Flat during this period, but it is important that we acknowledge the evidence there is.

For example, most histories of the Lambing Flat riots agree that one person died – a white miner shot by a white police officer during protests seeking to release arrested white rioters on 14 July 1861.[35] There were, however, newspaper reports of missing Chinese, of seriously wounded Chinese near to death, and James McCulloch Henley repeatedly argued that four Chinese had died – three who were murdered and one who died of wounds.[36] But the existing accounts are contradictory. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, with capitalised headlines, that two Chinese had been killed and ten injured after an anti-Chinese riot in December 1860.[37] But then the *Empire* accused the *Sydney Morning Herald* of lying and distortion when a police report, which they published, stated that after interviewing 120 Chinese on the field that no evidence was found of any deaths.[38]

Historian Andrew Markus concludes that while there were claims that several Chinese lost their lives, in the main riot there was no evidence to support this.[39] Carol Holsworth found no records of Chinese burials at Lambing Flat during this period".[40] Only three Chinese deaths were reported in the wider Lambing Flat area in 1860 and 1861, but further investigation is needed to determine the dates and circumstances of these deaths.[41] There are numerous examples of Chinese speaking out in newspapers, petitions to the government, and the courts when they felt they were being unfairly treated, as they did after the Lambing Flat incidences.[42] And we know

[35] Ann Curthoys, "'Men of All National, except Chinamen': Europeans and Chinese on the Goldfields of New South Wales," in *Gold: Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects of Australia*, ed. Iain McCalman, Alexander Cook, and Andrew Reeves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 113.

[36] Untitled, *Sydney Morning Herald,* 5 January 1861: p. 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13050928. "Lambing Flat," *Melbourne Leader,* 13 July 1861: p. 5, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article197520274. Holsworth, *James McCulloch Henley*, pp. 54.

[37] "Great Riot at Lambing Flat Diggings," *Sydney Morning Herald,*13 December 1860: p. 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13050175.

[38] Untitled, *Empire*, 7 January 1861: p. 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article60504705; "The Alleged Death of a Chinaman at Lambing Flat," *Empire*, 15 January 1861: p. 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article60505128.

[39] Markus, *Fear and Hatred*, p. 31.

[40] Holsworth, *James McCulloch Henley*, pp. 54–56.

[41] One man died at Burrowa (not mentioned in the riots) in 1860 and another two men at Back Creek (where violent expulsions did occur) in 1861. Inquests from this area and period do not survive. Thanks to Kate Bagnall for suggesting this line of research and searching for appropriate New South Wales death and inquest records.

[42] For example, protests against Chinese immigration restrictions and taxes in Victoria in the 1850s. Anna Kyi, "'The Most Determined, Sustained Diggers' Resistance Campaign': Chinese Protests against the Victorian Government's Anti-Chinese Legislation 1855–1862," *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, September 2009, unpaginated, http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/provenance/no8/DiggersProtestprint.asp.

that Chinese deaths were reported to colonial officials, even in controversial situations such as the Buckland Riots. We might expect Chinese deaths to be underreported, but without further analysis we do not know the extent to which this underreporting might have occurred.

There are lurid press accounts of mass violence at Lambing Flat, particularly associated with events of 30 June 1861. The 30 June riot is generally agreed to have been the largest of the Lambing Flat riots and the worst instance of anti-Chinese mob violence in Australia's history. On 30 June 1861, following a series of earlier violent expulsions, two to three thousand angry white miners with pick handles and guns, led by a band, marched six miles to the main Chinese camp "looting and attacking the Chinese on the way".[43] Nine hundred Chinese were driven off the goldfields at Tipperary Gully, their tents burnt, and equipment and possessions destroyed. Chinese were beaten and their queues cut off. Rioters moved on and did the same thing to the Chinese camped at Back Gully and when they came across a group of 1,200 Chinese fleeing, they forced them to stop and drop their swags. The Chinese belongings were then looted, and the remains burnt in six to seven bonfires. Then, as reported by Chinese interpreter and "Special Commissioner" for the *Sydney Morning Herald,*[44] William McCulloch Henley:

> Men, or rather monsters, on horseback, armed with bludgeons and whips, with a fiend-like fury, securing the unfortunate creatures by taking hold of their tails and pulling their heads so that they came with their backs to the horse and their heads upon the saddle, and then cutting or rather sawing them off, and leaving them to the fury of others who surrounded them.[45]

This account of white miners on horseback violently cutting off long-haired queues – the plaits which Han Chinese men had been compelled to wear by the Manchu Qing invaders since the mid-seventeenth century – has been read as indicating that Chinese miners died as a result of scalping. And yet, as will be seen, evidence of "scalping" or of deaths resulting from it is highly problematic.

