

GOLDEN SHADOWS ON A WHITE LAND

An exploration of the lives of white
women who partnered Chinese men and
their children in southern Australia,
1855 – 1915

KATE BAGNALL

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Department of History
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We walked up to the house and stood some minutes
watching the swallows that flew about restlessly, and
flung their shadows upon the sunbright walls of the old
building; the shadows glanced and twinkled,
interchanged and crossed each other, expanded and
shrunk up, appeared and disappeared every instant.

Dorothy Wordsworth
Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the experiences of white women who partnered Chinese men and their children in southern Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has been based on a wide range of sources, including newspapers, government reports, birth and marriage records, personal reminiscences and family lore, and highlights the contradictory images and representations of Chinese-European couples and their families which exist in those sources. It reveals that in spite of the hostility towards intimate interracial relationships so strongly expressed in discourse, hundreds of white women and Chinese men in colonial Australia came together for reasons of love, companionship, security, sexual fulfilment and the formation of family. They lived, worked and loved in and between two very different communities and cultures, each of which could be disapproving and critical of their crossing of racial boundaries. As part of this exploration of lives across and between cultures, the thesis further considers those families who spent time in Hong Kong and China.

The lives of these couples and their Anglo-Chinese families are largely missing from the history of the Chinese in Australia and of migration and colonial race relations more generally. They are historical subjects whose experiences have remained in the shadows and on the margins. This thesis aims to throw light on those shadows, contributing to our knowledge not only of interactions between individual Chinese men and white women, but also of the way mixed race couples and their children interacted with their extended families and communities in Australia and China. This thesis demonstrates that their lives were complex negotiations across race, culture and geography which challenged strict racial and social categorisation.

DECLARATION

The work presented in this thesis is original and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. The material has not been submitted, either in whole or part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Parts of this thesis have been published in different form as:

- ‘Across the threshold: White women and Chinese hawkers in the white colonial imaginary’, *Hecate*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2002, pp. 9-32.
- ‘“I am nearly heartbroken about him”: Stories of Australian mothers’ separation from their “Chinese” children’, *History Australia*, vol. 1, no. 1, December 2003, pp. 30-40.
- ‘“He would be a Chinese still”: Negotiating boundaries of race, culture and identity in late nineteenth-century Australia’, in Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (eds), *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation, and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860 – 1940 – Otherland Literary Journal*, no. 9, 2004, pp. 153-70.

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The writing of this thesis has been a long journey for me personally and intellectually. The idea of it began in a particular place and with a particular book. The place was Zhuhai, the southern Chinese city located directly across the border from Macau, and the book was Susanna Hoe's *Chinese Footprints*.¹ After finishing an Honours degree with a major in Australian history, in 1997 I travelled to Zhuhai to teach English and to take some time to decide on what I wanted to do next with my life. Half-way through the year I discovered *Chinese Footprints* and with it not only a beautiful and personal exploration of the histories of Chinese and Western women in the region in which I was living, but also the joy Susanna Hoe found as an historian uncovering and writing about their lives. I then made a decision that when I returned to Australia I would continue my own journey by undertaking postgraduate studies in history. My initial idea was to research the lives of Chinese women in colonial Australia.

That idea has gradually developed into this thesis, one that focuses not on migrant Chinese women in Australia, but instead on white women who formed relationships with Chinese men and the Anglo-Chinese families they created. After being told by one researcher early on in my studies that I would not find much material on this subject, I have instead been overwhelmed with the possibilities the topic has opened up. I have also been very fortunate to meet a wide range of people who have provided me with source material, research assistance, encouragement and friendship as the project has progressed.

My supervisor, Dr Penny Russell, has provided valuable guidance and helpful comment on my work from its awkward and uncertain beginnings to its final form. She has also provided invaluable assistance in dealing with the administrative matters of a student who for the last half of her candidature has rarely set foot on the university campus.

¹ Susanne Hoe, *Chinese Footprints: Exploring Women's History in China, Hong Kong and Macau*, Roundhouse Publications (Asia), Hong Kong, 1996.

