Creating White Australia

Edited by Jane Carey and Claire McLisky
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For a number of years now, cultural historians have looked to the experiences of Chinese migrant communities to interrogate established narratives of national cultural development. In recent years, Chinese diaspora studies has consolidated its position as a vital stream in a broader shift away from historical frameworks centred on the nation state and towards considerations of the transnational. In Australia, this realignment is challenging a number of long-accepted interpretations of whiteness and otherness, as emerging scholarship produces more nuanced and sophisticated readings of our colonial past. For historians considering the Australian goldfields, the emergence of a strong Chinese focus in readings of colonial history has cast new light on the cultural complexity of the era.

With this context in mind, this chapter touches upon a larger research framework and a methodological approach that we have been

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1 The authors would like to thank Antoinette Dillon; the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Victoria; Heritage Victoria; Valerie Lovejoy and Kirsty Marshall for permission to use images; and Exeter College, University of Oxford. Keir Reeves would like to acknowledge the students who took his 2007 ‘Heritage Workshop: Chinese in Australia’ fourth-year honours seminar at the University of Melbourne; much of the fieldwork and ideas for this chapter were formulated as part of this unit. This chapter is an outcome of an ARC Linkage Project (LP0667552) entitled ‘Layers of meaning: historical studies in central Victoria’s regional heritage 1834–1950’ and fieldwork was made possible by a University of Melbourne Faculty of Arts seeding grant.
exploring and refining, in consultation with a number of colleagues, over the last few years. It focuses on the advantages of using a range of historical methods to explore the Chinese experience on the Australian goldfields, and in doing so raises a number of broader questions on the merits of competing approaches. It argues that historians, and other cultural practitioners, can look to a number of different sources in order to interpret and reinterpret colonial history. This approach is particularly valid when seeking out a more sophisticated understanding of the goldfields Chinese and when evaluating notions of cultural hegemony and long-standing European interpretations of the Victorian goldseeking experience.

As Ann Curthoys reminds us in her work on New South Wales, the experiences of the thousands of Chinese goldseekers who arrived in the 19th century continue to cast a long and often dark shadow over Australian colonial history.\(^2\) There are a number of important stories that remain to be told. This chapter explores an evolving approach to rediscovering some of these hidden histories and navigates some of the challenges that have emerged (or may emerge) from a rapidly growing historiography.

**The remaking of Chinese-Australian history**

For much of the 20th century, Australian historians paid relatively little attention to the thousands of Chinese goldseekers who came to this country in the 19th century and to the broader patterns of cultural transmission of which they were a part. Obscured in both celebratory and radical nationalist readings of our colonial past, the extent and significance of the Chinese experience in Australia was generally underrated.

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The recent upsurge in interest in Chinese-Australian history has provided an opportunity to link local research with parallel work being carried out overseas. Studies of Chinese migration networks, political and native-place organisations, financial interests, and other patterns of social and cultural transmission across the globe have added new dimensions to our understanding of the overseas Chinese and their role (as both sojourners and settlers) in shaping the character of Australian society.3 In considering future directions and implications of cultural research in this country, ethno-histories, and in particular diasporic studies, provide an opportunity to locate Australian history in a global context. As such, historians of the Chinese in Australia have considerable scope to contribute to a more worldly Australian history and move away from some of the insular preoccupations of the past.4

Without downplaying the significance of recent advances, it remains vital that historians seeking new histories of the Chinese in colonial Australia continually refine their research methodologies. This process involves balancing insights gained from emerging studies and the continuous release of new source material (as archives move to accommodate shifts in community and academic interest) with a consideration of alternative viewpoints and approaches. Engaged in ‘a new and proliferating subject’ we must resist a tendency to skew our work toward established traditions and audiences.5 In their recent study The

3 John Fitzgerald’s *Big white lie* considers a number of these themes and seeks to relate the Chinese-Australian case to contemporaneous overseas developments. John Fitzgerald, *Big white lie* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).
Chinese in Britain, for instance, Benton and Gomez provide a timely reminder of the risks of overstating the transnational aspects of overseas Chinese experience.6 As Australian historians seek to liberate Chinese goldseekers from traditional depictions as faceless troupes of labourers or the passive victims of racial chauvinism, we must be wary of establishing equally crude transnational stereotypes, where individuals and considerations of identity-formation become lost in grand narratives of migration and cultural internationalism.

