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The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions

Proceedings

Editors
Henry Chan
Ann Curthoys
Nora Chiang

from the Symposium held in Taipei, 6-7 January 2001

Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies, National Taiwan University
Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian National University

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Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies (IGAS)
National Taiwan University, Taipei
&
Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora
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Introduction

This book is an outcome of a symposium entitled 'The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement, and Interactions', held at National Taiwan University, Taipei, on 6-7 January 2001. At that symposium, a group of twelve scholars, eleven from Australia and one from New Zealand, delivered papers to an audience of Taiwanese historians, geographers, and others interested in the history of the overseas Chinese. This was the first sustained investigation of that history in Taiwan, and it led to many new connections being forged between Taiwanese and Australian scholars. Given the high quality of the scholarship at the symposium, it is pleasing to have this permanent publication arise from it.

The symposium was the product of enthusiasm in both Taiwan and Australia. It was initiated and organised by a group led by Lan-hung Nora Chiang, Professor of Geography and co-ordinator of the Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies at National Taiwan University (NTU). The group consisted of scholars from both NTU and the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica in Taipei. At the Australian end, the initiator and coordinator was Henry Chan, Honorary Research Fellow at UNSW. There were five sponsoring bodies, four in Taiwan and one in Australia: the Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies at NTU; the Overseas Chinese Studies Program in the Population and Gender Studies Centre, also at NTU; the National Science Council of Taiwan ROC; the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission in Taiwan ROC; and the Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora at the Australian National University.

The symposium was a very interesting academic occasion, with around 30 to 40 people attending each day. Welcoming addresses were given by the Vice-President of NTU, Professor Peng Shie-Ming; the Director General of the Humanities and Social Sciences Division of the National Science Council of Taiwan, Professor Wang Fan-Shen; and by the Minister of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, Dr Chang Fu-Mei. The session chairs came from the History Departments of several universities — NTU, National Cheng-Chi University, National Tsing-Hua University, and National Chung-Cheng University, as well as Academia Sinica. The twelve academic papers were in every case met with penetrating questions from the Taiwanese audience.

All papers have been reviewed and revised for this book. Each chapter reports on original research and thinking in the study of Chinese in Australasia, providing a valuable addition to this lively and fast-growing field of scholarship.

The book begins with Henry Chan's chapter, surveying the state of scholarship on the history of overseas Chinese in Australasia, and setting out some directions for new work, including using Chinese language sources located in China, and greater interaction between Australasian and North American scholarship on their

respective overseas Chinese histories. Then follows a chapter by Ann Curthoys, emphasising the importance of applying cultural theory, especially in its exploration of questions of postcolonialism and diaspora, to the study of overseas Chinese. Curthoys also explores the nature of and reasons for the longevity of anti-Chinese, or more broadly anti-Asian, feeling amongst white Australians.

The remaining ten chapters explore Chinese-Australian history from many perspectives and are arranged here roughly in the chronological order of the histories they address. Regina Ganter reminds us of the probability of very early pre-European Chinese contacts with the various indigenous peoples of the northern parts of the continent that became Australia. Two chapters, by Andrew Markus and Nigel Murphy, provide an overview of the immigration policies that so much controlled the flow and size of Chinese immigration to Australasia. John Fitzgerald discusses the views of the Australian Chinese press on the Federation debates of the period, and the ways in which it related those debates to the political crisis in China itself. Sophie Couchman explores Chinese community in and around Bourke Street in Melbourne in the first twenty years after Federation. The other five chapters all focus on the Chinese in New South Wales, taking the story from 1818 through to the 1930s. Ian Jack discusses the earliest arrivals; Maxine Darnell explores the experience of indentured Chinese labourers; Janis Wilton investigates the history of the Chinese in rural New South Wales from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century; Jane Lydon discusses the Chinese community in the Rocks area of Sydney around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and Shirley Fitzgerald evokes the lives and aspirations of the Sydney Chinese in the 1930s.

This is the third in the series published by the Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies at NTU. We are pleased that this is a joint publication of IGAS and the Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora at ANU.