Anti-Chinese riots on the goldfields were horrific enough without resorting to exaggerated claims of scalping and death. Andrew Markus has observed that hostile outbreaks such as the Lambing Flat and the Buckland River riots did not spark a wave of expulsions nearby, as occurred on the goldfields in California.[46] Chinese miners themselves registered a vote of confidence by continuing to return to fields from which they had been expelled, not least because in other situations in Victoria and New South Wales they had found that British colonial law and order offered them adequate protection. Miners in Australia, Markus argues, generally preferred to use political channels to voice their concerns – public meetings and petitions, rather than taking the law into their own hands – and stopped short of taking the lives of Chinese, as they did for example in attacking Indigenous Australians.[47] That is another, more terrible history.

[43] Curthoys, "Race and Ethnicity," pp. 312–72. See also Markus, *Fear and Hatred*, pp. 30–42.

[44] As identified by Gavan Souter in *Company of Heralds* published in 1981 and quoted by Holsworth, *James McCulloch Henley*, p. 56. The *Sydney Morning Herald* also had a "Special Correspondent" at Lambing Flat. It is unclear whether this is the same person as the "Special Commissioner".

[45] "Lambing Flat (from our Special Commissioner]," *Sydney Morning Herald,* 9 July 1861: p. 5, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13068895.

[46] Markus, *Fear and Hatred*, p. 31.

[47] Markus, pp. 40–42.

Example Three: Amplifying Violence

To illustrate how accounts of apparent goldfields scalpings can push the boundaries of evidence in popular history, I offer a personal example of an interview for the television program *Waltzing the Dragon with Benjamin Law*, which aired on the ABC in August 2019.[48]

When approached by the producers for an interview, I explained that I was not an expert on goldfields violence but would be prepared to talk in general about early Chinese-Australian history. After some discussion, I agreed to speak about the Lambing Flat riots. On the day of the interview, I was not as careful in my choice of words as I should have been. Before the interview, I had been thinking about the issue of the newspapers accounts of Chinese being "scalped", which had come up in another project in which I had been involved. In a rather nervous state during the interview I said: "There are newspaper reports that suggest that Chinese miners were scalped but there were similar accounts that say, 'I was there too, and there was definitely no scalping'".

As soon as the words left my mouth, I realised that I was possibly perpetuating unsupported rumours of Chinese scalpings. To add to my concern, the editors quoted only the first half of my statement in the program – "There are newspaper reports that suggests that Chinese miners were scalped" – and inserted a long dramatic pause accompanied by an image of a Chinese man having his queue violently pulled (see Figure 1).[49] When I raised my concern with the producers, they apologised and agreed that they had misrepresented my position, reediting the program to include the full quotation. But the damage was done. Despite my best intentions, I had in fact amplified the most violent aspect of the Lambing Flat riots.

In total, one minute and twenty seconds of *Waltzing the Dragon* was devoted to the Lambing Flat story. As narrator, Benjamin Law noted that Lambing Flat was "the scene of some of the worst anti-Chinese violence in Australian history" (actually, it was the worst) and discussed the problematic relationship that the residents of Lambing Flat (now Young) have with this local history – a history that has been discussed with much sensitivity by Karen Schamberger.[50] I was given thirty seconds to sum up race relations on the Lambing Flat goldfields, but my poor choice of words meant that much of what the viewing audience would remember would be the story of Chinese being scalped.

Reports about the nature of violence against Chinese at Lambing Flat on 30 June were conflicting and disputed. In the first report, on 4 July 1861, the *Sydney Morning Herald* "Special Commissioner" (James McCulloch Henley) "saw one tail, with a part of the scalp, the size of a

[48] *Waltzing the Dragon with Benjamin Law*, television documentary, directed by Alex Barry and produced by Wild Bear Entertainment, which aired on ABC Television on 12 and 13 August 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/waltzing-the-dragon-with-benjamin-law.

[49] This image by S.T. (Samuel Thomas) Gill, "Might verses Right", shows a Chinese miner being pulled by his queue out of a hole in the ground. The European miners do not carry weapons, but one has his fists out ready to punch a group of Chinese miners. In the background Chinese miners are shown running down a hill, one with fists raised and another with a baton in his hands. This drawing is not identified with any particular Chinese expulsion in Victoria or New South Wales. Gill spent several years on the Victorian goldfields and was living in Melbourne during the Buckland River riots in 1854. There is evidence he was in New South Wales in 1861 during the worst of the Lambing Flat riots. E. J. R. Morgan, "Gill, Samuel Thomas (1818–1880)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (National Centre of Biography, Australian National University), http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gill-samuel-thomas-2096/text2639.

