
Two decades ago the late Jennifer Cushman wrote that, for students of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the literature on the Chinese in Australia seemed dated. She suggested that Australian historians were “still struggling to escape from an historiographical discourse limited by their colonial past” and had, for the most part, “not managed to relocate the Chinese experience within the Chinese community itself.” In particular, they had been “less concerned with the community on its own terms, and more with Australian attitudes towards Chinese.” She attributed this “imbalance” to “an historiographical preoccupation with explaining the formation of the White Australia Policy” (Cushman 1984: 100–101).

Much has changed since then. Interest in the history of the Chinese in Australia has greatly increased. The new historical writing is noteworthy for its diversity of practitioners and subject matter. As Henry Chan points out in the volume under review, a tradition developed of “linking academic researchers and historians with professional historians, community based amateur or freelance historians and researchers” (p.237). This pattern was set with the conferences held at the Museum of Chinese Australian History (Chinese Museum) in Melbourne in October 1993 and at the University of Western Australia in September 1994 (Macgregor 1995; Ryan 1995).

After the Rush is a collection of 17 chapters selected from papers presented at a conference held at the Chinese Museum in Melbourne in July 2000. It was held under the auspices of the Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation (CHAF) Project, a joint initiative of La Trobe University, the Chinese Museum and Shanghai’s East China Normal University. The conference program and abstracts may be found on the project website <www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au/>.

The book is organized into three parts around major themes in Australian history after the gold rush: regulation and governance, participation in public life, and community and identity formation. An introductory chapter by Adam McKeown attempts an overview of the book and its place in the historiography of the Chinese in Australia and in the global diaspora. He makes interesting suggestions for future research, advocating a new synthetic history of Chinese in Australia that straddles local, national and transnational perspectives.

One could not expect a project geared to the commemoration of Australian federation to ignore the White Australia Policy, whatever the validity of Cushman’s criticism of earlier work on the history of Chinese Australians. The first substantial
act passed by the federal parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 which established the framework for the implementation of the policy. What does After the Rush tell us that is new about the policy and its impact on Chinese in Australia?

John Hirst argues that the case for federation was not founded on the need for national control of immigration. All the Australian colonies had passed similar legislation against the entry of Chinese in 1888. Even the infamous dictation test had been introduced in some colonies in the 1890s. Anti-Chinese agitation was still important to the achievement of Australian nationhood, however. Quoting contemporary poetry, Hirst concludes that it gave “new power and cogency to the ideal of a pure, pristine, unsullied, united Australia.”

Kim Rubenstein elaborates on the confused state of Australian citizenship law to the present day, arguing that its vagueness was historically conditioned by the desire from the time of federation to control Chinese immigration and Chinese residents in Australia.

The administration of the Immigration Restriction Act gave rise to “tens of thousands of files, photographs, documents and investigations,” Michael Williams tells us, arguing that they have much more to offer historians than has hitherto been utilized. So far it is the policy files that have attracted most scholarly attention, but Williams demonstrates from the records held in Sydney the usefulness of individual files (apparently the bulk of the records) both for statistical analysis when aggregated and for Chinese Australian history when analyzed individually. The Act was administered at a State level, and further research in other states is likely to disclose important variations. The short chapter by Andrew Markus underlines the importance of further research into the history of individual Chinese living in Australia under the implementation of the policy.

Against the background of anti-Chinese agitation at the time, why was it, John Fitzgerald asks, that the Chinese communities took so prominent a part in the parade in Melbourne to celebrate the opening of the first federal parliament in May 1901? His chapter is one of the most interesting in this collection. We come to see the events of the time through contemporary Chinese newspapers and the speeches and writings of Liang Qichao, who spent six months in Australia at the time of federation.

Short notes will have to suffice for the other chapters. Denise Austin debunks the notion that converts to Christianity among the Chinese in Australia did so for purposes of accommodation to the wider Australian community. Rob Hess examines Australian Rules football matches played between teams of “full-blood” and “half-caste” Chinese players in Ballarat in the 1890s. Drew Cottle tells the story of Fred Wong (Wong Gar Kin) (1906–1948), an Australian-born greengrocer, Chinese patriot and working class activist. Pauline Rule mines the Victorian provincial press and the archives to throw light on the situation of European women