Nora Chiang
Henry Chan
Ann Curthoys

July 2001

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Becoming Australasian but Remaining Chinese: The Future of the Down Under Chinese Past

H. D. Min-hsi Chan

Introduction

Over the past couple of decades the Chinese experience in Australia has begun to be accepted as an agenda item in Australian, if less so in New Zealand, history. There are also signs that the Chinese in Australian and New Zealand history are beginning to be accepted as a sub-field in Chinese studies and it is the entry of sinologists into the study of the history of the overseas Chinese in Australia and New Zealand that promises a transformation of the field I should like to encourage. So in this chapter after sketching the development of historiography¹ I shall concentrate on discussing how sinological knowledge may transform our understanding of the history of the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand. I also suggest that we should develop a more comparative approach and that it is more useful to compare the history of the Chinese in Australia with that of the Chinese in other areas of European settlement in the Pacific and along its Rim rather than with the larger and more dominant Chinese communities in southeast Asia. In these efforts I shall argue that Australian and New Zealand historians need to develop strategic alliances with their Chinese and north American colleagues to undertake collaborative research.

The historiography of the Australasian Chinese since 1970

There were some early studies of Chinese migration, the development and administration of the White Australia Policy, and attitudes towards Asian and specifically Chinese immigration by Myra Willard, A.C. Palfreeman, Sandy Yarwood, and Arthur Huck.² However, in this chapter I shall discuss the mainly English language historiography on the history of the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand. I shall not discuss the very significant studies by Christine Inglis, Chung Tong Wu, David Ip, Kee Poo-Kong and others on Chinese immigration and immigrants since 1965, or the significant conferences and publications that are beginning to appear on Asian and Chinese Australian identities and self-representations. This literature and post-graduate research on identity issues are now very extensive. My concern will be solely with the very significant development of an historiography of the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand over the last three decades. Even then, I shall, on the whole, neglect one of the major fields of research at present and that is in the historical archaeology of the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand – the literature in this sub-field is also becoming extensive. It is to be regretted that despite at least one excellent PhD in the field we still lack a monograph that brings together the current knowledge in this dynamic field of historical archaeology.³

When I first visited Australia in 1974 I was made aware of two Australian postgraduates who had just finished their theses on the history of the Chinese in Australia: they are now Professors Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus, and both are represented in this collection. Andrew Markus was to publish his doctorate in 1979 as *Fear and Hatred*.⁴ Their work, together with Charles Price's *The Great White Walls are Built*,⁵ while dealing mainly with the responses to Chinese immigration and based entirely on English language sources, provide a remarkable amount of information on the Chinese immigrants and the communities they formed. It is a matter of regret that the very fruitful comparative and 'transnational' perspective of Markus and Price, comparing the Australian colonies with the areas of white settlement in North America, have not been pursued since.⁶

There were to be three Sinological interventions in Australia during the 1970s all originating from PhD research at the ANU by Chinese from Southeast Asia who could make use of Chinese language sources. Wang Sing-wu was perhaps hampered by the paucity of Chinese language sources available in the 1960s for his study of the organisation of Chinese emigration.⁷ More significant in the history of the Chinese in Australia and, by extension, in New Zealand were studies by the demographer Choi Ching-yan⁸ and the historian Yong Ching Fatt.⁹ Choi's demographic study was partly based on an analysis not only of Chinese *huiguan* records but of the ancestral tablets and records housed in the Sze Yup temple in Melbourne and thus provide some extraordinary material for the historian of the Chinese community. Yong's history is based on the extensive use of *huiguan* records, the records of the Chinese consulates in Sydney and Melbourne, the records of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and of the Kuomintang in Sydney. I regret that neither Choi nor Yong would continue their work on Chinese Australian history. Choi took up positions in demography in Canberra and Hong Kong, while Yong remained in history at Flinders University, Adelaide, but returned to his original research love, the history of Singapore.

