

# **AFTER THE RUSH**

## **Regulation, Participation, and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860–1940.**

*Edited by Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor.*

Victoria (Australia): *Otherland Literary Journal* (Special Issue No 9). 2004. vi 249 pp. (Tables graphs B&W photos. A\$29.95 paper. ISBN 0-646-44352-6

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These 17 papers were among over 50 presented at the international *Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation* conference at the Chinese Museum in Melbourne in 2000. They update earlier histories of the Chinese in Australia written while Australia's White Australia policy was still operating, isolating the country politically, intellectually and emotionally from Asia, and from its own Asian (primarily Chinese) residents. Today, increased Asian immigration, a vastly altered social awareness and a more robust political and economic dialogue with Asia, change how this history can and must be understood.

The discussion in early chapters, of citizenship and community, could profitably be required reading in Australian high-schools, given most Australians' vagueness about the terms of their citizenship. Indeed, we see that, apart from an expressed determination to privilege the "British type", the drafters of the Constitution were almost silent on citizenship, its obligations and rights. Since Federation, immigration legislation has consistently had less to do with clarification than with political and economic expediency, too often lightly disguising xenophobia.

The Immigration Restriction Act enacted by the new parliament in 1901, with its notorious "dictation test" that persisted until 1958, is the dirge behind the melody in most chapters. Thousands of records remain, notably those documenting the exemptions sought by "domiciles" to visit their homeland and return (though readmission was never guaranteed). The files are a rich seam yet to be fully mined, but some fascinating excerpts here distil a human dimension from dry records, commending them for further study.

A recurrent issue is the enormous gender imbalance, in part caused by immigration policies. For example, in one count in Victoria in the early 1860s, the Chinese made up 12% of the population, with 24,724 males but just 8 females! Liaisons with Anglo women (even those of poor character and behaviour) often heightened resentment, and offspring suffered the liminal status familiar the world over, perhaps even more on visits to China than in Australia. In cases where men married in China, it was not until the 1960s that many of these wives were able to join their husbands in Australia.

Gradually and often painfully, as the second half of the book shows, the Chinese and Anglo-Celtic communities reached a lasting accommodation, overcoming mistrust and hostility. Opportunities afforded by World War 2 and a common enemy were squandered in the cold war fear of communism and the "Yellow Peril" from the north. But by contrast, Chinese participation in the quintessentially Australian sport of Australian Rules football, and paradoxically the Chinese Masonic Society (which grew out of the Hung League secret society), helped promote integration into Australian Society.

Informative this book certainly is, but given the subject matter and the time it covers, it could hardly be a "pleasant read" — accounts of institutionalised racism, even when overcome, never are. But

the adaptability and optimism of the Chinese Australians who people its pages, and frequent evidence of decency on the part of many ordinary Australians and officials (including commendable instances of true impartiality on the part of the courts), provide the key to the successful multicultural mix that is Australia today. The Pauline Hanson outburst of the 1990s shows that the racism so malignant in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australia still festers in some. But the main message here is that for a century and a half, ethnic Chinese subjects (even when not citizens) have contributed much to Australia's developing society. It reaffirms what has been shown in so many countries, that people of goodwill and common purpose from very different backgrounds not only *can* live together, but can grow a truly syncretic community. It is a message that politicians worldwide should reflect upon in these troubled times.

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