

# Australia: Revisiting the roots of anti-Chinese racism

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*"There is no racial equality. There is basic inequality. These races are, in comparison with white races ... unequal and inferior. The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman. There is deep-set difference, and we see no prospect and no promise of its ever being effaced. Nothing in this world can put these two races upon an equality. Nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others."*

- Edmund Barton, first prime minister of Australia, speaking in support of the Immigration Restriction Bill, 1901

Racist comments from politicians are so frequent in Australia's history, let alone Australia's present, that they barely raise an eyebrow. The country's racist laws and practices have been so pored over, the racism so established and so obvious, that in 2019 the act of investigating the history of that racism, or trying to explain it, might seem an oddly dated exercise – a quaint throwback to the *Labour History* debates of the 1970s.

This is particularly so in light of developments over the last three decades, which have seen historians of the Chinese-Australian community take a conscious and decisive turn away from studying the roots of anti-Chinese racism in Australia. As Fitzgerald notes, this turn is in many ways a direct response to a challenge thrown down in 1984 by Cushman who argues:

What is immediately disturbing about the writing on the Australian Chinese community ... is that scholars have been less concerned with the community on its own terms, and more with Australian attitudes towards Chinese. This fundamental imbalance is a product of an historiographical preoccupation with explaining the formation of the White Australia Policy.

The consequent shift in telling Chinese Australian histories has proven extremely fruitful. The explosion of important eye-opening historical works published over the last decade or so includes moving studies of everyday life, alongside illuminating accounts of long-ignored radical political organisations and movements. Undoubtedly, the focus on Chinese Australians "on their own terms" has been a welcome intervention into writing a more nuanced, less whitewashed, history of post-invasion Australia.

In essence, the project of writing Chinese Australian histories has deliberately shifted away from looking at "the Chinese" as objects of study by and for an implied white readership, where Chinese people were cast as simply victims of racism, perennial outsiders, and so on, towards one which centred the agency of Chinese Australians and particularly their own sense of Australian-ness. In that latter aspect, the turn was also bound up with the Australian state's official transition from White Australia to multiculturalism from the mid 1970s on.

While racism survived multiculturalism, it's also true that diversity *preceded* multiculturalism. "White Australia" was never as white as the name suggests. In fact, one of the important aspects of the new Chinese Australian scholarship has been to highlight and acknowledge that historical diversity. That's not to say multiculturalism changed nothing. Indeed, one important consequence of official multiculturalism was the fostering of a proud liberal nationalism within migrant communities, particularly among the layers usually tagged as community leaders. Take for instance historian Henry Chan's remark that "[t]here is still much to be done to integrate the Chinese experience more into the national histories of New Zealand and Australia, so that these national histories become more culturally diverse".

If making Australia's national history "more culturally diverse" is the end goal, then it's not a particularly radical project. It is fine in so far as it helps chip away at the mountains of whitewashed fiction that have passed for historical fact in this country, starting at the lie of *terra nullius*. But the modern Australian state, a leading purveyor of racism on the world stage, paradoxically draws a degree of strength and identity through presenting itself as the very model of harmonious diversity. Hence, celebrating Australian diversity without simultaneously highlighting and explaining Australian racism is a troubling exercise in national myth-making.

A *radical* approach to Chinese Australian history must therefore tackle racism head-on. The purpose is not to paint an inaccurate and reactionary picture of constant racial conflict among the supposedly xenophobic masses (a staple trope of right wing historians – except when they're *denying* any conflict between colonisers and Aboriginal peoples), but to acknowledge the reality of both conflict *and* solidarity. In other words, while uncovering the true history of diversity and celebrating the often neglected traditions of anti-racism, we must also focus on explaining why racism runs deep in the very bones of the Australian nation state, and why official multiculturalism has failed to cure it. Otherwise, what does one say to the many Chinese Australians now confronting the re-emergence of virulent anti-Chinese racism right here in their multicultural home?

In 2018, politicians of all stripes voiced support for Clive Hamilton's book *Silent Invasion*, with its calls to treat ethnic Chinese people in Australia as a sinister fifth column in a war that has apparently already begun. This is a remarkably familiar fear among Australian politicians throughout history. Its persistence should remind us that we cannot ignore the roots of anti-Chinese racism and the White Australia policy if we seek to understand and challenge it. As Couchman astutely notes, there is need for:

nuanced studies that are able to embrace the inclusion and accommodation of Chinese immigrants into Australia without denying their ongoing simultaneous exclusion. Attention needs to be paid to how this balance between inclusion and exclusion shifts over time and according to different circumstances.

Today Australia has no explicitly anti-Chinese laws. At the same time though, respectable media outlets and ASIO frequently suggest there is some sort of national security problem in the fact that 170,000 Chinese international students live here. We're also told that Chinese international students are to blame for overcrowded public transport, or that cashed-up Chinese investors are responsible for today's historic and generational crisis in housing affordability.

The housing question in particular highlights the prevalence of anti-Chinese racism. In 2016-2017, investment from mainland China into Australian residential property was \$15 billion, while investment from North America was not far behind at \$14 billion. But only Chinese investment gets headlines. Moreover, according to research from leading business analysts, the impact of Chinese

foreign investment on property prices in recent years has been practically zero. This racism has consequences. A comprehensive 2018 study found a staggering increase in the instances of East Asians reporting discrimination in the housing market.

As imperialist tensions heighten between the USA and China, we can expect to see an increase in anti-Chinese racism in all these forms and more. This has precedent, because imperialist concerns and strategic agendas have always driven anti-Chinese racism in Australia. Unfortunately, historians tend to disregard this in their quest to locate the impetus for the White Australia policy in either the alleged material needs or prejudices of the Australian working class.

