

ON THE OVERSEAS CHINESE SECRET SOCIETIES OF AUSTRALIA

CAI SHAOQING 蔡少卿¹
Nanjing University

translated by DUNCAN CAMPBELL²
Victoria University of Wellington

In the period since the 19th century over 20 million Chinese have migrated overseas. Many of the earliest of these migrants worked initially as coolies in mines and goldfields, on road construction sites and plantations and pastures throughout Southeast Asia, North America, Australia and New Zealand. L.A. Mills has claimed that: “Wherever the Chinese coolie came the Hung League followed”,³ and this seems to be an accurate reflection of the situation amongst the overseas Chinese migrant communities in the 19th century.

Although an amount of systematic research has already been undertaken on the history of secret societies amongst the overseas Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, regrettably, the shortage of materials has

¹ Cai Shaoqing is Professor of History with the Department of History of Nanjing University. Author of numerous books and articles, including *Zhongguo jindai huidang shi yanjiu* [A Study of the History of the Secret Societies of Modern China] (1987) and *Zhongguo mimi shehui* [The Secret Societies of China] (1990), he is one of the foremost Chinese scholars of the history of Chinese Secret Societies. Professor Cai presented a shorter version of this paper at Victoria University of Wellington on 18 August, 2000, as part of the Asian Studies Institute Seminar Series. This present version is based on the original Chinese language text as recently published in *Jianghai xuekan* (2001), 1: 132-37, with reference having been made to an earlier English language translation by Zhu Qinghuai. Professor Cai was recently awarded the Frederic Milton Thrasher Award for his contribution to the history of Chinese secret societies.

² Duncan Campbell (Duncan.Campbell@vuw.ac.nz) is Senior Lecturer in the Chinese Programme of the School of Asian and European Languages and Cultures of Victoria University of Wellington. His research focuses on the literary and material culture of late imperial China. His translation of Qi Biaoja's (1603-45) “Footnotes to Allegory Mountain” was published in “Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes” (1999), 19 (3/4): 243-71.

³ L.A. Mills, *British Malaya, 1824-67* (1925; reprinted Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 211.

meant that the study of those of Australia is as yet comparatively underdeveloped. As of the present no single academic monograph has been produced on the topic, although a number of chapters in both C.F. Yong's *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia, 1901-21*⁴ and Zhang Qiusheng's 張秋生 *Aodaliya huaqiao huaren shi* 澳大利亞華僑華人史 [A History of the Chinese Emigrants to Australia]⁵ treat briefly with it. A comprehensive history of the Chinese secret societies of Australia will require, as a first and most important step, the gathering of relevant material, and this paper offers a case study of the use to which such material, once uncovered, may be put.

The Discovery and Significance of the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet

In 1992 the Bendigo Chinese Association uncovered a Hung League Pamphlet. Having obtained a copy of this pamphlet from Stephen Morgan of the University of Melbourne, I believe it to be a find of some considerable significance, for the following reasons:

Firstly, the discovery of this pamphlet represents something of a breakthrough in the study of the history of the Chinese secret societies of Australia. As is well known, the discovery of Hung League pamphlets in Southeast Asia and North America inspired the first phase of the study of the history of the Chinese secret societies in these regions. The first academic work on the topic was written by Gustave Schlegel, the Interpreter for the Chinese Language to the Government of Netherlands-India. In the spring of 1863 a bundle of books was found during the course of a police search of the house of a Chinese man in Padang (Sumatra) in Indonesia. The find contained a large amount of Hung League materials, including "laws, statutes, oath, mysteries of initiation, catechism, description of flags, symbols and secret signs etc., etc.". Schlegel's book, entitled: *Thian Ti Hwui: the Hung-League, or Heaven-Earth-League: A Secret Society with the Chinese in China and India* and published in 1866, was based on his translation and analysis of these materials.⁶ Further documentation of the Chinese secret societies continued to be uncovered in Singapore and Malaya by the British colonial government, and such finds formed the basis for the three-volume work jointly written by J.S.M. Ward and W.S. Stirling, entitled *The Hung Society or The Society of Heaven and Earth*, published in 1925.⁷ Since that time, a number of further books on the Chinese secret societies of Malaya have been produced, by M.L.

⁴ Richmond, South Australia: Raphael Arts, 1977.

⁵ Beijing: Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe, 1998.

⁶ Batavia: Lange & Co., 1866.

⁷ London: Baskerville Press, 1926.

