

*Review Article*

**‘THE ELEPHANT IN THE LIVING ROOM’:  
STUDYING CHINESE AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

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*After the Rush: Regulation, Participation and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860-1940* edited by Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor. Special issue of *Otherland*, no.9, December 2004. AUS\$29.95. 249 pages, paperback.

Paul Jones. *Chinese-Australian journeys: records on travel, migration and settlement, 1860-1975*. Research Guide 21. National Archives of Australia, 2005. AUS\$10.00. 286 pages, paperback.

Studying the history of Chinese communities in both Australia and New Zealand has grown rapidly in recent years. In New Zealand, interest was prompted by significant increases in Chinese migration post-1987. The Labour Government’s 2002 apology to the Chinese community for the poll tax and other legislative discrimination also generated considerable interest in Chinese New Zealand history. In Australia, it was the post-1970s change from the racially exclusive White Australia immigration policy to a multicultural policy that seeded interest in the various and previously overlooked ethnic communities that made up Australia’s past. The study of these communities can be seen as both re-examining and remodelling the national identity of both countries.

While Chinese Australians and Chinese New Zealanders have been writing an increasing number of publications themselves, the majority are still being produced by people outside those communities. The approach taken by those from within the communities is revealing. For both, the motivation can be seen as a search for identity and a seeking of one’s place in modern Australia and New Zealand. However the difficulty for many

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Chinese Australian historians is the absence of Chinese people from both the historical record and the mainstream national narrative. As Chris Lee noted in his essay 'Unfolding the Silence' in the recently published La Trobe collection *Secrets, Silences and Sources: Five Chinese-Australian Family Histories*, 'the first and major difficulty in researching my Chinese family history is the "silence" around the role Chinese immigration played in Australia's modern history'.<sup>2</sup> He also highlighted another issue confronting those writing Chinese Australasian history: that is, its often impersonal nature. As he states, 'Has not my disagreement with much of written history been just this issue? So often in the reportage and recreation of past stories, the lives and loves, the feelings, the humanness of its characters are presented in a feeling-diminished mode'.<sup>3</sup>

The combination of silence, exclusion, and an academic and impersonal style that denies the humanity of its subjects, continues to be an ongoing issue for those writing histories of the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand. Issues of exclusion and racism, and the place of the Chinese in society also mean that writing that history is never value-free. How to address these issues often becomes like dealing with the proverbial elephant in the living room. Is it best to simply ignore it, or to pretend it is less obvious than it really is? The latter was the impression I got from reading *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860-1940*.

Strangely, considering the subject, the question of racism in Chinese Australian history seemed at times to be minimised and circumvented. Even the word 'regulation' seems intended to avoid the harshness of words such as 'exclusion' or 'racism.' A further difficulty is what might be called the Chris Lee problem. There is, with some notable exceptions, little sense of real, living and breathing people in the book. However, this might be due to how the collection of essays came about. The book's seventeen chapters were taken from a conference held in Melbourne in July 2001 that aimed to examine and extend the boundaries of Chinese Australian history within the context of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Australian Federation. The aims of both the conference and the book are admirable: to rewrite Chinese Australian history in the light of the new multicultural and post "White Australian" environment. As Adam McKeown notes in his introduction, in this new environment 'historians of Chinese in Australia are writing in the context of a nation settled by new waves of Asian migrants, tempted by the seductions of a powerful Asian economy, and transformed by

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<sup>2</sup> Unfolding the Silence: James Lee Wah (1832-1909) Chinese Goldfields Miner and Anglican Missionary, in *Secrets, Silences and Sources: Five Chinese-Australian Family Histories*/edited by Sophie Couchman ([Bundoora, Vic.]: Asian Studies Program, La Trobe U, 2005); 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

multicultural policies and identities' stimulating them 'to imagine a new Australian past'.<sup>4</sup>

The book examines what has been a largely under-researched area of Chinese Australian history: the period following the gold rush. This period saw increasing exclusion and the tightening of boundaries, but also the negotiation of those boundaries between the Chinese and non-Chinese worlds, as well as a growing complexity in the organisation, identity and formation of Australia's diverse Chinese communities. The book is therefore divided into three sections that reflect these major themes: regulation and governance, Chinese participation in public life, and the internal identities and organisational dynamics of Chinese community life. The quality of the scholarship and writing is uniformly excellent throughout the collection. But one is left with the impression of an underlying desire to minimise racism as an element in the creation of modern Australia and modern Australian identity, and to show that racism against the Chinese was not as bad as it is made out, or indeed that racism was never the intent of the regulations and restrictions imposed on the Chinese between 1860 and 1940.

