CHAPTER 1

The Transformative Effect of Australian Experience on the Life of Ho A Mei, Hong Kong Community Leader and Entrepreneur

Pauline Rule

Abstract

Ho A Mei, one of the earliest young Chinese to receive a thorough English education in the colony of Hong Kong, spent ten difficult years (1858–1868) striving to make a fortune in the gold rush colony of Victoria. There he learnt much about modern business practices and ventures and also protested against the racial hostility the Chinese encountered. Eventually, after his retreat back to Hong Kong and Guangdong, he was successful partly because of his experiences in the advanced capitalist economy of colonial Victoria. This led him to move beyond the mercantile enterprises and property buying that were key activities of many Hong Kong Chinese businessmen into the areas of modern financial and telegraph services and mining ventures. He also frequently spoke out in a provocative manner against the colonial government over injustices and discrimination that limited the rights and freedom of the Chinese in Hong Kong. During the 1880s and 1890s he was a recognised Chinese community leader, one whose assertiveness on behalf of Chinese interests was not always appreciated by the Hong Kong authorities.

Keywords

Chinese political activity – Australian goldfields – Chinese interpreters – Chinese modernisers

As a young man, Ho A Mei (何亞美 He Yamei, also 何獻墀 He Xianchi 1838–1901)—a significant 19th-century Chinese spokesman and entrepreneur—spent ten formative years (1858–1868) in colonial Victoria. Within a decade of his return to Hong Kong, he emerged as a leading Chinese identity and businessman and, eventually, as an outspoken critic of British restrictions on Chinese freedoms, both business and personal. His exposure to the treatment of the Chinese as an inferior and unwanted immigrant group by the white set-
tlers of Australia made him acutely sensitive to attempts by the Hong Kong government to restrict or change Chinese practices. At a time when Chinese opinion was often courteously expressed through delegations and representations to the authorities, Ho A Mei was quick to speak out assertively in western arenas of public opinion.

In 1881, as one of the very first Chinese to attend the Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce, an institution that overwhelmingly represented western business concerns, he immediately proposed to the chamber that it petition the Governor to lift the restrictions on Chinese emigration to Hawaii, where he argued Chinese emigrants were “well cared for” (*China Mail*, hereafter *CM*, 10 March 1881: 3). The recent prohibition on this emigration had, he argued, resulted in emigrants now leaving from Canton and, in consequence, Hong Kong had experienced a significant decline in business activity (*CM*, 11 March 1881: 3). In 1891, Chinese merchants, ship-owners and traders petitioned the Hong Kong government to rescind a new ordinance that banned the movement of cargo on a Sunday from European ships in Hong Kong harbour. It was only permitted if an expensive permit was purchased. Ho A Mei spearheaded the Chinese opposition and ensured that his letters to the government presenting the Chinese position were published in the colony’s English newspapers (*CM*, 26 August 1891: 3; *Hong Kong Daily Press*, hereafter *HKDP*, 26 August 1891: 2).

The appearance of plague in Hong Kong in the mid-1890s resulted in unprecedented government intrusion into the lives of the colony’s Chinese inhabitants, with the searching of Chinese homes, burning of houses and corpses, and the removal of plague victims from the Chinese hospital, the Tung Wah, to a hospital ship where they were treated by western not Chinese doctors (Carroll 2007: 66–7). The latter action resulted in riots by the Chinese. To meet Chinese wishes, Ho A Mei organised a committee through the Tung Wah Hospital that proposed transferring plague victims to Canton where they would receive Chinese medical treatment (Sinn 2003: 174). When this action was rejected, he informed the western community of Chinese views by publishing his correspondence with the Sanitation Board, together with his own caustic observations, in the *Hong Kong Telegraph* (*Hong Kong Telegraph*, hereafter *HKT*, 7 June 1894: 2).

Ho A Mei’s most significant political act occurred in 1895 when he led a campaign, along with Robert Ho Tong, against the Light and Pass Regulation. This oppressive measure, recently re-imposed as a result of a panic about robbery, required Chinese who were out at night to carry a light as well as a night pass issued by the police. At a Chinese protest meeting held in December 1895, Ho A Mei was elected to preside and then gave the first speech where he described the regulation as “class legislation”, applying as it did to only one