The Faculty of Arts and Department of History at Sydney University have provided financial assistance in the form of an Australian Postgraduate Award, and funds to undertake research in Hong Kong and China, to attend conferences and to assist with general study expenses. I was also fortunate to be selected by the Department of Chinese Studies at Sydney University to receive a Chinese government scholarship to study Chinese language at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, China for six months, an experience which added depth to my understanding of both the language and culture of China.

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This thesis has benefited from discussion, comment and critique from a number of sources other than those already mentioned. Papers based on this research have been presented at conferences organised by the Australian Historical Association, the CHAF project and the CAHS and a number have subsequently been published (see the Bibliography for publication details). I thank those who have contributed to discussions after conference presentations and to those who have commented on drafts prior to publication.

Since its beginnings, this thesis has grown ever more personal and it is inseparable from the experiences I have had as part of two families, my Australian one and my Chinese one. My parents, John and Carlene Bagnall, have provided both material and emotional support, helping in countless practical ways—from trawling through BDMs with me, to proofreading and debates over word usage. They have waited a long time for this thesis to be finished and I thank them for their patience as the journey has taken me along roads neither they, nor I, had imagined. Finally, this thesis would not be what it is without the contribution of my husband, Xavier Xiaojian Tan. Xavier and his family in Zhuhai and Taishan have provided me with

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A NOTE ON USAGE

In this thesis the words white, European and Western are used interchangeably and include those of British, Irish, continental European and American background. I have generally used the term Chinese-European to refer to couples comprising a Chinese man and white woman, and Anglo-Chinese to refer to their mixed race children and families who, in other contexts, are often referred to as 'half-Chinese' or 'Eurasian'.

The subjects of this thesis were known by different names throughout their lives and in different contexts. I have referred to women by a combination of their maiden and married names, where possible using the name they themselves used. In English-language sources the names of Chinese men appear in different spellings and combinations, so for each man I have adopted one of these variations as my standard. I have taken the liberty of referring to my subjects by their given names, in part because it provides a simple way to distinguish between family members, but also because it seems inappropriate to be too formal or impersonal in discussions which centre on domestic and family situations.

Romanisation of Chinese

This thesis has been created primarily from English-language sources – written and oral accounts within which the Chinese names of people, places, businesses and organisations have been romanised and pronounced in varying ways. The Chinese in nineteenth-century Australia spoke a number of different dialects and they and the English-speaking community around them had no standard way in which to record their Chinese words in English script.

As it would be near impossible to retrospectively impose such a standard form of romanisation for these names, I have chosen instead to use the anglicised forms of Chinese names found in common Australian usage of the time and in English-language records. People are therefore referred to by the English versions of their names (Quong Tart rather than *Mei Guangda*; William Liu rather than *Liu Guangfu*), as

are Chinese cities and prominent Pearl River Delta towns, such as Hong Kong, Canton, Shekki and Kongmoon.

For places and terms which are not well-known in an anglicised form I have generally used standard Mandarin (*putonghua*) pronunciations in *pinyin* romanisation, except where the term is one specific to Cantonese (e.g. *fāan gwái*, 'foreign devil'), in which case I have used the Yale romanisation system. This use of romanised Mandarin includes the names of the counties and smaller towns and villages of the Pearl River Delta, the ancestral homes to many Chinese in NSW. In most instances it was possible to ascertain the original Chinese name from English-language records, but where it was not the original English spelling has been used.

The glossary lists Chinese characters for people, places and other Chinese terms when known.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
CEDT	Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test
CoD	Certificate of Domicile
ML MSS	Mitchell Library Manuscript
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NSW	New South Wales
NSW BDM	NSW Birth Death and Marriage registrations
NSW LA V&P	NSW Legislative Assembly Votes and Proceedings
QLD	Queensland
RCACG	<i>Report of the Royal Commission into Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality</i>
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
SRNSW	State Records NSW
VIC	Victoria