**Personal history and cultural landscape**

With these challenges in mind, this chapter considers two areas of Chinese-Australian history that the authors feel require further investigation. The first relates to the need to seek out personal perspectives and biographical histories of goldfields Chinese. Despite recent advances, Chinese-Australian studies have had limited success in seeking out individuals and their stories, particularly in the colonial era.7 To some extent this omission is unavoidable. Despite the significant number of Chinese immigrants to Victoria in the 19th century, no central body of archival documents from the community survives. This limitation makes writing a conventional history of the colonial Chinese difficult, irrespective of its desirability. This challenge is particularly pronounced when it comes to seeking out personal histories. Viewed though the fragments of evidence in which colonial society documented their existence, Chinese miners have often been portrayed collectively as


isolated and passive participants in goldfields communities.\textsuperscript{8} Unchallenged by rich, personal stories, an enduring characterisation of the faceless, shabby alluvial digger, eking out a living at the fringes of society, dominates both sympathetic and hostile readings of period.

The second research pathway, one that we contend has been under-utilised, relates to the interpretation of relic mining landscapes of the central Victorian Goldfields (see figure 1). Often confusing and contradictory, shaped by varied combinations of human impact and revegetation, these multifaceted spaces present a challenge to historians and heritage professionals alike. Despite a recent acceleration in attempts to provide themed interpretation on the goldfields (including the provision of audio-visual material at Castlemaine and Bendigo) there remains a need for continuing critical analysis and refinement.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{map.png}
\caption{Map of South Eastern Australia Showing Key Goldmining Sites. Courtesy of Antoinette Dillon.}
\end{figure}

This task presents a number of obvious challenges. Moving from subtle bushland ruins to iconic regional centres such as Bendigo and Ballarat, interpreting the goldfields as they appear today requires a fluid and pragmatic investigative model. One flaw of heritage studies to date has been the lack of serious theoretical precepts for analysing the past in the present day. Unlike history, there is no established canon from which to draw historiographical insight or critique. Our response is to take landscape as an evidentiary medium; one that enables the practitioner to put history back into place. One important aspect here is the development of a framework for better understanding landscapes by inscribing them with human narratives. Through this process historical landscapes, such as the Chinese precinct of the goldfields city of Bendigo, can be better interpreted. Complex (and sometimes contradictory) understandings of Chinese-European relations also start to emerge. These relations highlight an ambiguous cultural encounter and can provide the historian with a glimpse of Chinese subaltern perspectives.

In responding to the often distorted nature of source material relating to the colonial Chinese and to the complexity of reading remnant colonial landscapes, we have attempted to devise a tandem approach, with personal insights and landscape analysis supporting one another. This strategy follows Keith Jenkins’ assertion that historical writing can draw on a range of complementary methodologies.\(^9\) To date, the most effective proponents of this style of approach in Chinese-Australian studies have been Jane Lydon, Grace Karskens and Alan Mayne.\(^10\) By creating a new cultural history framework for the central Victorian

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Goldfields, one that encompasses both people and place, we can begin to unpack a regional historical narrative.

This process rests on an understanding of the concept of the ‘cultural landscape’. When using the term cultural landscapes we refer to the remnants of the built environments created as a consequence of gold discoveries together with the collateral visual, oral and documentary material that assists in the interpretation of these environments. This concept is especially useful for an analysis of diverse heritage sites across the central Victorian diggings and is particularly appealing for Chinese-focused studies because of the relatively scarce nature of archival sources. Cultural landscapes provide an important conceptual tool for investigating how human activity has shaped the built environment and how, in turn, the natural environment has impacted on human activity.11 This approach to interpretation is also of relevance to a broad audience as it provides a methodology for a range of cultural practitioners (including curators, heritage consultants, and site managers) to identify and interpret successive layers of heritage. In Australian history, these layers of past may include the Indigenous presence, convict settlement, pastoralism, or the impact of the agricultural, maritime, military or timber industries.

For the historian seeking new insights to the experience of the Chinese on the Australian goldfields, the value of landscape analysis is enriched when it is combined with personal or biographical studies. This relationship is mutually supportive, as a research framework incorporating a reading of a subject’s surroundings can open new avenues of investigation for the biographer exploring personal impressions of the colonial Chinese. In both scenarios, by linking a reading of remnant goldfields landscapes to a consideration of day-to-day life, we can begin to investigate subtle interactions between people and

place. This complementary approach allows the historian to bring together a range of disparate sources and may in time help repopulate ambiguous historical spaces (and surviving visual records) with vibrant individual narratives. By seeking an understanding of cultural landscapes, and setting them as a cultural and spatial context to individual narratives, historians of the goldfields Chinese can supplement documentary records and relocate the individual into the *mise en scène*.