Wynne,⁸ L.F. Comber,⁹ and Wilfred Blythe.¹⁰ All three books were based, in part, upon materials supplied by various police departments. Likewise, studies of the Chinese secret societies of North America were based initially on the discovery of Hung League materials, and to my knowledge, some of the earliest such documents thus far discovered are still kept by the Chee Kung Tong 致公堂 in Victoria, Canada, providing scholars there with an extremely valuable archive of research materials. It is by reason of such circumstances that I believe the discovery of the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet could represent a new breakthrough in the study of the Chinese secret societies of Australia.

Secondly, the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet is itself of great intrinsic academic interest and serves to clarify a number of important issues:

- According to Hung League tradition, any member of the League was able to transfer from one branch of the League to another as long as he possessed copies of the League Pamphlet and songbook. In other words, Hung League Pamphlets served an important functional role in the organisational expansion of the League. A reading of the relevant Qing Dynasty archives makes it clear that, according to the recorded confessions of numerous Hung League members, as long as one possessed a Pamphlet that had been transmitted within the League, one was authorised to establish a branch of the League and invite others to join it.¹¹ Lin Runcai 林閏才, a man from Gaoyao County in Guangdong Province during the final years of the Qianlong (1736-96) period, once confessed: “Only those who have the Pamphlet in hand are considered to have received the true word”. From this time onwards, all those who either possessed a Pamphlet, made a copy of one, inherited one from his ancestors, or even bought a copy from someone else could acquire the status of League master.¹² This convention had long been established within the Hung League, allowing us to say with some certainty that the hand-copied Hung League Pamphlet found in Bendigo can be considered proof of the spread of the Hung League to Australia.

- The discovery of the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet also indicates that Bendigo was a site of Chinese secret society activity. According to previous research, it appears that the Hung League existed everywhere such pamphlets

⁸ *Triad and Tabut* (Government Printing Office: Singapore, 1941).

⁹ *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Survey of the Triad Society from 1800 to 1900* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1959).

¹⁰ *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study* (London, Kuala Lumpur & Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1969).

¹¹ See Cai Shaoqing, *Zhongguo jindai huidang shi yanjiu* [Research into the History of Secret Societies in Modern China] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), pp. 148-49.

¹² See Hu Zhusheng, *Qingdai hongmen shi* [A History of the Hung League During the Qing Dynasty] (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1996), p. 31.

have been discovered. In China, the places where Hung League Pamphlets have been discovered at various times (Dapu County in Guangdong Province, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Gui, Donglan and Tianlin Counties in Guangxi Province) are all places where, from the Qing dynasty onwards, the Hung League flourished. Overseas, as already mentioned, a variety of Hung League material has been discovered over the years in Sumatra, Singapore, and Victoria in Canada, and historical records confirm that these were precisely the regions where the Hung League was at its strongest. In Lang Son in Vietnam, a region that borders the Chinese province of Yunnan, a Hung League pamphlet was found which is now held in the Paris Library. The finding of this Pamphlet tells that the Hung League had existed in Lang Son since the late Qing Dynasty. During the Sino-French war, the Chinese general Liu Yongfu 劉永福 once led his army to fight the French in the Lang Son region. Many of the soldiers in Liu Yongfu's army were actually members of the Hung League. The British Library holds a copy of a Hung League Pamphlet, found in Thailand, and as is well known, Thailand too was a country where various Chinese secret societies flourished. For this reason, I think that the finding of the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet attests to the fact that Bendigo was once the site of Chinese secret society activity.

- An examination of the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet itself reveals at least two outstanding characteristics. The first of these characteristics is the format of the Pamphlet, which is different from those found in Sumatra and Singapore. In the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet, the Chinese characters for the name of the Heaven Earth Society are written in a composite form incomprehensible to non-members. These transformed Chinese characters were first used in the 57th year of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1792) by Chen Laosu 陳老蘇 and Su Ye 蘇葉, both men from Tong'an County in Fujian Province, "as a code reference to the Hung League" in order to evade persecution at the hands of the Qing imperial government.¹³ These transformed characters were widely used in League pamphlets dating from the reign period of the Jiaqing Emperor (1796-1820) onwards that have been found in many regions of China, those from Gui, Donglan and Tianlin Counties in Guangxi Province being examples. As the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet employs the same transformed characters, it can be ascertained that the Hung League Pamphlet in Bendigo was transmitted there from Mainland China. The League pamphlets which have been found in Sumatra and Singapore, on the other hand, referred to the Hung League as the "Yee Hing Company" 義興公司, a nomenclature that had developed in those places in

¹³ Memorial from the Governor of Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces, Wulana, dated 5th day 8th month of the 57th year of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor, cited in Cai Shaoqing, *Zhongguo jindai huidang shi yanjiu*, p. 132.

imitation of the British East India Company.¹⁴ In Australia, the majority of Chinese secret societies also referred to themselves as the “Yee Hing Company”, indicating that the League had spread there from Southeast Asia. We must conclude, therefore, that there existed two channels for Hung League expansion to Australia: one flowed directly from Mainland China; the other was by way of Southeast Asia.

