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Rewriting the History of Chinese Families in Nineteenth-Century Australia

KATE BAGNALL

The nineteenth-century Chinese population in Australia was made up mostly of men, drawing many commentators to the conclusion these men faced an absence of family life, resulting in prostitution, gambling, opium use and other so-called vices. Recent research has, however, expanded and complicated our knowledge of Chinese families in New South Wales and Victoria, particularly concerning the extent to which Chinese men and white Australian women formed intimate relationships. This article traces the origins of the misconceptions about Chinese families in nineteenth-century Australia, and considers how new directions in scholarship over the past decade are providing methods for enlarging our knowledge. It argues that instead of being oddities or exceptions, Chinese-European families were integral to the story of Australia's early Chinese communities.

IN THE late autumn of 1861, two days after she fell from a cart, Eliza Davis gave birth to her second child. The baby was premature and stillborn, its tiny body taken in a cigar box to Eliza's father, Joseph, a woodcutter, for burial in the bush. Eliza, a white woman, was twenty-one years old, and the second eldest of Joseph Davis' six daughters. The family lived at the Bark Huts, a village about ten miles out of Sydney on the Liverpool Road, in today's South Strathfield. The Bark Huts was known to mid-nineteenth century Sydneysiders as a Chinese village, home to a group of men who eked out an existence as charcoal burners.¹ Chinese had been living at the Bark Huts from the mid-1850s, and to some white colonists it represented 'a most exemplary industrial village'.² The death of Eliza's tiny baby may well have gone unremarked but for the fact that a coronial inquest was held. The facts revealed at the inquest excited the interests of the Sydney press, in particular the *Empire*, and reports were reprinted in various colonial newspapers.³ These focussed on the living arrangements of young Eliza Davis and the fact that the father of her stillborn second child was Chinese.

The lives of Eliza's European family were entangled with those of their Chinese neighbours at the Bark Huts. For the previous nine months, Eliza lived with her baby's Chinese father, Dick, in a hut not far from her parents' house. Earlier, the Davis family shared their home with a Chinese man—with whom Eliza had, in her father's words, 'cohabited'. Eliza's first child was fathered by a

¹ Reports of court cases involving Chinese living at the Bark Huts appear in the Sydney press from the mid-1850s. See, for example, *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*), 8 February 1856, 11 November 1858, 21 April 1860 and 24 January 1863. Their presence was also noted in the parliamentary debate on the Chinese Immigration Bill in July 1858. See *SMH*, 29 July 1858.

² *Courier (Brisbane)*, 7 June 1861.

³ *SMH*, 27 May 1861; *Empire (Sydney)*, 30 May 1861; *Sydney Mail*, 1 June 1861; *Goulburn Herald*, 1 June 1861; *Maitland Mercury*, 4 June 1861; *Courier (Brisbane)*, 7 June 1861.

Chinese man and at least two other sisters had Chinese partners. In 1867, younger sister Jane was sent to the Industrial School for Girls at Newcastle after she had been found, at age fifteen, 'living with common prostitutes' in the house of a Chinese man in Sydney.⁴ Joseph Davis told the coronial inquest that he chastised his daughter Eliza for 'going with Chinamen' but that she did not listen to him.

The details revealed at the inquest into the death of Eliza's second baby provoked a sense of moral outrage among the press and the officials involved, prompting the *Empire* to investigate the Bark Huts firsthand.⁵ On visiting the home of Eliza and Dick, the *Empire* found the young couple, together with Eliza's two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, living in desperate poverty. Their home was a crudely constructed slab hut, with a rough bark roof and dirt floor. It consisted of two rooms, with two beds and scant other furniture. Dick 'looked pale, haggard and emaciated', his clothes covered in patches. Eliza, described by the *Empire* as both good-looking and intelligent, was still recovering from her fall and premature confinement, but was apparently content with her lot. After speaking to white residents and the local clergyman about other Chinese-European couples in the neighbourhood, the *Empire* found that the cause of their so-called plight lay squarely with the Chinese population. They were a horde of 'idolatrous barbarians, destitute of religion and morality' and the village at the Bark Huts was 'but a scene of vice, filth, and social degradation'.⁶

The *Empire's* investigation into the life of the Bark Huts residents came at a time when the Chinese Question was much in the minds of the white residents of New South Wales. The Chinese Immigration Restriction Bill was being debated in the Parliament, conflicts between Chinese and European miners were flaring up on the goldfields—most notably at Native Dog Creek near Oberon in May 1861 and at Burrangong (Young) over a period of about ten months, culminating in the Lambing Flat riot at the end of June—and every week there were further reports of various kinds in the newspapers about the colony's growing number of Chinese residents. This context meant that Eliza's and Dick's relationship assumed greater meaning, representing a possibility inherent in any encounter between a Chinese man and European woman in the Australian colonies.