Several of the chapters reflect this. John Hirst in his 'The Chinese and Federation' argues that while anti-Chinese agitation was an element in the formation of 'White Australia', the origins of the term remain obscure.<sup>5</sup> He therefore argues that rather than a direct oppositional 'White race versus non-white race' dichotomy, the 'white' in 'White Australia' referred to themes of purity and virginity that already existed in the national ideal.<sup>6</sup> Rob Hess asks in his 'A Death Blow to the White Australia Policy' whether Chinese participation in Australian Rules football indicates that racism against Chinese was not as monolithic as assumed, or if that participation was a social aberration.<sup>7</sup> Pauline Rule examines the role of Chinese camps in breaking down barriers between Chinese and non-Chinese Australians. She argues that the relationships that resulted from contacts between Chinese and non-Chinese that the camps helped facilitate 'enabled cultural mediation, and helped create new kinds of social possibilities at a time of great hostility to non-European people.' To continually seek exceptions to the prevailing racism of the time seems to reflect a desire to minimise, to say that anti-Chinese racism was not as monolithic as assumed.

John Fitzgerald, in his excellent article on Chinese voices at Federation, extends this argument in another direction, interpreting the Chinese communities' efforts to attain justice and relief from the immigration restrictions imposed on them, as bringing them into the fold of the greater Australian national identity, an identity that dreamed of an equality based on

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<sup>4</sup> p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> p. 104.

natural justice and a 'fair go' for all. According to Fitzgerald, because they dreamed of a 'fair go' in immigration policy, 'Chinese residents imagined themselves part of this nation, and they shared in its vision of equality.'<sup>8</sup> By sharing in the vision of a combined future, Fitzgerald argues that Chinese Australians 'were among the most astute of our sentimental dreamers'.<sup>9</sup> It is, after all, 'their dream of a multi-racial Australia that we are all invited to share as Australians now'.<sup>10</sup> While a nice dream in itself, this is surely taking post White Australian historical reinterpretation just a step too far.

This volume reflects the political and cultural circumstances under which both the conference and the book were produced. The centenary of the Australian Federation provided an opportunity to reflect on the journey taken by Australia since that nation-making event. Unpleasant reminders of racist exclusion, and the White Australia philosophy that helped form Australia's national identity, would surely be an unwelcome guest at such an occasion. New Zealand and Australia reveal their respective national identities when examining the record of their responses to the Chinese. Australia, being a more positive, 'lucky' country, tends to emphasise and highlight the positive, while New Zealand, forced by its relationship with Maori to negotiate identity, belonging and the meaning of the past, is more willing to examine historic injustices. It is therefore much less likely that Australia, unlike New Zealand, would apologise for the poll tax and other legislative discriminations imposed on Chinese Australians.

Some might argue that focussing on the negative aspects of the relationship between Chinese and non-Chinese Australians – what John Howard referred to as 'the black armband' version of history – simply results in an historical dead end; that such a version of history is too binary, too adversarial, too black and white; that it paints Chinese too much as victims, and white Australians too much as villains, and that one should move beyond the historical impasse of racism to a more nuanced exploration of Chinese Australian history. I agree with this position to a certain extent. But it is difficult to move beyond something when it has not been properly engaged with in the first place. The questions raised by *After the Rush*, both in terms of themes, and the political and cultural context in which it was produced, highlight issues concerning the place of Chinese in Australia. These questions go to the heart of Australian identity, and of who can, and can not, be an Australian.

Paul Jones' *Chinese-Australian Journeys: Records on Travel, Migration and Settlement, 1860-1975* is less politically fraught than *After the Rush*, being simply a comprehensive guide to the records relating to Chinese

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<sup>8</sup> p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Australians held in the National Archives of Australia. The aim of the guide is to facilitate researchers' use of these records, and it forms part of the National Archives' series of research guides that facilitate access to the Archives' collections. The records covered in the guide range from policy documents to the day-to-day administration of the many regulations and restrictions that affected Chinese people travelling to and living in Australia. The author, Paul Jones, an honorary Associate of the Department of History at the University of Melbourne, is an expert in the records relating to Chinese Australians.

The guide is divided into seven chapters, each with a theme ranging from policy, procedures and precedents, to wartime experiences and community. This approach allows the vast range of records - covering the whole of Australia from 1860 to 1975 - to be arranged and presented with a great deal of coherency. Jones introduces each chapter with an introduction that sets the theme of the chapter very clearly, and then details the main record groups that pertain to that theme. Each record group is also given explanatory text. To add further value, the guide has a glossary of terms, a chronology of Chinese settlement, bibliography and internet resources, a list of other national archival institutions and a comprehensive index.

Jones and the National Archives have produced an invaluable introduction and guide for genealogists and researchers that will provide a roadmap into the sometimes complex and confusing records relating to the history of Chinese Australians. It will no doubt prove to be a boon to historians and will help to stimulate further, more nuanced and in-depth research and explorations into Chinese Australian history, and the Chinese Australian experience.