In New Zealand by the 1970s a number of postgraduate theses had been produced on the history of the Chinese in New Zealand, though none resulted in publications, and Peter O' Connor had published his pioneering article on 'Keeping New Zealand white'.¹⁰ James Ng, a medical practitioner in Dunedin, had already begun his magnificent work of locating, assembling, and then donating for public safe-keeping and use material on the Chinese in New Zealand. However, it is a measure of the low level of academic interest in the topic in New Zealand at the time that I, a lecturer in early modern European intellectual history at Massey University in Palmerston North (and the first New Zealand-educated Chinese to hold an academic position in history in a New Zealand university), was regarded, quite incorrectly, as the local university expert on the history of the Chinese in New Zealand. I usually referred them on to James Ng in Dunedin. One of those I referred on was Professor W.E. Willmott, by then the eminent sociologist and social historian of the Chinese in Cambodia and Canada. He had left British Columbia to take up the Chair in Sociology at the University of Canterbury and he brought out with him a young Canadian postgraduate student. They both came to see me in Palmerston North in 1974 before I left New Zealand to retool myself into a Chinese historian at SOAS in London. The student, Charles

Sedgwick, was to go on to produce one of the most significant studies of the social history of a Chinese community in Australia and New Zealand yet produced – unfortunately and regrettably it remains unpublished.¹¹ A few years later, Neville Ritchie completed another major PhD in archaeology, on the Chinese in Central Otago in the nineteenth century; sadly, it too, unfortunately remains unpublished.¹²

In the 1980s three Australian publications would be significant: Kathryn Cronin's *Colonial Casualties*, Cathy May's *Topsawyers*, both arising out of their doctoral theses, and Eric Andrew's history of Australian Chinese relations, *Australia and China*, which actually contains very good discussions of the local Chinese communities in Australia and gives an excellent list of 'Gaps in Research and Knowledge'.¹³ In 1985 the Museum of Chinese Australian History was opened in Melbourne and after a few turbulent early years settled down to make significant contributions to the study of the history of the Chinese in Australia. It should also be noted that in 1989 Liu Weiping, a former Chinese consular official in Sydney and then Associate Professor of Chinese at the University of Sydney, published his *Aozhou Huaqiaoshi*, a history of the overseas Chinese in Australia.¹⁴ Perhaps the publication in 1988 of Ann Atkinson's biographical dictionary of Asians immigrants in Western Australia and, in 1989, of Morag Loh's *Dinky-Di*, about Chinese who served in the Australian defence forces, can also be seen to be the precursors of the transformation of the history of the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand by the rush of activity and publications in the 1990s on both sides of the Tasman.¹⁵

However, the late Jennifer Cushman in a review article in 1984 made the most significant breakthrough in historiography.¹⁶ Cushman, a Southeast Asian historian, argued that for too long the concentration of Australian historians had been on racism towards the Chinese and on the history of the White Australia Policy. In reviewing Kathy Cronin's book Cushman pointed out that it too suffered from treating the Chinese as passive victims reacting and responding to white racism. She suggested it was surely possible to restore some agency to the Chinese immigrants and to look more closely at their community life and organisational structures. Cushman's argument has greatly influenced my own interventions in the field.¹⁷

There was something of a revolution in scholarship in the 1990s. Let us start this time with New Zealand. Manying Ip's life stories of Chinese women in New Zealand appeared in 1990, followed by a more general study of the Chinese New Zealanders in 1996.¹⁸ Then in 1993 there appeared the first two of the four massive volumes of James Ng's study of the history of the Chinese in New Zealand.¹⁹ They will remain for a very long time the major printed resource on the history of the Chinese on both sides of the Tasman. His contributions to the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* and to building up archival collections in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington and in the Hocken and Hewitson libraries in Dunedin place all of us interested in the history of the Chinese in Australasia in his debt. James Ng has provided us with the materials and many insights; now those of us who wish for a more critical, interpretive, academic history must take up the challenge of historical analysis and interpretation. New Zealand has also led the way with a number of New Zealand Chinese, notably Joe Yue Sing, Dan Chan, and Ian Bing, exploring the histories of their communities and publishing both in Chinese and English.²⁰