For all these reasons the old debates about White Australia shouldn't be laid to rest too easily, especially not by the far left. We need to once again revisit the questions of *what* the purpose of the White Australia policy was, *why* it persisted for so long, *why* Chinese people were such a focus, and *whose* interests all this racism served. In essence, you can't understand Australian racism without understanding its roots in Australian capitalism. To put it more clearly, we need to understand that the struggle against Australian racism stands no chance unless it is also a struggle against the Australian capitalist class and its state.

Before going further, it is necessary to make a qualification regarding terminology. I'm using the term Chinese Australian because it is an accepted convention, but it's not without its own ambiguities. As Kwok points out, the category "Chinese Australian" is problematic, reminding us "of a recurrent tension between 'Chinese' and 'Australian' as discrete cultural nations and the ease with which these concepts can be reduced to labels and generalisations".

As revolutionary socialists and therefore internationalists, we have no particular aspiration to defend the existence of an "Australian" identity. But we understand why oppressed communities within this country would want to challenge the idea that they aren't and could never be Australian. Describing yourself as Chinese Australian can be a proud expression of identity in the face of systematic racism, and it can be an acknowledgement of both inclusion *and* exclusion.

## **Australian racism: more than just divide and rule**

Racism, like all oppression, survives so long as it facilitates exploitation and domination. It is not just a set of ideas that form for no reason and spread in defiance of all logic, but is rooted in material conditions. Organised and systemic racism first emerged with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and has since justified colonialism and genocide, cohered people behind imperialist wars, created scapegoats for capitalism's myriad failings, and allowed capitalist ruling classes to maximise their exploitation of labour power by dividing workers into hierarchical and hostile categories. Peter Alexander, writing in 1980s Britain, lays out one of the best brief explanations of racism, identifying not only its historical roots in capitalism, but its evolution *with* capitalism:

Racism itself took shape in the course of the development of capitalism ... [and] has assumed three successive forms, the racism of slavery, the racism of empire, and anti-immigrant racism.

In the nineteenth century Australian colonial context, the pervasive racism was not an expression of some innate xenophobia, but was an expression of agendas being pursued by the colonial ruling class. In his 2006 doctoral thesis, Phil Griffiths articulates a clear analysis of what this means. He focuses on the period 1876-1888, when the pre-Federation Australian ruling class were taking their most significant steps towards what would soon become enshrined as the White Australia policy.

Griffiths identifies three particular agendas the ruling class was pursuing.

Their first, and perhaps primary, concern was a strategic one. The colonial ruling class was driven by a relentless fear of China's capacity to threaten British control, and then more loosely "white" or "Australian" control, over this continent that Britain itself was still in the process of stealing from its Indigenous owners. The white population was concentrated in isolated pockets, mostly along the south-east coast of this enormous continent, and the ruling class lived in terror that one day a rival colonial power would take the north. And despite having been occupied and carved up by European powers, China through the nineteenth century remained the biggest and most militarily advanced power in the Asia Pacific region (at least until the rise of Japan in the 1890s). Australia's rulers also assumed that even if China's seizure of the continent couldn't be accomplished by military force, it could easily be achieved by the slow implantation of enough Chinese people to form a future fifth column.

Articulations of this fear can be seen across the centuries in the constant invocation of a "Chinese invasion". In the nineteenth century it's seen in countless newspaper cartoons, but perhaps most brazenly in the comments of politicians. For example, in 1879 when NSW premier Henry Parkes introduced a new round of Chinese exclusion laws, he justified them by reference to the Chinese emperor's alleged plot to colonise Australia. Parkes even ordered customs officials to interrogate all Chinese people they encountered, so as to gather intel on this mythical invasion plan.

We see the same racist trope expressed today in Hamilton's *Silent Invasion*, with its distrust of Chinese students, cleaners, and even of those granted refuge here after the Tiananmen Square massacre - who he claims "would become some of the most effective agents of influence in Beijing's campaign to transform Australia into a tribute state".

If the ruling class's first agenda was a strategic one, the second agenda Griffiths identifies was "the minimisation of indentured 'coloured labour', so that a modern, industrial economy could be built". Sections of the ruling class, particularly in Queensland's pastoral sector, benefited from exploiting indentured workers and "black-bird" slave-labour on the plantations. This put them at conflict with the rest of the Australian ruling class who wanted to exclude "coloured" labour because:

[a] century of anti-slavery agitation meant that such a model represented an economic, social and political threat to those who wanted a society based on free-labour capitalism and parliamentary rule. It would also have consigned such societies to economic and social backwardness, producing simple commodities instead of advanced manufactures and other sophisticated products.

Rather than address this by abolishing slavery and indenture, and giving "foreign" workers equal rights with those already living here, Australia bared its racist teeth by attempting to ban the workers who'd been the victims of these practices. They even left perfectly intact the legal infrastructure for indenture and slavery *as a practice* despite its supposed abolition in 1901. Indentured Chinese labourers were, for example, common in Melbourne's hospitality sector in the 1950s, while indentured Asian labour persisted in Australia's pearl-shelling industry until well into the 1970s. Moreover, a moment's reflection on the nature of Australia's twenty-first century migrant work visas brings to light glaring continuities in the way Australian capitalism exploits migrant workers and bonds them to particular employers.

Griffiths identifies the third ruling class agenda behind White Australia as "the construction of an 'homogeneous' population, both demographically and culturally". This refers not to their fears of

creating a potential fifth column, but to their aim of maximising bonds of ideological and cultural cohesion so as to better *discipline* the working class:

Chinese people were the major group regarded as unable to be assimilated into Australia's British culture. Chinese people were not Christian and could not, it was feared, be disciplined using the ideological methods used on people of British origin. A large Chinese population would threaten existing political structures and techniques for social control. Chinese camps were notorious for providing a space for "larrikins" and prostitutes. Chinese people were disciplined by their own secret societies which raised the prospect of alternative centres of power. To admit large numbers of Chinese to British-Australian nationality would undermine the effect of existing nationalist and racist ideologies on the white population and necessitate the construction of new nationalist and class collaborationist ideologies.