The other characteristic is to do with the number of lodges they record. Early Hung League Pamphlets list only five ancestors; Wu Tiancheng 吳天成 (First Lodge), Hong Taisui 洪太歲 (Second Lodge), Li Sedi 李色地 (Third Lodge), Tao Bida 桃必達 (Fourth Lodge) and Lin Yongzhao 林永招 (Fifth Lodge). League Pamphlets dating from the reign period of the Jiaqing Emperor found in Donglan County of Guangxi Province, as well as those dating from the reign period of the Daoguang Emperor (1820-50) found in Tianlin County of the same province all carry the same listing. Hung League Pamphlets dating from after the reign period of the Daoguang Emperor, however, such as the pamphlet found in Sumatra in 1863, list a latter five ancestors, in addition to the former five. The Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet lists both the five former and five latter ancestors. It can be concluded, therefore that the Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet is a copy dating from after the reign period of the Daoguang Emperor and that, further, the expansion of the Hung League to Australia must post-date the reign period of this emperor. When then did the Hung League first expand its activities to Australia and how?

The Expansion of the Hung League to Australia

It remains difficult to establish a precise date for the founding of the Hung League in Australia. As a secret society, the Hung League’s organisational activities were conducted through clandestine channels and were never disclosed to outsiders. Of one thing can we be sure, however, and that is that the Hung League entered Australia during the Gold Rush years. During that period of time, large numbers of Chinese came to Australia in search of gold. As the Chinese flooded in, the Hung League followed.

During the 1850s, gold mines continued to be discovered in Australia, and the news of these new finds spread rapidly to Europe and throughout the rest of the world. As a result, hundreds and thousands of Chinese gold rushers swarmed to these “New Gold Mountain” fields in Australia. Most of these gold rushers were poor peasants or indigent labourers from the coastal areas

¹⁴ See Wen Xiongfei, *Nanyang huaqiao tongshi* [A Comprehensive History of the Overseas Chinese of the Southern Oceans] (Shanghai: Dongfang yinshuguan, 1929), p. 111.

of Guangdong and Fujian Provinces. Specifically, they were Cantonese from the countryside around Canton and from the Pearl River Delta who arrived in Australia via Hong Kong or Fujianese from Xiamen (Amoy). The rapid population increase in these regions from the mid-Qing period onwards had exacerbated the crisis in the supply of available arable land. Taking the Pearl River Delta region as an example, the 13 counties that made up this region occupied an area of some 20,000 square kilometres, comprising 10% of the total territory of Guangdong Province. Yet the population reached upwards of 18 million, that is 50% of the total population of the Province. The population density was even higher in the See Yap (Siyi) region and Chung Shan (Zhongshan) County, with between 1,500-1,600 people per square kilometre.¹⁵ These regions were amongst the most densely populated areas in the world at the time. The shortage in arable land displaced from these areas many peasants who had little or no land, forcing them into vagrancy in other provinces and overseas. Life was far from easy for them, afflicted as they were also by both natural and man-made disasters, and oppression at the hands of foreigners. In keeping with their need for mutual support, their desire for an association based on sworn brotherhood and which maintained the principle of “All for one and one for all” was a pressing one. It was precisely this historical context that gave rise to the Hung League. Research has revealed that once the Hung League had been established in Zhangzhou in Fujian Province in 26th year of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1761),¹⁶ it spread rapidly in the southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. By the 1850s, the League: “had spread throughout [Guangdong] and had reached as far as Guangxi Province”, “infecting also the Wu and Chu regions”.¹⁷ Large numbers of poor peasants and indigent labourers joined the Hung League in order to obtain mutual aid and to safeguard their livelihoods. Even more did the Hung League of this period speak to the needs of the migrant Chinese communities, and it appears that it held especial attraction to Chinese colliers and workers. As large numbers of Chinese labours arrived in the goldfields of Australia, so too did the Hung League, spreading widely throughout the Australian Chinese community.

A point that very much needs to be borne in mind is that during the 1850s the Taiping Rebellion broke out in Southern China, along with the Hung League led Red Turban Rebellion. Upon the defeat of both these uprisings, the Qing Imperial authorities launched a cruel campaign to suppress

¹⁵ Cai Shaoqing, *Zhongguo mimi shehui* [Chinese Secret Societies] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1989), p. 358.