**Fook Shing and the Bendigo diggings**

To demonstrate this process, the authors are currently engaged in a research project that centres on the story of Fook Shing, a prominent goldfields personality, who settled in Victoria and served as a police detective in the years after the rush. By taking a complementary approach and synthesising a range of historical sources, we are attempting to unearth some of the complex patterns of social interaction that characterised Fook Shing’s life on the Bendigo diggings in the 1850s. The aim of this approach is to seek out a more detailed understanding of one Chinese-Australian’s goldfields experience and to draw on that individual narrative to uncover new insights into the hidden history of the region.

For the historian seeking a personal window to the Chinese in colonial Victoria, Fook Shing (sometimes Bay Fok Sing, Fok Sing, Fook Ching, Fook Sing, Fook Shing and finally Henry Fook Shing) has left behind a wealth of material.12 Though a more detailed examination of Fook Shing’s personal narrative forms the basis of our broader study, a brief survey of his involvement in the Bendigo community during the 1850s provides an indication of the sophistication of Fook Shing’s goldfields experience. From a methodological perspective, Fook Shing’s personal story also offers a number of insights into how a biographical history might complement a reading of Bendigo’s cultural landscape.

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12 For a more detailed account of Fook Shing’s life on the goldfields and a complete catalogue of associated references see Benjamin Mountford, ‘In search of Fook Shing: detective stories from colonial Victoria’ (Honours thesis, University of Melbourne, 2007).
Fook Shing was a ubiquitous figure across the colony of Victoria throughout much of his professional life. A native of Guangzhou, he arrived in Victoria via Adelaide in January 1854, making his way quickly to the goldfields at Bendigo. Like so many of the Chinese gold diggers who arrived in Victoria in the 1850s, his family farmed the land in troubled Guangdong province. As rapid population growth and political instability shook the region, Fook Shing joined the mass of his countrymen seeking new opportunities abroad. He took work as a ship’s steward and a serving boy at Singapore, reaching Victoria as his countrymen began to arrive en masse.

At Bendigo, Fook Shing took an active role in the rapidly expanding local community. As both a formative leader of the Bendigo Sheathed Sword society, a triad organisation representing his Sze Yup countrymen, and a headman in the Victorian government’s Chinese Protectorate system, he established significant local authority. He took an active role in cultural and political life, attacking Christian missionaries and their efforts to convert Chinese diggers, campaigning against the Victorian government’s efforts to restrict Chinese immigration, and playing a prominent role in the erection of a Chinese temple. Fook Shing was also

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13 According to his certificate of naturalisation, Fook Shing arrived in Adelaide via Singapore aboard the Swan and then travelled to Melbourne aboard a ship ‘the name of which ... [he] could not remember’. ‘Naturalisation Papers: Fook Shing’, Series A 712/1, Item 1859/L10690, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra.


16 In addition to serving as places of worship, Chinese temples were social spaces and meeting points for local communities. Jutta Niemeier, ‘The changing role of the See Yup Temple in Melbourne, 1866–1993’, in Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific: proceedings of an International Public Conference held at the Museum of Chinese Australian history, Melbourne, 8–10 October 1993, ed. Paul Macgregor (Melbourne: The
involved in a range of business ventures on the goldfields. As Protectorate employment declined in the later 1850s, he began touring a successful Chinese theatre company across central Victoria and opened a store at Ballarat. Ongoing research shows he may also have been the ‘Fok Sing’ involved in the construction of a large brick kiln uncovered at Bendigo’s PepperGreen Farm (see below). By the end of the 1850s, Fook Shing had become a naturalised Briton, and had purchased a house and land package across from the government reserve in Bendigo.

For a snapshot of the complexity of Fook Shing’s goldfields narrative, we turn our attention to an episode that took place in 1856. On 3 November of that year, at Castlemaine’s Primitive Methodist Chapel, the Reverend William Young delivered a report on the local Chinese mission.17 Frustrated by what he perceived to be a prevalence of idolatry in the goldfields camps, Young castigated the Chinese for their lukewarm response to Christian teaching, expressing great disappointment that ‘the seeds of divine truth … [had made] no deep religious impression’.18 Elaborating on the failure, he recalled a recent visit to the Clinkers Hill Chinese camp, where he had been ridiculed by two headmen.19 Most vocal was a leader from Bendigo:

When he was told there was but one God, he replied—Englishmen may worship one God, we Chinese worship hundreds of gods. When I offered

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18 Cronin, Colonial casualties, 108.