[50] Karen Schamberger, "Difficult History in a Local Museum: The Lambing Flat Riots at Young, New South Wales," *Australian Historical Studies* 48, no. 3 (August 2017): pp. 436–41.

man's hand attached",[51] but in his 9 July report he stated that queues were simply cut or sawn off.[52] By 20 July, the *Sydney Morning Herald* was reporting that queues were removed "*with the scalp attached*" (italicised in original) and "That this was done in more than one instance there can be no doubt".[53] These accounts were widely syndicated and re-reported. Curiously, a contrary account from William Piper of Burrangong was not widely reproduced. In a letter to the *Empire* he wrote:

> Having read, in different journals, so many contradictory statements relative to the late monster "roll-up," allow me to offer, as an eye witness, a few remarks upon it. That there was a vast quantity of property destroyed, there is no doubt; also, that a great number of tails were cut off, I don't deny; but, for any one to say that they saw the scalps of the Chinese hanging to poles, or that one of them had his back broken, or his ears cut off, why, it is a falsehood, and it is ridiculous to suppose that white men would be guilty of such atrocities.[54]

We may well question William Piper's faith in the actions of "white men", but he draws our attention to the conflicting accounts which came out of Lambing Flat and accuses "the storekeepers of Lambing Flat" of viewing events in a "different light" to the diggers.

Figure 1. Samuel Thomas Gill, "Might versus Right", Dr Doyle's Sketch Book, c. 1862–1863, John Thomas Doyle & Samuel Thomas Gill

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales
https://search.sl.nsw.gov.au/permalink/f/1cvjue2/ADLIB110327344

[51] "By Electric Telegraph. Lambing Flat (from our Special Commissioner)," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July 1861: p. 4, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13067993.

[52] "Lambing Flat," *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 9 July 1861: p. 5, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13068895.

[53] "Riot at Lambing Flat", *Sydney Morning Herald,* 20 July 1861: p. 8, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13060704.

[54] "Riots at Lambing Flat," *Empire,* 22 July 1861: p. 2, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article60486284.

Other contemporary accounts in newspapers also accused the *Sydney Morning Herald* and James McCulloch Henley, who had been paid by the Chinese of the Lambing Flat area to assist them in compensation negotiations, of bias.[55] David Buchanan, newly elected representative for the New South Wales Legislative Council, supporter of the working class and opponent of embattled Premier Charles Cowper who supported Henley, also accused Henley of lying and perjury on several occasions.[56] George Ogilvy Preshaw, a bank official posted to nearby Yass in July 1861 in the days after the riots, pointed out that the miners had a particular dislike for the *Sydney Morning Herald's* "Special Correspondent" because they were particularly critical of any anti-government actions.[57] Weighing up the evidence of these conflicting accounts requires close attention to their sources, as Ann Curthoys did in her doctoral thesis, where she unpicked the motivations and biases of the newspapers in order to describe how colonial politics and race intersected in different ways in how the Lambing Flat riots were reported in different newspapers.[58]

There can be no doubting that during the Lambing Flat riots, and other colonial riots where Chinese were forcibly expelled from goldfields, that queues were violently removed. But is there evidence to support the idea that Chinese were scalped and their hair trophied in the way scalpings occurred in the United States? Drawing on my own interview experience for *Waltzing the Dragon*, I would caution against referring to the sensational claims of scalping in public presentations, particularly ones where there is no chance to consider the contradictory and complicated evidence.

Example Four: Queues and Goldfield History in the Contemporary Museum

My final example is the case of two plaits of hair (queues) held in the collection of the Chinese Museum in Melbourne. Both are believed to be Chinese queues and both have uncertain provenances.[59] One was purchased at auction and was said, without evidence, to have been removed during the Lambing Flat riots. The other was held within an Anglo-Australian family for a number of generations and was linked by family lore to the Buckland Valley and, less directly, to the violent anti-Chinese riots there.[60] It is far more likely that both have a more prosaic past.

In general, the practice of cutting off queues in Australia had its origins in China and not in local colonial history. The practice dated from the period immediately before and after the 1911 Republican revolution. Before that revolution, Chinese republicans cut off their queues to signal their defiance of the alien Manchu Qing regime which, as noted earlier, had forced the custom on adult Han Chinese males. After the revolution, it was mandatory for all males in China to cut off their queues. Chinese-Australian residents returning to visit their families in China needed to

[55] "Riots at Lambing Flat," *Empire*, 22 July 1861: p. 3, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article60486307.