¹⁶ “Guanyu Tiandihui de qi yuan wenti” [On the Question of the Origins of the Heaven Earth League], in Cai Shaoqing, *Zhongguo jindai huidang shi yanjiu*, pp. 45-65.

¹⁷ “Zeng Wangyan zougao” [Drafts of the Memorials of Zeng Wangyan], as cited in *Taiping tianguo shiliao* [Historical Materials on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom] (Shanghai: Kaiming shudian), p. 524.

both the remnant Taiping army and the Hung League. Many of the key leaders of these movements joined the gold rush and fled to Australia. It is recorded that in 1864, after the defeat of Taiping Rebellion, the Southern Conquering King Huang Deci 黃德滋 (a man from Xinhui County, Guangdong Province) led his remaining soldiers and: “fleeing in dozens of boats, crossed the South China Sea, and finally arrived in Darwin Harbour in northern Australia. Their arrival coincided with the opening up of the New Gold Mountain, and thus they proceeded to this place and became gold miners”.¹⁸ According also to the memoirs of an early overseas Chinese named Yang Tangcheng 楊湯城, of the six brothers of his great grandfather Yang Shenglong’s 楊勝龍 generation, two participated in the Red Turban Rebellion in Poon Yee (Fan’ou) County of Guangdong Province, led by Gan Xian of the Hung League. Both were executed by the Qing armies after the defeat of the uprising, and in order to avoid guilt by association, one other brother fled to New Zealand to join the gold rush. Some years later, Yang Tangcheng’s grandfather Yang Xiongda 楊雄大 and two of his brothers also fled overseas. The eldest went to Australia to become a gold miner, the two other men to New Zealand and America respectively as coolies.¹⁹ As key members of the Hung League, these men had all proved themselves to be able organisers. It is said that once Huang Deci had established himself in the New Gold Mountain area of Australia, he immediately established the Hung League run “Yee Hing Company”, and that the present office building of the “Yee Hing Company” in Bendigo (on the site of a former Guan Yu Temple) was actually built by Huang Deci.²⁰

In my view, the course of the Hung League’s dissemination and development amongst the Chinese migrants to Australia may be broadly divided into three phases.

First Phase (1851–75): This was a period when the influx of Chinese migrants into Australia as part of the gold rush reached a peak; it was also the period during which the Hung League membership become widespread amongst the Chinese labourers. About 55,000 Chinese arrived in Australia during this period,²¹ most of whom gathered at the gold fields of New South Wales and Victoria. At the time, the gold production of areas like Ballarat and Bendigo in Victoria led to a concentration there of Chinese people.

¹⁸ Lin Jinzhi, “Huaren yiju Aodaliya shilue” [A Brief History of Chinese Migration to Australia], in *Huaren zhoukan* (1986), 6.

¹⁹ *Huaqiao cangsang lu* [The Vicissitudes of the Overseas Chinese] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1984), p. 50.

²⁰ Zhao Yu, “Xinhai geming yu haiwai hongmen” [The 1911 Revolution and the Hong League Overseas], in *Xinhai geming huiyi lu* [A Collection of Memoirs of the 1911 Revolution] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe), Vol. 6, p. 75.

²¹ Chen Zexian, “Shiji shiji shengxing de huagong qiyue zhi” [The Contract System Prevalent amongst Chinese Labourers During the Nineteenth Century], in *Lishi yanjiu* (1963), 1.

According to statistics, in 1853 there were 2000 Chinese labours in Ballarat; three years later this figure had increased to 25,000, the Chinese population comprising a quarter of the total population of the area. By 1859, the Chinese population of Victoria had reached a total of 42,000. In New South Wales there was a Chinese population of 21,000 Chinese in 1861, comprising 1/6 of its total population.²² In large groups, these Chinese crossed mountains and forded rivers in search of gold, setting up their huts whenever and wherever they discovered a mine. Exposed to the harsh climate and the depredations of wild beasts, they were also subject to attack by both the aborigine population and the white colonialists, occasionally resulting in loss of life. Apart from relying for mutual aid on their fellow townsmen and fellow clansmen, the Chinese also welcomed the expansion of the activities of the Hung League, an organisation that displayed the strongest cohesive power and which conducted most of its activities in a clandestine manner. At present it is impossible to know the exact number of the League's membership in this period, but comparison with what we know of Hung League development in Southeast Asia and North America, along with statistics from the later stages of the development of the League in Australia does permit us to make some conjectures. According to Victor Purcell, of the 27,000 Chinese in Singapore in 1850, 20,000 were members of the Hung League; that is, almost 80% of the Chinese population of Singapore had secret society affiliations.²³ Li Donghai 李東海, in his book *Jianada huaqiao shi* 加拿大華僑史 [A History of the Chinese in Canada], argues: "At the height of its power, the Chee Kung Tong of the Hung League had more than 40 branches and a membership of about 20,000, only a few Chinese declining to join it. This number comprised 70-80% of the total Chinese population".²⁴ According to statistics, by 1911 the Chinese population in New South Wales stood at 8,223, that of Victoria at 4,707; in 1913, the total membership of the Chinese Masonic Society in New South Wales was between 2,000–3,000, while the "Yee Hing Company" in Victoria claimed a membership of 3,000 in 1911.²⁵ It is obvious from these statistics that Hung League membership constituted at least half of the Chinese population.