19 According to the Mount Alexander Mail concerns were mounting about growing idolatry among the Chinese toward the end of 1856. On average 612 Chinese had been attending the mission Sunday services. The Chinese chapel on Clinkers Hill had been successfully renovated to improve conditions in summer and completely at the expense of the local Chinese community. Mount Alexander Mail, 10 November 1856.
him a copy of the bible he rejected it with disdain, and said he could not read or understand that book, and that he liked Chinese books better.  

As Young left the camp in defeat, the headman called out to him:

You sir, go about teaching the Chinese with a view of making them Christians. I can tell you a very easy method by which you can do that; just promise to give each man £3 a-week, and, I will pledge myself to bring you fifty Chinese Christians.

Though the Bendigo headman is not named, Young’s detractor was almost certainly Fook Shing, who made similar anti-Christian affirmations elsewhere. His identity is affirmed by a number of factors, such as Young’s assertion that the headman he encountered at Clinkers Hill had ‘taken a prominent part in the erection of the Joss house at Long Gully ... Bendigo and was champion of idolatry there.

This vibrant episode is one of many from Fook Shing’s personal story that provide the historian with a vignette of day-to-day life in the Chinese camps. As well as raising a number of questions about the influence of missionary activity and Christian teaching on the Victorian Chinese communities, Fook Shing’s treatment of Young prompts considerations of broader patterns of cultural transmission and community identification. By taking his personal perspective as our focal point, we are able to approach these complex questions at the micro-level, taking into account

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid. For an account of the work of missionary societies amongst the colonial Chinese see Cronin, Colonial casualties, 107–23.
22 Mountford, 20–3.
relationships between the individual and the collective. Fook Shing’s actions at the Clinkers Hill Camp can thus be read as an expression of Chinese community resistance to missionary endeavour but also understood as a concerted effort by a government employee to emphasise his Chinese cultural affiliations and to downplay his role as a colonial agent. By setting himself in opposition to those Asian-Australians (like Young) actively promoting Western values, he fortified his own position amongst the parochial diggings Chinese. The suggestion that Fook Shing’s anti-Christian stance rested on political (rather than spiritual) foundations is supported by his readiness to marry spinster Ellen Mary Fling in a Christian ceremony, held at Melbourne’s Congregational and Independent Church in July 1857 (see figure 2 below).

Though only touched upon here, Fook Shing’s story demonstrates the capacity of personal ethno-history to substantially enrich our understanding of colonial society. In contrast with the enduring image of the faceless, downtrodden Chinese digger (or the usual counterpoint, the flamboyant, urban Chinese entrepreneur) which dominates Australian history, his goldfields narrative provides a framework for interrogating a number of long-standing perceptions of the Chinese in 19th-century Australia. Neither simply ‘collaborator’ nor pro-Chinese ‘chief’, he offers a more complex, pragmatic image of the Chinese on the diggings. His readiness to adapt to Australian society and commitment to carving out a place in his adopted home provides a personal dimension to ongoing arguments over the sojourning mentality of Chinese goldseekers.

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26 This commitment remained strong for the rest of his life. After the collapse of the Chinese Protectorate system in 1859, Fook Shing went on to serve as government interpreter and eventually became Victoria’s longest-serving Chinese detective. In the large number of personal and professional records so far uncovered, Fook Shing gives no indication of any intention to return to China.
Reading the historical layers of White Hills, Bendigo

In moving from personal history to a discussion of landscape we suggest that by considering people and place together, a more sophisticated analysis of heritage sites can be realised. The need for greater heritage interpretation has only recently been acknowledged by cultural heritage practitioners in general and Australian historians in particular. Accordingly, we contend that Fook Shing’s historical experience cannot be fully understood independently of the cultural landscape of White Hills, Bendigo (see figure 3), where he spent much of his time on the goldfields. Equally, it is only by anchoring the biographical details of his life to defined places that a deeper understanding of colonial Bendigo can be achieved.
White Hills, Bendigo, Fook Shing’s former stamping ground, offers an excellent case for reading a cultural landscape. It should be noted that heritage professionals are mainly in agreement about the existence of cultural landscapes and their significance, yet the defining characteristics of such landscapes are not so easily identified. The Ironbark Camp, now

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known as the Chinese Camp, is the key Chinese heritage site in White Hills. The Ironbark Camp, also known in colonial administrative circles as the Chinese Protectorate, was the largest and most enduring camp in Bendigo. Situated at the northern terminus of the Bendigo tram, Ironbark Camp and its surrounding precinct comprise the key 19th-century Chinese heritage sites of the city. The Chinese temple, which is still known locally by the derogatory term Joss House, was where Chinese goldseekers practised their religious custom and engaged in many social activities. Today it stands as a remarkable relic of the goldrush era and as a reminder of the enduring Chinese presence throughout the region.