In other words, a key aim was to forge a national identity that would bond workers ideologically with their exploiters and the state. Other writers do place anti-Chinese racism in the context of fostering a national identity, but tend to trivialise the top-down nature of the process. Instead they depict an innate hostility to difference that exists independently of the ruling class' material and ideological agendas. Fitzgerald for example rightly dismisses the "clash of cultures" narrative, but explicitly replaces it with a "popular racism", pointing out that it was Chinese dress and customs, that "marked them out for comment and caricature". But this misses the point. The creation of an Australian identity hinged on the ruling class' conscious promotion of racism. There are two aspects of this. Firstly, it was about consolidating British control of the physical space, through excluding Chinese people whose loyalty was suspected to be with a rival state and whose culture allegedly made them impossible to discipline. Secondly, it was about undermining class consciousness and class identity. Again, most historians get this second aspect wrong, arguing the White Australia policy represented a *gain* for the white working class despite it uniting them with their own exploiters.

Perhaps the best illustration of this dynamic comes from the very man who drafted the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, Australia's first attorney general, Alfred Deakin. In his parliamentary speech supporting the Bill, his references to "they" and "us" should be read as meaning Chinese people and white people respectively, while "sectional differences" obviously means class conflict:

It is only necessary to say that they do not and cannot blend with us; that we do not, cannot, and ought not to blend with them. This was the motive power which swayed tens of thousands who take little interest in contemporary politics – this was the note that touched particularly the Australian born, who felt themselves endowed with a heritage not only of political freedom, but of an ample area within which the race might expand, and an obligation consequent upon such an endowment – the obligation to pass on to their children and the generations after them that territory undiminished and uninvaded. A coloured occupation would make a practical diminution of its extent of the most serious kind. It was this aspiration which nerved them to undertake the great labour of conquering the sectional differences that divided us.

Two years later, during his successful campaign to become prime minister, Deakin made an even more explicit connection between the White Australia policy and the aim of smashing union power:

You probably believe that a white Australia is secure. I hope it is, but it won't be secure unless a vigilant watch is kept upon proposals to tamper with it ... The next necessity for a white Australia will be to pass the Arbitration Bill, to prevent strikes, and lock-outs ...

Deakin understood that class struggle undermined class collaboration and national identity. He expressly defines "strikes and lockouts" as a threat to White Australia. While compulsory arbitration, which forced unions off the picket lines and into the courts, is often lauded as a victory for the union movement, it actually aimed to severely reduce our capacity for action. When Deakin identifies this as a "necessity for a white Australia", he illustrates just how class conscious the white Australian ruling class were.

The ruling class agendas that underpinned White Australia weren't the only path Australian capitalism could have taken. But for the ruling class in general, notwithstanding a few sectional disagreements, there was a certain horrible logic to Chinese exclusion. This is why the White Australia policy was proudly supported by every political party that ran seriously for Parliament. It's important, and accurate, to point out that the ALP was the party of White Australia. But so too were the Free Trade Party, the Protectionist Party, and later the National Party, the Country Party, the United Australia Party and of course the Liberal Party. Every government and every opposition between 1901 and 1965 declared support for White Australia, and it is worth noting that most of those governments were *not* of the ALP. This is not to excuse the ALP or to deny its role in propagating racism, but to illustrate the unassailable centrality of the White Australia policy to Australian capitalism. The policy was non-negotiable. It's easy to end a survey there, and many historians do, but this misses a key piece of the story. Because outside the cesspit of parliamentary politics, there was always at least some organised political opposition to anti-Chinese racism.

## Opposing White Australia: a few telling episodes

As early as 1889, the Australian Socialist League, publishers of Australia's first regular socialist paper, celebrated that "[t]he world is my country ... [and] The labour movement appears to be breaking down all national barriers and distinctions, and anything that tends to maintain them is toryism". This was not just wishful thinking; the group campaigned, at least initially, against the anti-Chinese racism that was so connected with the Labor Party and hence with the unions, explaining in 1887 that:

Labor agitators are declaiming against the "yellow agony"; and worst of all, the members of our trades unions are allowing themselves to be borne upon the crest of this wave of jealous fear ... The workers of the colonies are falling out as to who is to do the work, instead of considering who should share the profits.

But by 1898 the Australian Socialist League itself had fallen in behind the Chinese-exclusion laws, as the party became focused on parliamentary elections in a period of deep downturn in class struggle following the defeat of the Great Strikes. This rightward shift prompted a split, with the anti-racists leaving to form the International Socialist Club *precisely* over the question of anti-Chinese racism. Later came, of course, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Communist Party, and other organisations of the far left.

Meanwhile, a number of Chinese organisations were outspoken in their opposition to the anti-Chinese laws. Unfortunately, the loudest Chinese voices were those who were rich and spoke English. Their actions frequently involved throwing working class Chinese under the bus. Most

famously, in 1879 three prominent and extremely wealthy Chinese Melbourne merchants, Lowe Kong Meng, Cheok Hong Cheong and Louis Ah Mouy published an extensive pamphlet *The Chinese Question in Australia*. Rather than tackling the issue of racism head on, they focused on Australia's breaching of the rules of the British empire, and emphasised the importance of trade and commerce:

This, then, is the position of the Chinese in Australia, relative to British colonists. By a treaty forced upon his Imperial Majesty, our august master, your nation compelled him to throw open the gates of his empire to the people of Western Europe. In return, you bound yourselves to reciprocity. The freedom to come and go, to trade and settle, which you insisted on claiming for yourselves, you also accorded the subjects of his Imperial Majesty. He has fulfilled the first part of the compact, and the trade of Great Britain with China has trebled during the past fourteen years, to say nothing of the indirect commerce transacted with that country via Singapore and Hong Kong.

But this was *not* "the position of the Chinese in Australia", as though they were an undifferentiated whole. In reality, the Chinese Australian community was divided over White Australia, and class divisions often influenced positions. Nobody was ever going to haul Kong Meng from his 86-hectare Malvern mansion and deport him. For Kong Meng the exclusion laws were only bad insofar as they also made life harder for wealthy figures like himself.