Second Phase (1875–1900): This was a period which saw intensified anti-Chinese activity and during which the number of Chinese in Australia declined precipitously. Hung League activity declined and became increasingly difficult. The total number of Chinese entering Australia dropped to about 8,000.²⁶ As many of the shallow gold mines became depleted, large

²² Zhang Qiusheng, *Aodaliya huaqiao huaren shi*, pp. 72-74.

²³ Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 157.

²⁴ Li Donghai, *Jianada huaqiao shi* [A History of the Chinese of Canada] (Taipei: Jianada ziyou chubanshe, 1967), p. 234.

²⁵ C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia, 1901-21*, pp. 163, 275.

²⁶ Chen Zexian, "Shijiu shiji shengxing de huagong qiye zhi", *Lishi yanjiu* (1963), 1.

numbers of Chinese quit mining and turned to other forms of employment, many of them removing to the cities to take up jobs in the industrial or commercial sectors of the economy. Sydney and Melbourne became the two most important centres of Chinese population concentration. In 1881, the Chinese population of Melbourne had totalled 1,057, that of Sydney, 1,321. By 1891, however, the Chinese population of Melbourne had reached 2,143, and that of Sydney 3,499; in other words, the Chinese populations of these cities had doubled within the decade.²⁷ Chinese guild and clan halls were established one after another within the Chinatowns of these cities. The office building of the “Yee Hing Company” too shifted in to Chinatown. During this period also, leadership of the Hung League in Australia was assumed by experienced members of the League and by successful businessmen and industrialists, such as Lee Yuan Sam 李元三 in Melbourne, Moy Sing 梅東星 and James A. Chuey 黃柱穩 in New South Wales and so on.²⁸

Third Phase (1901-21): This period saw an increasing sense of nationalism within the Hung League in Australia and was a period also when the social and political activities of the Hung League reached a high point.

Firstly, during this period, immediately after the establishment of the Federation of Australia in 1901, the Australian Federal Government passed the Immigration Restriction Act, an Act that served to give both systematic and legal expression to the “White Australia Policy”. Racist sentiment spread throughout society and the frequency of anti-Chinese and anti-coloured incidents increased. Naturally, these anti-Chinese incidents could not but serve to arouse the nationalist sentiments of both the Chinese in Australia at the time and the Hung League. Secondly, at the beginning of the 20th century a revolutionary movement to overthrow the Qing Dynasty developed in China. The propaganda campaign on the part of the revolutionaries, led by Dr Sun Yat-sen, encouraged Hung League members in Australia to express widespread anti-Manchu sentiment. For the first time, they came to realise that it was necessary to make a connection between their own fates and that of the future of their motherland and they began to participate self-consciously in social and political activities:

- (a) They initiated a campaign against the “White Australia Policy” and petitioned for the establishment of a Chinese Consulate in Australia.
- (b) They supported Dr Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary programme for the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of a republic, working together with the republicans to set up a Young China League and otherwise actively seeking to raise funds for the revolutionary cause. In 1911, a sum of £1,300 was raised and sent to Dr Sun Yat-sen personally.

²⁷ C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia, 1901-21*, pp. 218-20.

²⁸ Ibid.

After the Wuchang uprising, the Hung League continued to collect contributions for the revolutionaries and in partnership with the Young China League, the “Yee Hing Company” raised £4,700 in Melbourne, £4,758 in Sydney, whilst £1,900 was raised from the Chinese in Western Australia. Between June, 1912 and 1913, Chinese in Australia and throughout the South Pacific region raised altogether the sum of £26,000 for the Nanjing revolutionary government, as an expression of their patriotic support for the Republic.²⁹