In Australia, the most significant development in the 1990s was an institutional breakthrough. The settling of the Museum of Chinese Australian History into some sort of organisational and management stability led it to play a crucial role in the developing historiography of the Chinese in Australia. Beginning with an 'international public conference' organised by the Museum on the histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific held in Melbourne in November 1993, there has been at least one large conference or part of a conference each year since. There were series of sessions on the Chinese in Australian history at the Australian Historical Association conferences in 1994 and 1995, the Chinese Studies Conference at Macquarie University in 1996, and the AHA conference again in Newcastle in 1997. A second conference on the Chinese in Australasia was organised by the Museum in Melbourne in November 1996. In November 1998 a large conference was organised by James Ng in Dunedin followed in June 1999 by the Workshop on Asians in Australian History at Griffith University organised by Regina Ganter. Then in 2000 there were two very large gatherings: in February a four day workshop on the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand History at the University of NSW and in July a two-day 'Chinese at Australian Federation' Conference in Melbourne. Publications have already appeared from several of these gatherings or are in the process of being produced.²¹ Significant features of all these conferences are the creation of strategic alliances and networks of academic, postgraduate, and professional historians and researchers, librarians, archivists, and museum curators, heritage officers, and community based researchers; the large range of topics covered; and the involvement of historical archaeologists. The creation in February 1999 of the Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora (CSCSD) at the Australian National University is also enhancing research and study of the Chinese diaspora in Australia.²²

Six doctoral theses were completed during the 1990s, five on the history and one on literary self-representation of Chinese Australians with analysis of historical materials.²³ Of these, published versions now include Jan Ryan, *Ancestors: Chinese in colonial Australia*, and Shen Yuānfang, *Dragonseed in the Antipodes: Chinese Australian Autobiographies*, while Paul Jones's PhD is in press.²⁴ While those by Wilton and Darnell, and Sophie Couchman's Masters thesis on the history on Melbourne's Chinatown around Little Bourke Street, remain to be published in book form, some of their results are included in this volume.²⁵ The change reflected in nearly all of these theses is the focus on the Chinese immigrants and the communities they created in Australia. This trend is also to be seen in other publications on the history of the Chinese in Australia: Diana Giese has produced a series of books and studies of oral histories of post-war Chinese Australians²⁶ and Shirley Fitzgerald a history of the Chinese in Sydney.²⁷ Several studies in Chinese of or by local Chinese Australians have also appeared, for instance the autobiography of C.C. Lee, the biography of Arthur Lock Chang, and the study of the Zhongshan people in Australia by his brother Zheng Jiarui.²⁸

There is also the publication of the two-volume work on the Chinese in Australia by Eric Rolls.²⁹ This contains some very useful information and insights, and is well written and readable, as one would expect from one of Australia's most distinguished writers. It is, unfortunately, largely undocumented and its narrative is undisciplined.

Until it is superseded by another scholarly general history of the Chinese in Australia, it remains the authoritative history, however unfortunate this may be. In some respects it is an Australian equivalent to James Ng's *Windows on a Chinese Past*, with the major difference that *Windows* is well documented and the sources can be readily checked and Ng's opinions can be critically assessed. A good general interpretive history of the Chinese in Australia is still needed.

During the 1990s several government funded projects to locate, identify, record, and conserve sites and objects of Chinese Australian heritage have been undertaken. The National Thematic Survey of Chinese Historic Sites initiated by the Museum of Chinese Australian History in 1993 and funded by the Australian Heritage Commission was revived in 2000 as the Chinese Australian Cultural Heritage Project, this time managed by a Sydney-based group in cooperation with the Australian Heritage Commission. A manual and an on-line toolkit are expected to be completed by the middle of 2001. Since 1996 John Fitzgerald has directed a Chinese Heritage at Australian Federation project funded by the Australian Commonwealth Government.³⁰ In 1997, the NSW Ministry for the Arts initiated and has continued funding the 'Golden Threads' project, directed by Janis Wilton, to document the contributions of Chinese to the history of regional New South Wales.³¹ In 1998 and 1999 the NSW Heritage Office in conjunction with the NSW Migrant Heritage Centre has undertaken a project to locate, assess, and list significant items of Chinese cultural heritage in NSW. At the end of 2000 it was announced that the Australian Research Council is funding two major research projects; one on the Chinese on the Victorian goldfields in the nineteenth century and the other on a transnational history of the Chinese in Australia. So the historiographical revolution of the 1990s will continue in this century.