Other Chinese merchants were even more explicit. In fact, as Shirley Fitzgerald notes, during the 1878 highpoint in anti-Chinese agitation, 30 of Sydney's most respectable Chinese merchants signed a disgraceful and self-serving petition to the NSW government explaining that they had "no desire to encourage any undue influx of Chinese, or to prevent restrictions" and that they would "submit without the least complaint" to any impending anti-Chinese laws, including if necessary "the utter prohibition of Chinese immigration". Later that year, when white seamen on the Australian Steam Navigation company took their notorious anti-Chinese strike, wealthy Chinese merchants of Sydney launched a petition insisting "None of us have ever encouraged Chinese immigration. None of us have any intention either to favour or resist any such immigration". The ASN anti-Chinese strike was supported by most of the Australian establishment, but a few weeks later, when the Chinese seamen of the same company staged their own strike, in pursuit of equal pay and conditions with ASN's white employees, they were arrested and faced court. Predictably, there seems to be no evidence that any of these wealthy Chinese merchants, so fond of writing lengthy pamphlets decrying their own treatment at the hands of White Australia, had anything at all to say in defence of the Chinese seamen risking jail and deportation in their struggle for equality and against racist discrimination.

Even with Federation and the enshrining of official White Australia policy as Commonwealth law, the class distinctions were apparent:

At the time it was being debated in Federal Parliament, Sydney's two Chinese newspapers gave it scant attention. Once again, their focus was on self-interest and the merchants were least affected by the Act. When it became clear that return visits home were being made more difficult for many workers, the *Chinese Australian Herald*, which appealed more to ordinary Chinese, ran a protest on this issue, but the merchant-oriented *Tung Wah Times* did not even discuss it.

In 1903, two years after the laws passed, another rich Chinese merchant, Mei Quong Tart, famously wrote a letter directly to prime minister Edmund Barton. Quong Tart's concern was that rich Chinese like himself were having their trade hampered by the dictation test and the poll tax, and

should therefore be granted exemption certificates. But he had no wish to see these exemptions given to working class Chinese people:

We do not ask that certificates be granted to others who may have lived here equally long, but through whose habits during their term of residence may have become undesirable. As before stated all reputable Chinese, in any station of life, have no difficulty in procuring letters of recommendation from well known public men, and leading tradespeople, and in these cases where there can be no doubt as to their bona fides, we hope that there may be no difficulty in the way of Domicile certificates being granted.

The idea that Australia's Chinese community was united in opposition to White Australia is a myth. Historians tend to pay disproportionate attention to the objections of the Chinese government or from the few wealthy Chinese Australians who voiced self-centred concerns on the matter, while marginalising the resistance of Chinese workers and downplaying the collaborationist attitudes of the Chinese Australian elite. Hence, a truer picture of the dynamics around White Australia clearly indicates that wealthy Chinese Australians in general were mostly concerned with protecting and extending their own capacity to live and profit here, and were often hostile to the immigration of Chinese workers precisely because they saw their own prestige tarnished by association. The most steadfast Chinese resistance to White Australia was to be found then among the radical elements of the Chinese Australian working class, the very people whose reputation has been the most slandered and whose supposed "cheap" labour is frequently misidentified as the driving force of anti-Chinese racism in Australian history.

## **Chinese workers and the "cheap labour" stereotype**

The Australian ruling class had many reasons to foster anti-Chinese racism, but one constant feature has been the stereotype of Chinese workers as "cheap labour". Here, Australian capitalism was drawing on racist anti-Chinese stereotypes that had simultaneously evolved in much of the European colonial sphere, including South Africa and New Zealand, but also in the independent republic of the United States. All of these countries and more were passing Chinese exclusion laws in the same period as the Australian laws, and all of their respective ruling classes encouraged and quoted each other in parliaments and in the press. Despite their different contexts and their different strategic agendas, these ruling classes all took advantage of this stereotype and ruthlessly propagated it.

In Australia the capitalist class used this stereotype, and the laws it justified, as a weapon against the workers' movement in two ways. On the one hand, many employers certainly *did* try to use Chinese workers as cheap labour, or even directly as strike-breakers. And plenty more employers who didn't probably *threatened* to do so, in the same way that employers today maintain discipline by threatening to outsource, offshore or casualise. Hence this desire to use Chinese workers was not because they were Chinese as such, but because the employers believed their own racist lies and assumed these workers were submissive and non-union. They were wrong, and in fact Australian history is marked by frequent explosions of rebellion by Chinese workers, and even the building of significant Chinese revolutionary organisations. The travesty is that much of this history has been overlooked because it counteracts the accepted narrative – which is itself based on the "cheap Chinese labour" stereotype. It should go without saying, Chinese workers were never content receiving lower wages than white workers, and they resisted this discrimination relentlessly. At times, militant Chinese workers in Australia fought for, and won, wages that were actually *higher* than those of their white counterparts.



But the idea of “cheap Chinese labour” was also a weapon against the working class in a less direct way. Its currency weakened the workers’ movement by directly dividing it into two hostile camps. This in turn encouraged workers, both Chinese and non-Chinese, to see their own interests as somehow bound up with the interests of their own employers. The bosses clearly recognised this. For example, while the despicable role of union officials from the United Furnishing Trades Society is well-discussed, it’s seldom highlighted that when they sat on the leadership of the Anti-Chinese League those union officials were sitting alongside some of the industry’s most wealthy employers. Furthermore, the clear intent of many of the Chinese restrictions that the ACL demanded was to protect those employers’ market share – nothing at all to do with the wages of the workers involved. Markus even notes that in 1879 when W.E. Murphy, former President of the Cabinetmakers Union, helped initiate the Anti-Chinese League, his own union had already collapsed and he was not yet Secretary of VTHC. In other words, it’s not clear exactly what Murphy represented in 1879. Markus adds that

at the same time the men and masters engaged in the furniture trade had banded together to form the Victorian Furniture Manufacturers and Employees’ Trade Protection Association. The object of the organisation was to “retrieve and maintain the furniture trade in the hands of the Europeans by every legitimate means”.