Figure 4: Excavation of Chinese Kiln and Market Garden, PepperGreen Farm. Courtesy of Heritage Victoria.

Until recently the Chinese temple comprised a single element of Chinese culture in an otherwise European streetscape. However, in 2005 a community access program undertook a fencing project at PepperGreen Farm, situated some 200 metres from the Chinese temple.
(see figure 4). During the project participants uncovered a large brick-kiln. Originally constructed by A’Fok, Fok Sing and Co in 1859, a subsequent excavation by Heritage Victoria revealed a large conical structure, much of which remained buried underground. This startling find represented one of the largest archaeological discoveries of Chinese activity outside of China and highlighted the extent of the Chinese role on the Bendigo diggings during the rushes.

It transpires that PepperGreen Farm was also previously a Chinese market garden. It is probable that the Chinese who operated the kiln concentrated their work on the market following the kiln’s closure during the 1880s. Archaeological excavation carried out in 2006 revealed a range of smaller artefacts that indicated the kiln was part of a significant commercial concern whose products were for both Chinese and European clientele. Market gardening on the site continued well into the 20th century. The scale of the market gardens and the varieties of fruit and vegetables produced indicate the Chinese community’s role in providing nutritious food to a notoriously dry region of Victoria.29

Perhaps the most enduring, and well-known, continuous physical presence of the Chinese community in Bendigo is manifested at the White Hills cemetery. While most of the Chinese goldseekers returned to China, a significant minority were not sojourners and instead remained in regional Victorian goldfields centres such as Bendigo, Castlemaine and Ballarat. A major replacement of headstones and the preservation of the burning tower make it a key Chinese burial ground in the southwest Pacific (see figure 5). The scale of the headstones in the Chinese burial

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ground section challenge the sojourning stereotype of the typical Chinese goldseeker. As Warwick Frost has pointed out:

the very physicality of the cemetery, both its presence and its size, makes apparent tensions within the Chinese goldfields narrative … [and] suggests another story of Chinese life on the Victorian goldfields in which the Chinese became settler Australians.\(^30\)

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Figure 5: A Chinese headstone, White Hills cemetery. Courtesy of Kirsty Marshall.

Bendigo’s historically layered landscape highlights the broader cultural themes of goldseeking and migration that are central to understanding

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the region. While White Hills can be read as a vernacular landscape (as Jackson has done in America) it is one that is also intricately linked with underlying historical forces of global capital and colonial settlement.31 If we consider the temple, the kiln, the White Hills cemetery, and the market gardens as an assembly of Chinese heritage sites, then the claim of national and international significance is a tenable assertion. These heritage locations are, however, in many respects subtle parts of the cultural landscape and require human narratives in order to bring a greater depth of meaning and historical context. Without historical interpretation they stand as peripatetic elements in a little-known cultural landscape.

Though we seek to foreground the individual narrative in this interpretation, it is important to avoid setting Fook Shing and his contemporaries as stylised Chinese-antipodean caricatures or, conversely, to elevate them uncritically as universalising cultural metonyms. It is necessary, rather, to interpret personal histories as part of a broader global movement of people and transmission of ideas that underpinned the 19th-century gold discoveries. As such, Fook Shing can be equally understood as a Protectorate headman in the employ of the Victorian colonial authorities; a nefarious Chinese community leader; a businessman with a stated interest in the White Hills brickworks; and a pioneer with a vested interest in the development of Bendigo and, in turn, the machinations of the British Empire. These traits should not be treated as mutually exclusive.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have argued that it is necessary to consider people and place together in order to historically analyse the Chinese experience in the predominantly British colonial setting of goldrush-era Bendigo. Here

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we have been particularly concerned with exploring a methodology that we hope will inspire new considerations of Chinese perspectives within colonial history. By linking people and place (individuals and historical landscapes) we have an opportunity to uncover another layer of history on the diggings and to reinterpret the physical legacy of this history in the present day. Recognising the complexity of cultural identification on the goldfields, particularly across boundaries of race and ethnicity, promises new insights into 19th-century Australian society and our understanding of the importance of ‘whiteness’.