Over the following decades, the themes raised in the *Empire* article, summed up in its comment about 'vice, filth, and social degradation', became synonymous with discussions of intimate relationships between Chinese men and white women in the southern colonies. From parliamentary debates to sensational scandal sheets, Chinese-European relationships were used as evidence of the 'problems' caused by a predominantly male migrant population and the subsequent racial mixing that took place. As will be discussed later in this article, twentieth-century histories of the nineteenth-century Chinese Australian

⁴ *SMH*, 4 September 1867.

⁵ *Empire* (Sydney), 6 June 1861.

⁶ *ibid.*

community, based primarily on official reports, newspapers and other published writings by white (almost exclusively male) commentators, often took on the biases of their sources, describing an absence of Chinese family life in the colonies and the consequent 'vice' and 'immorality' that occurred.⁷

This article reconsiders responses to Chinese family life in nineteenth-century Australia. It explores how early anti-Chinese discourses, imbued with particular understandings of race, gender and respectability, found their way into twentieth-century historians' discussions of the social, sexual and familial lives of nineteenth-century Chinese Australians. A growing body of Australian and international scholarship over the past decade suggests that it is now time to refigure our understanding of what constituted 'family life' for Chinese in the colonies, particularly concerning the prevalence and meaning of intimate relationships between Chinese men and white women and, although not the focus of this article, between Chinese men and Indigenous women. Newer approaches being taken by historians allow us to break away from the old myths and stereotypes by exploring lived experience within both Chinese and Australian contexts. By looking closely at the lives of women and men like Eliza Davis and her partner Dick, current research is demonstrating that, despite opposition on both sides, interracial relationships became a familiar, and indeed tolerated, part of nineteenth-century Chinese Australian family life.⁸

The masculinity of Chinese immigration and its colonial reception

Chinese immigration to New South Wales and Victoria after the discovery of gold in the early 1850s was almost totally male. Chinese indentured rural labourers who arrived in the previous decade were also all men, but their numbers were small in comparison to Chinese goldseekers.⁹ Colonial censuses revealed that by 1861 there were nearly 13,000 Chinese men (and two women) in New South Wales and almost 25,000 Chinese men (and eight women) in Victoria.¹⁰ The Chinese population fluctuated over the following decades, but

⁷ References in this article to 'white colonists' and 'white commentators' should be taken to refer to men, unless otherwise stated. For discussion of gendered responses to the Chinese, see Kate Bagnall, 'Across the Threshold: White Women and Chinese Hawkers in the White Colonial Imaginary', *Hecate* 28, no. 2 (2002): 9–32.

⁸ For further discussion of the arguments raised in this article see Kate Bagnall, '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' (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2006).

⁹ Shirley Fitzgerald, *Red Tape, Gold Scissors: The Story of Sydney's Chinese* (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales Press, 1996), 17–22. On Chinese indentured labourers, see Maxine Darnell, 'Master and Servant, Squatter and Shepherd: The Regulation of Indentured Chinese Labourers, New South Wales, 1847–1853', in *The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions*, ed. Henry Chan et al. (Taipei and Canberra: Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies, National Taiwan University and Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian National University, 2001).

¹⁰ Charles H. Wickens, *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, No. 18 – 1925* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1925), 952–53.

Table 1. Estimated number of male and female Chinese in New South Wales, Victoria and Australia, 1861–1901. Charles H. Wickens, *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, No. 18, 1925* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1925)

	New South Wales			Victoria			Australia (total)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1861	12,986	2	12,988	24,724	8	24,732	–	–	–
1871	7,208	12	7,220	17,795	31	17,826	–	–	–
1881	10,141	64	10,205	11,795	164	11,959	38,274	259	38,533
1891	13,048	109	13,157	8,355	134	8,489	35,523	298	35,821
1901	10,063	159	10,222	6,236	111	6,347	29,153	474	29,627

this common characteristic remained (see Table 1). The high masculinity of Chinese immigration was not particular to the Australian colonies; almost all of those leaving China in the second half of the nineteenth century were male, meaning that overseas Chinese settlements around the world were characterised by a significant gender imbalance. These so-called ‘bachelor societies’ were places where relatively few lived what was seen as a ‘normal’ family life—with a (Chinese) man living together with his (Chinese) wife and children in a family home.¹¹