[56] Holsworth, *James McCulloch Henley*, pp. 54–55.

[57] G.O. Preshaw, *Banking under Difficulties, or, Life on the Goldfields of Victoria, New South Wales & New Zealand, by a Bank Official* (Melbourne: Edwards, Dunlop & Co., 1888), p. 78.

[58] Ann Curthoys argues that unlike most other newspapers at the time the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Maitland Ensign* were alone in their view that digger hostility during anti-Chinese riots in Lambing Flat in January and February 1861 was unjustified and the product of "political agitators and the democratic spirit, illustrating both the faults of liberal democracy as represented by the Cowper government, and 'the brutal temper which prevails among the migratory bands of diggers'." Curthoys, "Race and Ethnicity," pp. 330, 332.

[59] While curator at the Chinese Museum I sent a small sample for scientific testing which confirmed it was human hair of someone with Asian ancestry. They were unfortunately not able to date the samples to any particular period in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.

[60] Chinese Museum collection, 1986.13 and 2011.46.

cut off their queues before docking in Chinese ports or face having them removed forcibly on arrival.

It would be safe to say that virtually every Chinese-Australian male cut off his queue over the first and second decades of the twentieth century, and that many preserved them in special boxes or casks for safe keeping. Even today, many a Chinese-Australian family in Melbourne can recall where grandfather kept his queue. By the 1980s and 1990s, some of these thousands of queues presumably made their ways into museum collections where their fabled provenance was subsequently burnished by reference to more sensational moments in Australian history.

After many years working at the public interface of Chinese-Australian history, I am not at all surprised that fabulous stories should have become attached to the queues in the Melbourne Chinese Museum. The stories that attach to them resonate deeply at the points of intersection where particular streams of Chinese Australian history merge with wider currents of Australian history – specifically Chinese participation in the goldrushes and the place of Chinese in the history of immigration restriction and the White Australia Policy. Whatever the provenance of these two particular plaits of hair, as queues they have become symbols of cultural exoticism and their allegedly violent removal remains a reminder of historical anti-Chinese racism.

These queues with their exotic provenance feed into a powerful popular narrative that begins with Chinese arriving in large numbers, moves on to their encounters with racism and violence (epitomised by the Buckland and Lambing Flat riots) and ultimately leads to immigration restrictions and the advent of White Australia. As this narrative unfolds, Chinese Australians fade from view as if White Australia had extinguished their communities and their histories from the record. In some cases, as I have argued elsewhere, they were still remembered in declining goldfields towns through a photograph of the "Last Chinaman" or in a nostalgic newspaper article about the past glories of a town's Chinatown or temple.[61]

This clichéd public narrative, despite all we have learned about Chinese Australian history, remains remarkably persistent. In this research note, I have unpicked some of the ways in which it is perpetuated – in the language we use, in the ways we contextualise Chinese-Australian experiences, and in the amplification of stories of anti-Chinese violence in colonial Australia. A focus on hostile race relations has become the glue that binds this narrative together. And yet, as Keir Reeves has written, while race plays a crucial role in understanding Australian colonialism, it is not an "overarching theme for understanding the historical consciousness of Chinese-European relations in gold fields communities during the second half of the nineteenth century".[62] It is this narrative, I would argue, that Barry McGowan's sea breeze of research has yet to shift.

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[61] Sophie Couchman, "Making the 'Last Chinaman': Photography and Chinese as a 'Vanishing' People in Australia's Rural Local Histories," *Australian Historical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2011): p. 83; Sophie Couchman, "Tong Yun Gai (Street of the Chinese): Investigating Patterns of Work and Social Life in Melbourne's Chinatown 1900–1920" (MA (Public History), Monash University, 1999), p. 145; Sophie Couchman, "Melbourne's See Yup Kuan Ti Temple: A Historical Overview," *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 8 (2019). Janis Wilton has also written about the contradictions inherent in the relationship between local museums and their collections and the Chinese pasts they seek to remember. Janis Wilton, "The Chinese History of Heritage of Regional New South Wales," in *The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions: Proceedings from the Symposium Held in Taipei, 6–7 January 2001*, ed. Henry Chan, Ann Curthoys and Nora Chiang (Taipei: IGAS, National Taiwan University and CSCSD, Australian National University, 2001), pp. 95–97.

[62] Reeves, "A Hidden History," p. 19.