This cross-class dynamic was also felt among Chinese cabinetmakers, despite their being far more organised and militant than their white counterparts. From the 1880s through to their brilliantly successful strike in 1903, the Chinese cabinetmakers in Melbourne forged one of the most heroic stories in Australian union history. But several factors combined to shape their path. First, they were met by hostility from the non-Chinese cabinetmakers’ union. Second, after 1901 they were organising amid a constant tightening of the White Australia policy. Third, and in a generally positive development, China itself was witnessing a growing sense of Chinese nationalism as an anti-colonial movement began to take form. In this context, and with no sense of class solidarity being offered to them, it’s hardly surprising to learn that around 1909 (just two years before the downfall of the decrepit Manchu dynasty) these militant Chinese workers in Melbourne dissolved their union into a cross-class industry association with the very employers whom they’d previously driven to the wall. This is a familiar and disastrous pattern. Far from being a sign of the strength of the workers’ movement, the anti-Chinese campaigns undermined class identity and solidarity in the extreme, while forging unity with the employers.

At heart, it was the ruling class pushing anti-Chinese racism, not the working class. But many union officials found they could agitate successfully and easily around Chinese exclusion *alongside* employers, rather than doing the hard work of organising class struggle *against* them. The union officials existed in a national framework and often embraced the national project, including Chinese exclusion. Hence when the motion to establish an Anti-Chinese League was put to Victorian Trades Hall in December 1878, the seconder, a “Mr Miller”, acknowledged that “cheap labour” wasn’t even the issue:

He had heard some of his fellow workmen say they would have no objection to Chinese coming into the colony if they would agree to work only for the same wages and the same hours as Europeans; but he would not agree to that as he considered the Chinese had no right in this land.

The Victorian government’s racist furniture stamping laws, in place from 1896 until 1963, offer a useful insight. Premised on the false claim that Chinese cabinetmakers’ wages were so low that they threatened white wages, the laws stipulated that every piece of furniture produced for sale in

Victoria must be stamped to indicate the race of the workers who made it, either “Chinese labour” or “European labour”. If a single set of Asian hands had been involved, then the “Chinese labour” stamp was compulsory. It’s frequently argued that this was an outcome of white cabinetmakers bending the government to their will. In fact, Victorian politicians had toyed with the idea for several decades, and the main agitation from outside parliament came from the cross-class alliance of manufacturers and union officials. Certainly, there seems no record of white cabinetmakers *ever* threatening to strike over the matter, and the “campaign”, such as it was, mostly seemed to involve union officials writing letters to the editor of *The Argus*. Interestingly *The Argus* occasionally took Victorian MPs to task over the question, pointing out in a scathing article in 1885, some eleven years before the laws finally passed, that:

There is no evidence whatsoever that the Victorian working man demanded or expected such a paltry and futile piece of race persecution as the Chinese furniture brand.

## Laws to exclude “certain immigrants”

The unfederated Australian colonies passed their first anti-Chinese laws some decades earlier, in the 1850s. This was a period between the two Opium Wars – both of which saw Britain and its allies destroying whole cities and seizing Chinese territory like Hong Kong.

At this time, authorities in the newly declared colony of Victoria were confident and flush with gold rush revenue, but were shaken to their core by the 1854 Eureka rebellion. In the following year, they passed Australia’s first anti-Chinese law. *An Act to Make Provision for Certain Immigrants* (a.k.a. the *Chinese Immigration Act*) established a £10 tax on “certain immigrants” who arrive by boat and imposed a limit on the proportion of such immigrants who could be given passage to Victoria on any single vessel. To avoid confusion, the law notes that “the word ‘Immigrant’ shall mean any male adult native of China or its dependencies or of any islands in the Chinese Seas or any person born of Chinese parents”. Governments in South Australia and New South Wales quickly replicated the law.

Some explain this sequence of events by claiming the impact of the Eureka rebellion forced the Victorian government to concede most of the diggers’ demands including restrictions on Chinese immigration. There are serious problems with this view. First, as Small points out:

In Victoria’s gold rush period, the first recorded voice raised against the Chinese was not a digger orator holding forth atop a tree stump, but William Westgarth, founder of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce, who rose in Victoria’s infant Parliament in January 1853 to ask “whether it was the intention of the Government to adopt any measure for the exclusion of such population”, and to ensure they “or any other inferior race” were not “chargeable to the State”. Westgarth was speaking before there was any significant influx of Chinese, and a year before the first anti-Chinese violence recorded in the secondary literature.

In fact, the documented demands of Eureka rebels themselves don’t include any racist immigration restrictions, and accounts of the period are peppered with instances of leading diggers arguing *against* anti-Chinese racism.

Second, though it’s hard to find concrete evidence of Chinese diggers participating in the Eureka rebellion itself, there is a copious and clear record of many Chinese actively participating alongside

non-Chinese diggers in other pro-democracy struggles on the goldfields, most notably the massive Red Ribbon Rebellion centred around Bendigo in 1853, the year before Eureka.

Third, as Kyi notes, the law itself went well beyond even the anti-Chinese proposals that had been proposed by the *Commission into Conditions of the Goldfields*. The commission itself had been established in response to the Eureka rebellion, and consisted of half a dozen sitting or former MLCs – including William Westgarth himself. Although the Commission report argued for restrictions on Chinese, the report's transcripts of witness questioning includes some remarkable material. Time and again, the commissioners raise the issue of Chinese diggers without any prompting from the witness, in a clear attempt to provoke anti-Chinese comments. It occasionally works, but for the most part the respondents dismiss it with palpable confusion, as in this typical exchange:

Are the Chinese obnoxious to the diggers, as diggers? – I recollect hearing, some time ago, of some ill-feeling towards the Chinese at Bendigo. I never had any such feeling myself, nor heard any man express that feeling.