- (c) They actively participated in anti-Yuan Shikai activities and supported the Northern Expedition of the Guangdong Military Government. In China, Yuan Shikai’s usurpation of power after the 1911 Revolution sparked off the “Second Revolution”. Apart from publishing “The China Republic News” in order to denounce Yuan Shikai’s actions, leaders of the Australian Chinese Hung League such as James A. Chuey, Moy Sing and the others also enthusiastically raised funds to support the anti-Yuan ShiKai movement in Southern China. In 1916, the Chinese Masonic Society in Sydney established a “Hung League Fund Raising Committee”, and James A. Chuey and Moy Sing embarked upon a tour of Victoria and Tasmania in order to rally the support of “Yee Hing Company” members for this cause. The sum of £2,900 was raised and sent to Dr Sun Yat-sen to support the Southern China revolutionaries. In 1918, in order to support the Guangdong military government’s expedition against local warlords, the Chinese Masonic Society of Sydney raised a further £2,300.³⁰
- (d) As social and political circumstances changed, the Chinese Hung League in Australia also began to adapt its organisational structure and nomenclature. Firstly, the “Yee Hing Company” began to accept membership from all sectors of the Chinese community; rich merchants and poor vegetable gardeners alike, carpenters as well as street vendors, all met the requirements for membership of the “Company”. Generally, however, although there was a higher percentage of working class members, control of the “Company” remained in the hands of rich Chinese merchants. In 1912, the headquarters of the “Yee Hing Company” was established in New South Wales, later on becoming the headquarters of the Aligned Yee Hing Company, and adopting the English name: “The Chinese Masonic Society”. In 1914, “Yee Hing Company” in Melbourne underwent reform and adopted the same English name. During the period 1916-18, once the Chinese Masonic Society had opened up its activities to the public, branches of the Chinese Masonic Society appeared throughout Australia,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

publicising their activities and membership lists in the local Chinese-language newspapers. All these branches took their direction from the Sydney headquarters. Between 1918-21, the Sydney headquarters convened four Interstate Chinese Masonic Society Consolidation Conferences, and inaugurated its own newspaper, "The Chinese World News" in 1921. This latter served as a forum for important political issues and gave expression to the increasing influence of the League. The Hung League of Australia had by now completely escaped from its clandestine past, and its history as a secret society had come to an end.

The Nature, Characteristics and Social Role of the Chinese Hung League in Australia

It has now been more than 150 years since the Heaven Earth League first arrived in Australia along with the large number of Chinese labourers who came to Australia to join in the gold rush from 1851 onwards. Although the original slogan of the League had been "To overthrow the Qing and Restore the Ming", it had in essence been an association by, of and for indigent labourers seeking mutual aid and support. Once it had commenced its activities overseas, the entire context of these activities changed fundamentally; no longer did it have to contend with the Qing imperial government or the feudalistic control of the Scholar-gentry class, but rather the discrimination and oppression of a Western colonial power. As a consequence, the Hung League in Australia could no longer be said to be defined by the slogan "To overthrow the Qing and Restore the Ming", and the League's original nature as an association devoted to resistance to tyranny and to mutual aid came to the fore. Large numbers of Chinese labourers, finding themselves now in a foreign land, without relatives or acquaintances to turn to in times of need, swore oaths of brotherhood and joined the Hung League in order to undertake mutual aid activities to protect the economic rights and common interests of the Chinese and to oppose the oppression and discrimination of both the Western colonial government and the European settlers. Under normal circumstances, the Hung League arranged jobs for them, mediated their disputes, and assisted with the everyday difficulties of birth, old age, sickness and death and so on. One source records that: "in their initial phases, the "Yee Hing Companies" of both New South Wales and Victoria undertook a great many good works on the behalf of their members. The companies encouraged amongst their members a sense of brotherhood and helped them find employment, all to protect the interests of members".³¹

³¹ Ibid., pp. 112-116.

During times of anti-Chinese violence, they sought legal protection for their members through petitions and appeals to public sympathy. When a violent anti-Chinese incident broke out in the Baklan gold fields in Victoria in July, 1857, and the colonial government began to impose a resident's tax of £1 per person per month, the Chinese gold miners rallied to petition the government of Victoria with a statement of their plight. As a result of their efforts, the Victorian State Parliament decided to reduce this tax to £1 per person every three months.³² In 1861, when another violent anti-Chinese incident occurred in the lowlands of Lanming in New South Wales, as many as 600 Chinese joined the Chinese speaking interpreter James Henley in petitioning the colonial government for legal protection. Driven by his strong sense of social justice, Henley presented a report to the Australian authorities demanding legal protection for Chinese labourers.³³

In an editorial dated 2nd August, 1861, the *Sydney Morning Herald* also expressed its sympathy for the suffering of the Chinese, stating: "In all respects, they are excellent; one does not see them wallowing on the ground drunk; one does not see them shabbily dressed, and nor do they make a display of their poverty in order to gain public sympathy; they have their own broadly based organisation to provide mutual support and help, and although they earn very little, they still save some to send back to support their families".³⁴ To my mind, in terms of its resistance to the oppression of the colonial government and its protection of the interests of the Chinese, the Hung League served something of the role of an unofficial Chinese consulate.