We have, however, still a great way to go. Compared to the North American situation, Chinese Australian history and studies, Asian Australian history and studies, even ethnic history and studies are underdeveloped and do not even appear on the horizon in our Australian universities and schools and their curricula. Nor are there yet any Chinese historical societies in Australia and New Zealand; such societies are strong in nearly all major North American cities.³² Further, American scholarship on the history of the Chinese in the Americas is better organised than in Australia, based on the mastery of both Chinese and non-Chinese language sources, is theoretically sophisticated, and published by some of the best university presses.³³ There is much we in Australia and New Zealand can learn from North American scholarship.

Ethnographic eyes and Sinological ears: trends in research

In my own contributions to our field I have always argued for the development of 'ethnographic eyes and Sinologically tuned ears' necessary for the study of the history of the Chinese in Australia, and I have sought the acceptance of Chinese-Australian studies not only as a sub-field of Australian studies and Australian history but also of Chinese studies and Chinese history.³⁴ The answers to many of the 'problems' in Chinese Australasian history, I suggest, are to be found in the local cultures and traditions in Guangdong and Fujian provinces from which most of our Chinese immigrants came.

There are encouraging signs that these eyes and ears are beginning to appear our field. There is a growing general interest in the Australian and New Zealand, the 'Down Under', Chinese past. This interest is reflected in the large number who attend the various conferences and workshops and in the broad range of papers by the community-based researchers they attract. The interest is reflective of the discovery, and now acceptance, by a growing number of Australians, both European and indigenous, that somewhere in their family past there lurks a Chinese ancestor. Indeed, I have recently mused that where once Australians boasted of a convict ancestry, it may become fashionable in the near future to claim a Chinese ancestry. This acceptance and interest in a Chinese ancestry also involves a growing number of younger Australian-born Chinese who now wish to rediscover or research their own Chinese family past. Some have maintained Chinese language skills; while others are seeking to acquire them, some even going so far as to enrol in successive Chinese language courses in China in order to equip themselves to begin research. One result of this interest has been the formation of Chinese Australian family and community history research groups in Melbourne and Sydney. Another is the new interest among Australian indigenous peoples in their relations with Chinese Australians, as many are discovering a Chinese ancestor, several very prominent Aboriginal activists in Australia being of Aboriginal-Chinese descent. This new interest in Indigenous-Chinese relations led to the well-supported Whitewash Colloquium at the ANU at the beginning of December 2000.³⁵

A very welcome development is the entry of graduates of Chinese studies into graduate research in the history of the Chinese in Australia. The Department of Chinese Studies under Professor Kam Louie at the University of Queensland has a large group of postgraduates exploring issues of Asian identity. One of these is Carole Tan, a Pakeha New Zealander married to a Chinese, who graduated in Chinese studies from the University of Auckland and who is researching the identity formation of Chinese Australians who were children in Australia in the 1920s and 1930s. Another is Michael Williams, a graduate of the University of New England, who is fluent in both Mandarin and Cantonese, has the benefit of a Chinese 'pillow dictionary', and has already established a reputation as an outstanding history researcher with a M.Litt acquired under the supervision of Janis Wilton. He has just completed his first year as a postgraduate scholar at Hong Kong University researching the transnational history of the Chinese Australians in New South Wales and their connections with their *qiaoxiangs*.³⁶ He has acquired extraordinary skills at locating and utilising sources and documents; his discovery of Chinese sources has amazed some of my Chinese *huaqiao* history colleagues in Guangzhou. Other Australian postgraduates, like Kate Bagnall at the University of Sydney researching the history of Chinese-European 'marriages' in the nineteenth-century, are acquiring Chinese language skills while pursuing their research.

The range of research topics, as can be seen from above, is reaching far beyond the perspective of the Chinese as victims or as minor players in the grand narrative of Britannic Australia, although research is also continuing into racial immigration policies.³⁷ And this is even by researchers with no Chinese language skills: a postgraduate student at the ANU is undertaking a biographical study of the prominent Chinese Australian churchman in nineteenth-century Melbourne, Cheok Hong Cheong, and

another postgraduate student at the University of Southern Queensland has recently begun research on a thesis on the history of a Chinese community in Queensland. Scholars such as these will be at the forefront of the next breakthrough in our understanding of the history of the Chinese in Australasia.