Several witnesses do express anti-Chinese sentiment but they stand out precisely for doing so. Despite all the leading questions from the commissioners, most witnesses express no objection to the Chinese, and some even express open sympathy with them. At least one of the witnesses displays deep anger as he recounts seeing a trooper pushing a “poor Chinese man” along a road at the point of a bayonet. Despite all this, the report has gone down in history as being “evidence” of a deep-seated anti-Chinese sentiment on the goldfields, so overwhelming that authorities felt compelled to respond with severe restrictions on Chinese immigrants.

The only sense that can really be made from the passing of the *Chinese Immigration Act 1855* is that Victorian authorities sought to divide and conquer the agitated goldfields population. It was no doubt convenient that both British imperialism in China and the broader strategic agendas of the Australian colonial ruling class had already created fertile soil for anti-Chinese sentiment, and two key aims coalesced in this moment. Here was a fortuitous alignment between the ruling class' project of building a white population free of a rival power's imagined fifth-columnists and their desire to create racialised scapegoats to explain away a lack of basic democratic rights and declining living conditions, particularly as alluvial gold deposits ran out. In fact, this dynamic goes a long way to explaining the entire history of anti-Chinese riots on the Australian goldfields, which peaked between 1857 and 1873 – several years *after* the introduction of the first anti-Chinese laws, and a period that includes the entirety of the Second Opium War. It's hard to maintain the standard argument that the 1850s-60s anti-Chinese laws were a ruling class' reluctant response to racist public sentiment when they were so clearly designed to actively *foster* such sentiment – a task they evidently and tragically succeeded in.

We looked earlier at the 1880s resurgence in anti-Chinese racism, noting the ways this racism was driven by the Australian ruling class. This was also a period in which Australian capitalism went through significant booms and rapid industrialisation, along with the growth of significant new labour unions. The year 1888 in particular stands out as a high point in state-initiated anti-Chinese racism. Most obviously, this year brought the Intercolonial Conference on the Chinese Question, at which government delegates committed their respective colonies to legislate new uniform anti-Chinese laws across the country. It was also a year in which the infamous *Afghan* standoff took place, in a horrible foreshadowing of the 2001 *M.V. Tampa* standoff, and designed to fulfil similar racist ends.

Unsurprisingly, 1888 was also the highpoint in a series of well-funded public speaking tours by

notorious anti-Chinese campaigner John Potts. His story demonstrates the close relationship between anti-Chinese campaigners and high profile establishment politicians. Previously an architect with the firm who designed Melbourne's Spencer Street station, Potts had relocated to Charters Towers in Queensland and established himself as the owner of a mining company. He had always moved in elite circles, but now set himself the vile task of trying to win the working and middle classes to backing total Chinese exclusion, a project for which his wealthy backers ensured Potts was highly funded. In September 1888 the treasurer of the Brisbane Anti-Chinese League reported they had paid Potts a total of £120, with over £172 remaining for future anti-Chinese campaigning. Potts also seems to have received support-in-kind from state government MPs including Charles Dutton, then minister for railways in the Queensland government, and the great, great-grandfather of Peter Dutton. In April 1888 Dutton was facing a difficult election, and used his ministerial powers to unilaterally grant Potts a free state-wide railway pass, allowing him to travel the state whipping up racism. This was the intensely racist climate that culminated in the notorious North Brisbane anti-Chinese election campaign through April and May, and the consequent anti-Chinese riot that erupted on polling day, 5 May.

The larger John Potts story is a revealing one. It includes being mobbed and "roughly handled" by Chinese people who stormed the stage during one of his speeches in Lambing Flats (earlier the site of the notorious anti-Chinese riot), and being chased from Barcaldine's Chinatown by a mixed crowd of Chinese and white people. Not that you'd know much of this from the glowing and effusive reports the press gave his regular anti-Chinese tours. Save the odd passing reference, most reports claim Potts was warmly received by thousands of adoring citizens wherever he went. But Potts kept his own diary in which at numerous points he despairs that the Australian working class will never take up his calls to drive out the Chinese.

The anti-Chinese racism of the 1880s was no doubt tangled up with trying to undermine the growing union movement, and its hold could probably have been broken by the great strikes of the early-mid 1890s if only a force inside the unions had organised to make it happen. Indeed, there is some evidence that Chinese workers in various parts of the country took up the strike call in solidarity with the shearers, the wharfies and the railway workers. These Chinese workers saw themselves first and foremost as members of the working class, even if the Australian state wished to section them off and scapegoat them. But by the time the first Federal Parliament finally sat in 1901, the great strikes had been defeated and the unions were in disarray. Racism and reaction were setting in, and so after decades of preparing the soil, the first laws the Australian parliament passed were a cluster that became known forever as "the White Australia policy", with its centrepiece being Alfred Deakin's *Immigration Restriction Act*.

## **Yellow peril, red scare, white Australia: some conclusions**

The White Australia policy was in place from 1901 until 1973, and it was eventually replaced by official multiculturalism. Nonetheless, precisely because it is rooted in Australian capitalism's broader strategic agendas in multiple ways, anti-Chinese racism both preceded and outlived the White Australia policy. Furthermore, the policy itself was a complex and constantly shifting thing – a suite of evolving laws and practices, not a law in itself.

As is well known, after the Second World War the policy was slowly dismantled in a process Tavan labels "the long, slow death of White Australia". This process famously involved the Colombo Plan, which allowed thousands of Asian students to study here, alongside the opening up of permanent immigration to workers from southern Europe who had previously been viewed as not white enough. But as Tavan documents well, it also involved an endless array of minor amendments and shifts among bureaucrats and polices over many decades, some of which were not directly the product of

any particular government.