In the course of its century or more of development, and in comparison to similar Hung Leagues elsewhere, the Hung League of Australia, has two obvious particularities. Firstly, in contrast to the circumstances that prevailed in Southeast Asia and America, Australia was essentially without the type of gang fight and Tong Wars between branches of the League which proved so injurious to the social order of both the Chinese community and the local society more generally. The main reason for this was because of the diversity of the origins of the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and America. Although the majority came from Guangdong and Fujian Provinces, these overseas Chinese communities included also men who came from Guangxi Province as well as ex-members of the "Three Rivers Gang" secret society from throughout China. The communities they formed part of were fragmented by dialect differences and, as a consequence, their Hung Leagues too were divided.

In Malaya for example, during the 19th century, the Chinese community was comprised of five main dialect groups and the Hung League there divided

³² Zhang Qiusheng, *Aodaliya huaqiao huaren shi*, p. 126.

³³ Liu Weiping, *Aozhou huaqiao shi* [A History of the Chinese in Australia] (Taipei: Xingdao chubanshe, 1989), pp. 112-16.

³⁴ Quoted in Zhang Qiusheng, *Aodaliya huaqiao huaren shi*, p. 127.

into groups like the Ghee Hin Society 義興黨, the Hai San Society 海山黨, the Ho Seng Society 和生黨, the Wah Sang Society 華生黨 and the Toh Peh Kong Society 大伯公黨.³⁵ Mutual misunderstanding, suspicion and hostility often arouse between these groups as a result of differences in dialect, custom, personality and nature of employment, occasionally resulting in conflict and bloody strife. The secret societies played leading roles in these battles. Such internecine struggles caused, in the case of Malaya, the two infamous Larut Wars of 1862 and 1872.

In contrast, the Chinese in Australia, especially those who migrated there during the gold rush period, were mainly from the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province, whilst others came from the southern part of Fujian Province. They lived in communities based upon their places of origin. Although there is no detailed statistical record of the numbers of the earliest Fujianese and Cantonese migrants to Australia, we can gain an impression of the origins of these men from the existing Chinese gravestones of Ballarat. 480 of these gravestones provide clear record of origins of those buried. 250 of the gravestones record Ningyi (Xinning County) as the place of origin, this representing over 52% of the total number. A further 123 gravestones give Sun Hui in Gangzhou (Xinhui County) as place of origin, this in turn representing another 26% of the total. The remaining 107 gravestones belong to men from counties such as Tot shan (Taishan), Chang Shen (Zengcheng), Xiangshan, Hoi Ping (Kaiping), Poon Yee (Fan'ou), Tung Kuan (Dongguan), Soon Tack (Shunde), Ho Shan (Heshan) and so on. Not one gravestone is for somebody from any other province.³⁶

The impression gained from such records is of a community which spoke the same dialect of Cantonese and which was made up of men of very similar physical features, ideology and character, thus reducing the likelihood of mutual friction and conflict. With the exception of battle that took place on Little Bourke Street in Melbourne in 1904 between the "Yee Hing Company" and the Bo Leong Association over the profits from the opium and gambling business, the history of the League in Australia is almost completely free of violence or conflicts that derived from the existence of Chinese secret societies. In fact, the reputation of the Bo Leong Association was so affected by this fight that it was disbanded in 1912.³⁷

The second particularity of the Hung League in Australia was that it became unified at an early stage, making use of English title "The Chinese Masonic Society" to refer to the aligned headquarters of the "Yee Hing

³⁵ L.F. Comber, *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Survey of the Triad Society from 1800 to 1900*, pp. 35-36.

³⁶ Linda Brumley, Lu Bingqun & Zhao Xueru, eds., *Fading Links to China: Ballarat's Chinese Gravestones and Associated Records, 1854-1955*, Melbourne University History Research Series # 2 (1992).

³⁷ C.F. Yong, *The Chinese in Australia, 1901-21*, pp. 159-60.