The third development is the entry of Sinologists into the field. In Australia we welcome John Fitzgerald at La Trobe University, who brings an outstanding international reputation in Republican China history, and Mobo Gao at the University of Tasmania, who has written a history of his own village in Jiangxi and is interested in assisting in research on the history of *qiaoxiangs*.³⁸ In New Zealand, the Ming-Qing historian, Brian Moloughney of the University of Otago, will join Manying Ip in researching the history of the Chinese in New Zealand.

The ethnographic eye and the Sinological ear are, then, certainly being developed for the study of the history of the Chinese communities in Australia and New Zealand. But what of the availability of Chinese language sources? We have nowhere near the availability of Chinese language sources that are readily available in North America. There, very active Chinese historical societies and Asian American and Ethnic Studies departments have been assiduous in building collections of documents, artefacts, and other sources on the histories of their Chinese and other ethnic sources. In New Zealand, owing to the efforts of James Ng together with other New Zealand Chinese intellectuals, along with one of our contributors, Nigel Murphy, a great deal of Chinese language material has been recovered, located, acquired from their Chinese holders and is now accessible in public libraries. In Australia, a beginning is being made by Michael Williams, in tracing Chinese sources and documents relating to the Chinese migration to and communities in Australia. Proposals are being drawn up for a joint Australian-New Zealand project to acquire copies of Chinese documents relating to the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand located in the People's Republic and Taiwan.

Towards a new historiography: returning 'Chineseness' to the history of the Chinese in Australasia

What might a new historiography of the Chinese in Australasia look like? Despite the development of the ethnographic eye and the sinological ear in Australian and New Zealand historiography, the next major advances in our understanding of the history of our Chinese communities will come about through collaborative research involving our American colleagues and our Chinese colleagues, both in the PRC and in Taiwan, to develop a comparative history of the diasporic Chinese on the 'White' PacRim and one that links this history to the *qiaoxiangs* in China. Such a history will be truly transnational and trans-Pacific and part of Chinese diasporic history. Again I am addressing our Chinese colleagues as much as my Australasian colleagues, for I am taking this opportunity to recruit the interest and involvement of our Chinese colleagues in our research enterprise. Only then will the 'Chineseness' and the 'China' of the history of the Chinese in Australasia be restored.

The new historiography will need first to integrate the discussion of Chinese experience in Australia and New Zealand, and then go on to compare and contrast that history with the history of the Chinese communities in the Pacific Islands and on the

west coast of the American continent. The gold rushes in the nineteenth-century created the transnational circulation of peoples, including Chinese, around the Pacific from the middle of the nineteenth-century. Most Chinese Australasian families were trans-Tasman from the gold rush period onwards, and many if not most were also trans-Pacific, like my own family and other families from the district of Zengcheng, with links in the Pacific Islands and over to California. I have been amazed at the number of requests from Chinese in California for help in tracing a Chinese ancestor who had once lived in Australia. Tracing these movements will involve close collaboration with our North American colleagues.

The new historiography of the Chinese in Australia must return to China and especially to the *qiaoxiangs* in Guangdong and Fujian provinces to study and understand not only 'Chinese' traditions and cultures, but the diversity of local cultures, traditions and histories of the *qiaoxiangs* that provided the cultural and mental baggage of our Chinese Australians and New Zealanders. There has been a revolution in English-language historiography of China in the past three or four decades, making our understanding of nineteenth and twentieth century Chinese history more complex and nuanced. We need to revise, for instance, our understanding of the 'push' factors in Chinese emigration. Not all *qiaoxiangs* were in economic depression in the nineteenth century. The new economic history of nineteenth century Guangdong demonstrates there were different economies in the province. We need to differentiate the depressed economies of the western *qiaoxiangs*, notably Taishan in the nineteenth century, from those on the Pearl River delta area, and from those of the eastern *qiaoxiangs*.³⁹