Overall though, it was still the strategic agendas of the Australian ruling class that were shaping immigration policies. As Lee Ack explains, by the 1950s Australian capitalism was experiencing a labour shortage that demanded rapid increases in population size alongside growing international pressures. The White Australia policy was becoming a liability for the Australian ruling class. Australia's Asian neighbours naturally found it offensive and it was an impediment to good relations between the Australian state and business community and their counterparts in countries like Singapore and Japan that were increasingly important for the Australian economy.

Menzies, though he is sometimes credited as starting the process of dismantling the White Australia policy, was at the same time its foremost defender – willing to describe it publicly as “a great policy” as late as 1961. His commitment to defending the policy should confound those who argue that Australia's racist laws are purely a reflection of popular racism among the electorate. As Tavan explains:

There is no evidence that the dismantling of White Australia was significantly out of step with public demands ... [A] majority of people accepted the policy changes that occurred from 1956 onwards. If opinion polls are to be believed, people would have tolerated more comprehensive reforms in the early to mid-1960s if the Menzies government had been prepared to act.

The 1950s brought Chinese Australians a new experience of racism in which they were “not just ‘yellow’, they were also ‘red’”. One terrible outcome of this was the victory of the right over the left in the political battles that had shaped the Chinese community in Australia's Chinatowns. In Sydney, for example, communists and other radicals had made Chinatown a centre of militant unionism and revolutionary politics through the 1930s and 1940s. Radicals like Arthur Gar Lock Chang and Fred Wong were well known among NSW unionists and communists, playing important roles in many of the famous waterside disputes, including the Port Kembla “Pig Iron” dispute and the celebrated “black armada” actions in support of Indonesian independence. But the 1950s Cold War stiffened the spine of Chinatown's right wing, while terrifying the Chinese-Australian left – many of whom dropped out of political activity. The fear and isolation these Chinese radicals felt, in an era when Mao's communists had just taken power in China and when a strong popular campaign had *defeated* Menzies' anti-Communist referendum, points to the continuing impact of anti-Chinese racism.

Australia's official shift to multiculturalism after the 1972 election of the Whitlam Labor government came only seven years after the party had dropped its own commitment to White Australia in 1965. It's easy to see this as a total about-face, and indeed it is often portrayed that way – not least by Whitlam's own immigration minister Al Grassby: “White Australia is dead. Give me a shovel and I'll bury it”. The *Australian Citizenship Act 1973* and the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, did remove the openly racist aspects, but nobody today could argue Australia's immigration practices are *not* discriminatory. The racism of “border protection” is nestled in the very existence of a modern nation state's borders. As Tavan notes, under Whitlam, there was practically *no* increase in non-European immigration, and the most powerful challenge to the lingering ghost of White Australia came *after* Whitlam – when an historic influx of refugees began arriving by boat from Vietnam. Their actions forced the Australian establishment to reckon with the shallowness of their anti-racist declarations. Notably, Whitlam's infamous answer to this challenge was outright hostility: “[I'm] not having hundreds of fucking Vietnamese Balts coming into this country with their religious and political hatreds against us”.

Multiculturalism was designed to fulfil particular needs of the Australian capitalist class. The new policy was never intended to end racism, and the resurgence of anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese racism in the 1980s and 1990s illustrates this clearly.

Now, in the twenty-first century, old fears and new realities have combined. China's capacity to dominate the Asia Pacific was a myth in the 1880s, but no longer, as it surges towards becoming the world's second superpower. The strategic threat this poses to Australia's established traditions of imperialist aggression in the region is clear. In the longer term, as the US and China move more openly into economic and even military competition, the prospect of a future war between the two imperial centres is almost inexorable.

The whole history of anti-Chinese sentiment in Australia has been driven by the Australian ruling class's own agenda, their strategic concerns and their imperialist aims. This much remains true in 2019. But we're also now living in a time of increasing brutality and of social crisis. Capitalism everywhere is becoming more vicious, more racist, more willing to jettison pretences to human rights and decency. As tensions tighten between the US and China, and as Australia feels China squeezing its capacity to dictate terms around the Asia Pacific, we can expect anti-Chinese racism here to increase in coming years. It won't be an interesting historic question or a fringe position of the far right. The analysis that racism springs from the innate xenophobia of the uneducated masses will offer no strategy to resist the massive campaign of bigotry which is already being trialled in the mainstream media. Only a struggle against Australian capitalism and imperialism will have any hope of holding back the coming deluge.

**Liam Ward**

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[1](#) Barton 1901, p5233.

[2](#) Fitzgerald 2007, p3.

[3](#) Cushman 1984, p101.

[4](#) Of particular note here are: Mei-Fen Kuo and Judith Brett, *Unlocking the History of the Australasian Kuo Min Tang*, Australian Scholarly Publishing 2013; Mei-Fen Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia: urban elites, newspapers and the formation of Chinese-Australian identity, 1892-1912*, Monash University Publishing 2013; Fitzgerald 2007; Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (eds), *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance*, Koninklijke Brill, 2015.

[5](#) Chan 2001, pp10-11.

[6](#) Hamilton 2018, pp135-136.

[7](#) Couchman 2015, pp8-9.

[8](#) For some examples of this common argument, see Joanna Mather, "Beijing is stirring up 'red hot patriotism' among Chinese students on Australian campuses", *Australian Financial Review*, 29 August 2017 and Philip Coorey, "ASIO warns vice chancellors over Chinese spies on campus", *Australian Financial Review*, 18 October 2017.

[9](#) Chinese citizens constitute easily the largest single group of international students, being some 29 percent of the total. The next largest grouping is from India, at just 11 percent. See: "Most international students come to Australia from these countries", *SBS News*, 16 April 2019.

[10](#) Stephen Letts, "Foreign property investment plummets as tougher regulations bite", *ABC News*, 30 May 2018,.

[11](#) David Chau, "Are Chinese buyers driving up Australia's housing prices?", *ABC News*, 6 October 2017.