Company”, in order that the Australian public understand the nature of the “Yee Hing Company” and thus helping to facilitate the assimilation of the league into Australian society. As is widely recognised, within many overseas Chinese communities, the various secret societies were divisive elements which inhibited any sense of unity within these communities. This remains the case in a number of regions. The situation with the Chinese secret societies of Australia is different. With the exception of the early gold rush period when Hung League members were scattered throughout the various gold fields, once the majority of Chinese had moved to live in the cities, the League too moved the centre of its activities into the cities. By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, two “Yee Hing Company” headquarters had been established; one in Sydney in New South Wales and the other in Melbourne in Victoria. The Sydney headquarters was the first established, in Blackburn Street in 1908; this headquarters was later moved to Mary Street. The Melbourne headquarters was established in Little Bourke Street.

The two headquarters co-operated frequently, and the connection between them was an intimate one. When the “Yee Hing Company” in New South Wales celebrated the opening of its Blackburn Street headquarters, the heads of the “Yee Hing Company” of Melbourne and Bendigo all attended the ceremony. When in 1912 the “Yee Hing Company” of Sydney adopted “The Chinese Masonic Society” as its English name, the “Yee Hing Company” of Melbourne followed suit in 1914. On the cover of the extant Bendigo Hung League Pamphlet are written the words “Masonic Society”. In 1916, an aligned headquarters was established in New South Wales. In the same year, the aligned “Yee Hing Company” called on all “Yee Hing Companies” across Australia to become affiliated branches of the Sydney headquarters. Between 1918-21, the Sydney headquarters convened four Interstate Consolidation Conferences of the Chinese Masonic Society and laid the foundation for a unified Australian Hung League in Australia.³⁸

The change of name for the Hung League from “Yee Hing Company” to “The Chinese Masonic Society” not only won support from the Chinese community in Australia, but also facilitated an understanding of the League on the part of the Australian public, for the term “Free Mason” was one that they were familiar with. Although the Chinese Masonic Society did not undertake any of the rituals associated with the Australian Masonic Society, the sense of brotherhood and fraternity that the societies sought to foster were very similar. This served towards the greater purpose of the acceptance of the Chinese into Australian society.

Apart from the similarity in the origins and backgrounds of members and a consequent reduction in the possibility of conflict, another characteristic of the League that allowed it to become unified at an early stage was to do

³⁸ Ibid.

with its leadership. Men such as Lee Yuan Sam, Moy Sing, James A. Chuey and Lee Yuan Xing 李元信 were not only capable organisers, but they also had enormous prestige within the Chinese communities in Australia, and the trust of Australian society in general. Lee Yuan Sam whom I had occasion to mention earlier, was born in China in 1831 and came to Australia in 1862, initially as a gold miner in Ballarat. Later on, he established a business in Melbourne. He travelled frequently throughout New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, and gained a lot of experience of life in Australia. He had maintained a long-term relationship with the “Yee Hing Company” of Victoria, becoming a leader of the Yee Hing Company of Melbourne early last century. By 1911, under his leadership, the “Yee Hing Company” had attracted a membership of 3,000. He was a popular figure in the Chinese community of Victoria and played an important role in the 1891 Revolution against the Qing Dynasty. He played a critical role in the unification of the Hung League of Australia. Moy Sing was born in the See Yap region of Guangdong Province in 1831. He migrated to New South Wales in 1852 and served as leader of the “Yee Hing Company” there for 55 years. During his term as leader, the Yee Hing Company had a membership of 3,000. He died in 1919.

James A. Chuey, who was also from the See Yap region, migrated to Australia in 1878. He settled down in Junee in New South Wales, running a wheat farm and exporting wool. A faithful follower of Moy Sing, he was a sociable, modest, honest and generous man and became one of the most popular members of the Chinese communities of New South Wales and Victoria. He made many friends, both Chinese and Australian. W.A. Holman, an Australian who was elected as premier of New South Wales between 1913-19, was amongst his closest friends. He was one of the top leaders of the Aligned Chinese Masonic Society during the first three decades last century. Under his leadership, the Chinese Masonic Society of New South Wales was united and became an important social and political power within the Chinese Community of the state throughout the 1920s,³⁹ whilst he also played an important role in the process of unifying the Chinese Masonic Society across Australia.

It has now been more than 150 years since the large-scale initial wave of Chinese migration to Australia. During this period, Chinese migrants have undertaken all kinds of work; gold mining, vegetable farming, furniture manufacturing, industrial business and city construction. Though they suffered at the hands of anti-Chinese movements and from the ill treatment and discrimination of the “White Australia Policy”, with perseverance and hard work, they made a great contribution to the economic development and modernisation of Australia.

At the same time, their Chinese cultural background served to make Australian society more culturally pluralistic. Throughout this process, the

³⁹ Ibid.

Hung League of Australia played a very significant role in uniting the Chinese community, undertaking mutual aid measures, and promoting the integration of the Chinese with Australian society. This circumstance needs now to be more fully appreciated by the general public.