There were also varying cultural and social traditions within Guangdong and **within** *qiaoxiangs*.⁴⁰ For instance there were vastly differing marriage patterns and traditions in the Pearl River delta region.⁴¹ The diversity of local cultures and tradition within Guangdong itself means it is as dangerous and insulting — not to say inaccurate — to call someone from Taishan Cantonese, as it is to call an Englishman from Essex a Londoner. My own research investigates the migration to New Zealand and Australia not only from the district of Zengcheng but also from a small cluster of villages forming a marketing community in Zengcheng from which a large number of people (including my own great grandfather) migrated in the nineteenth century to New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, California, and Australia. Even in that small cluster of villages there would be some diversity of local traditions and indeed inter and intra village conflicts, as indicated by the history of my branch of the Chan lineage in Sungai village. Such conflicts may explain why my direct ancestors migrated to Australia, unlike members of the first lineage branch who went to New Zealand.

Qiaoxiang, and, even more so, specific family histories and traditions may explain the diverse migratory patterns and community histories of our Chinese in Australia and New Zealand. Why, in the predominantly bachelor society in colonial Australia and New Zealand, were there groups who migrated as intact families, or at least 'paper families', with wives and daughters as well as sons? Or why there was organised migration of Chinese women in the nineteenth century to north America, mostly to act as prostitutes, while this practice did not occur in Australia? *Qiaoxiang* histories may also help us understand why in nineteenth century law court records

in Australia, conflict between Chinese was as much, if not more likely, to be the cause of the legal action as Chinese conflict with White Australians.

It is important to remember that Chinese migration, as Adam McKeown and Chan Kwok Bun remind us, was and still is a family affair.⁴² Many of us diasporic Chinese can relate well to Chan Kwok Bun's insight: 'The lone migrant is seemingly set free to go off home ground, into the air, like a kite — but not without the family pulling the string, if necessary, back to the hearth, though not always successfully. The migrant thus experiences the family in his everyday sojourning life as a real factor, sometimes seeing it as a liability, a constraint, other times as a source of strength and enablement.'⁴³

Too much of what has been written about transnationalism, transnational communities and Chinese transnationalism has been at the level of discussion of the nation-state and globalisation, missing the point that in the Chinese case for over a century and a half it has been the family that is transnational and the individual Chinese migrant the prototype 'hypermobile transilient'.⁴⁴ At one level, the migration of a male family member was part of a Chinese family or lineage economic strategy for survival or wealth creation, at another level the ever presence of 'the family' is part of the Chinese migrant's 'Chineseness'. The current interest in Chinese family histories in Australia may lead to some deeper understanding of the history of the Chinese in Australia and indeed of Chinese transnationalism. As I hope to show in a biographical study of Quong Tart (Mei Guangda), though he is regarded in Australian history as an assimilated 'Australian mandarin' in nineteenth century Australia, he was in fact a typical Chinese transilient, and the Mei family a nineteenth-century Chinese transnational one. Transnationalism has become a fashionable concept but it may already be becoming passé: in the twenty-first century national states will become porous, and the real threat will be closure at the cultural and ethnic level.⁴⁵

If family-centredness is a central part of the 'Chineseness' of the transnational Chinese past and present, then so too are the long periods of separateness from family, loved ones, and friends part of being Chinese overseas, and one that has intrigued non-Chinese. Here, too, one needs an understanding of Chinese culture and an appreciation that departure, absence and separation are some of the key motifs in Chinese poetry from Han and Southern dynasties' love poetry (from first century BCE to the sixth CE) to that of the Tang poets, Li Bai, Wang Bo, and Wang Wei, and beyond the Tang. Chinese scholar-officials spent long periods on official duties away from home, family, and friends, and on parting Chinese scholarly friends composed verse for each other. Travel, separation and longing are not only the motifs of the Chinese diaspora but are central motifs of Chinese culture.⁴⁶

We now know that many Chinese men in Australia and New Zealand allayed their 'separation' by forming alliances with local non-Chinese women. Again it is important to get beyond nineteenth-century Victorian notions of 'respectability' and return to China and Chinese and *qiaoxiang* traditions and family practices.⁴⁷ Many Chinese migrant households were amenable to the establishment of more than one family centre, one in China and one in Australia. Many of the marriages to local women, Chinese or non-Chinese, were secondary marriages, and many non-Chinese wives were shocked when they returned to their husband's village and met the primary