[12](#) Alanna Kamp, "Asians out! Not in this suburb. Not in this apartment", *The Conversation*, 22 November 2018.

[13](#) Kwok 2015, pp290-308.

[14](#) Alexander 1987, p6.

[15](#) Griffiths 2006, pp41.

[16](#) For example: "The Chinese Invasion, Northern Queensland", *The Illustrated Australian News*, 9



July 1877, <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/142941>.

[17](#) Griffiths 2006, pp100-101.

[18](#) Hamilton's hostility to Chinese students is peppered throughout the book, and includes frequent claims that they are "spies", "brainwashed", and "angry". He even claims Chinese doctoral students "may not absorb the Australian academic culture". Hamilton 2018, p213.

[19](#) Hamilton 2018, p29.

[20](#) Griffiths 2006, p42.

[21](#) *ibid.*, p42.

[22](#) Some excellent but brief accounts of how Chinese radicals smashed this indenture system under Menzies are: Jia Rui Zheng, "Sixty Years of the Chinese Youth League", Chinese Youth League 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Magazine, Chinese Youth League of Australia, 1999, pp39-41; Arthur Lock Chang, Interviewed by Ann Turner, National Library of Australia, Oral History Section, 1991; Drew Cottle and Angela Keys, "Building the bridge of solidarity: The politics of the Chinese Youth League in Australia, 1939-73", Journal of Chinese Australia, Issue 2, October 2006.

[23](#) Martínez 2005, pp125-147.

[24](#) Griffiths 2006, p43.

[25](#) *ibid.*, pp43-44.

[26](#) Fitzgerald 2007, p11.

[27](#) Deakin 1901.

[28](#) Deakin 1903.

[29](#) Burgmann 1985, p45.

[30](#) *ibid.*, pp45-46.

[31](#) *ibid.*, pp101-102.

[32](#) Kong Meng et al 1879, Appendix 1, paragraph 29.

[33](#) Fitzgerald 1997, p85.

[34](#) *ibid.*, p85.

[35](#) Armstrong and Bramble 2007, p40.

[36](#) Ward 2015, pp96-97.

[37](#) Fitzgerald 1997, p86.

[38](#) Quong Tart 1903.

[39](#) For the US context, two good accounts are: Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans*, Random House 2007 and Andrew Gyory, *Closing The Gate: Race, Politics, and*

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[40](#) For a detailed overview of Chinese-Australian working class radicalism, see Ward 2015.

[41](#) See for example Lynn Beaton, *Part of the furniture: moments in the history of the Federated Furnishing Trades Society of Victoria*, Melbourne University Publishing, 2007.

[42](#) Markus 1974, p1.

[43](#) Ward 2015.

[44](#) Couchman 2001.

[45](#) "The Chinese Labour Question", *The Argus*, 4 December 1878, p6.

[46](#) In fact, the 1895 Victorian Factories Act Inquiry Board (a body established with an implicitly anti-Chinese agenda) had to concede that Chinese cabinetmakers were paid more than Europeans, and "in the years 1897-1912, the report of the Chief Inspector showed that Chinese employees received an average minimum wage higher than that received by their Australian [sic] counterparts". Ward, 2015.

[47](#) *The Argus*, Monday, 30 November 1885, pp4-5.

[48](#) The passing of this law met with mass Chinese resistance, which finally broke it (see Ward 2015). The Victorian government themselves complained about the tax being "inoperative" as early as 1857 but persisted with it regardless (see "Chinese Immigration", *The Argus*, 15 January 1857, p4).

[49](#) Chinese Immigration Act 1855 (Vic), <https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-sdid-18.html>.

[50](#) Small 2008.

[51](#) The word "Chinese" does not even appear in the Ballarat Reform League Charter from 11 November 1854 which can be found in full here:  
[http://eurekapedia.org/Ballarat\\_Reform\\_League\\_Charter](http://eurekapedia.org/Ballarat_Reform_League_Charter).

[52](#) Small 2008.

[53](#) One witness questioned by the post-Eureka Commission does suggest there were "one or two" Chinese rebels in the stockade, but there's no other evidence of this tantalising reference. Gold Fields Commission of Enquiry 1855, paras 1653-1654, p86.

[54](#) Ward 2015.

[55](#) Kyi 2009, p17.

[56](#) Gold Fields Commission of Enquiry 1855, para 1026, p55.

[57](#) *ibid.*, pp159, 174, 201.

[58](#) *ibid.*, para 3559, p184.

[59](#) O'Lincoln 2005.

[60](#) Welch 2003, pp267-296.

[61](#) For a very good analysis of the Afghan crisis, see Michael Grewcock, Crimes of exclusion: The Australian state's responses to unauthorised migrants, PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales, 2007, pp100-112.

[62](#) See Pott's brief biography in The Queensland Figaro, 7 July 1888, p13.

[63](#) Queenslander, 1 September 1888, p379. It's worth noting that this meeting of the Anti-Chinese League was held in the mayor's office at the town hall, and in a time when a skilled tinsmith, ironworker or plumber would earn £2-£3 per week.

[64](#) Queensland Figaro and Punch, 7 April 1888, p15.

[65](#) Evans 2004.

[66](#) Queenslander, 25 February 1888, p285.

[67](#) Queensland Figaro and Punch, 26 February 1887, p16.

[68](#) Potts 1888.

[69](#) Ward 2015.

[70](#) Tavan 2005.

[71](#) Lee Ack 2012, p30.

[72](#) Tavan 2005, p127.

[73](#) *ibid.*, p238.

[74](#) Fitzgerald 1997, p144.

[75](#) See: Drew Cottle, "Unbroken Commitment: Fred Wong, China, Australia and A World To Win", The Hummer, 3 (4), Winter, 2000.

[76](#) This history is documented well in Drew Cottle and Angela Keys, "Red-hunting in Sydney's Chinatown", Journal of Australian Studies, 31 (91), pp25-31.

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## **P.S.**

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