Chinese living in the Australian colonies turned to a range of social, legal and economic reasons to explain why so few women left China with their menfolk. The primary reason they gave, however, was the importance of the Chinese family, particularly the wife’s role in contributing to her husband’s patrilineal family in the ancestral home through domestic work, care for her parents-in-law, bearing sons and raising her husband’s children. These traditional family practices, combined with the workings of the labour market and difficulties arising from migration (such as financial expense and legal restrictions), formed the basis for the limited emigration of Chinese women to all overseas destinations, although there were variations across time periods and locations.¹²

¹¹ On the overseas Chinese ‘bachelor society’ see Jennifer Ting, ‘Bachelor Society: Deviant Heterosexuality and Asian American Historiography’, in *Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies*, eds. Gary Okihiro, Marilyn Alquizola, Dorothy Fujita Rony and K. Scott Wong (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1995) and Madeline Hsu, ‘Unwrapping Orientalist Constraints: Restoring Homosocial Narrativity to Chinese American History’, *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 2 (2003): 229–53.

¹² See, for example, Bessie Ng Kumlin Ali, *Chinese in Fiji* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 2002); Adam McKeown, ‘Transnational Chinese Families and Chinese Exclusion, 1875–1943’, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18 (Winter 1999): 73–93; George Anthony Pepper, *If They Don’t Bring Their Women Here: Chinese Female Immigration Before Exclusion* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Laura Hall, ‘The Arrival and Settlement of the Chinese in 19th Century British Guiana’, in *The Chinese Diaspora: Selected Essays Volume II*, eds. Wang Ling-chi and Wang Gungwu (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), 86–111; Manying Ip, *Home Away From Home: Life Stories of Chinese Women in New Zealand* (Auckland: New Women’s Press, 1990); Clarence E. Glick, *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu: Hawaii Chinese History Center and University Press of Hawaii, 1980).

It is difficult to ascertain how many of the Chinese men who came to Australia were, in fact, married, with contemporary estimates putting the number at between a quarter and a half of the total. Chen Ah Teak, when called before the New South Wales Select Committee on the Chinese Immigration Bill in 1858, stated that 'very few' Chinese men were married, only 'about a fourth'.¹³ Ten years later a report by Reverend J. W. Young on Victoria stated that out of nearly 18,000 Chinese men in the colony, around 8,000 or forty-four per cent were married with their wives in China.¹⁴ The New South Wales censuses of 1891 and 1901 gave figures on the conjugal condition of the Chinese, recording that the large majority were 'unmarried' (see Table 2).¹⁵ However, as the Census only recorded as married those men whose wives were present in Australia, thousands of men were likely to have been incorrectly labelled 'bachelors'. It is clear though that unmarried men or married bachelors (married men with wives remaining in China) formed the majority of the early Chinese population in Australia.¹⁶

For white politicians and social commentators the presence of such a large group of men, unaccompanied by their womenfolk, suggested immorality and perversion, and it was thought that terrible consequences would arise if suitable female companionship and a sexual outlet were not made available to Chinese men. Even in the face of little hard evidence, numerous complaints directly tied to the imbalance of the sexes were levelled against the Chinese, including sodomy, seduction, debauchery, paedophilia, rape, murder, gambling and opium use.¹⁷ In part, the concerns raised by white colonists about the masculine nature of Chinese immigration were prompted by general social conditions in the colonies, where a marked imbalance between the sexes had arisen through the unequal migration of men and women, particularly during the early convict period. Steps were taken to increase the number of white women in the colonies, and to improve the lot of those already living there, but the situation

¹³ 'Report from the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Chinese Immigration Bill, 1858', *Journal of the New South Wales Legislative Council*, vol. III (1858).

¹⁴ Rev. J. W. Young, 'Report on the Condition of the Chinese Population in Victoria (1868)' in *The Chinese in Victoria: Official Reports and Documents*, ed. Ian F. McLaren (Ascot Vale, Victoria: Red Rooster Press, 1985), 31–57.

¹⁵ Census of New South Wales 1891 and 1901. The national census returns after Federation gave the numbers of married Chinese men with their wives either in China or Australia. In 1911, 36.4 per cent of Chinese-born men in New South Wales, and 49.8 per cent in Victoria, were married, about the same proportion as earlier estimates. See C. F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia 1901–1921* (Adelaide: Raphael Arts Pty Ltd, 1977), 264.

¹⁶ The term 'married bachelor' was used by Paul C. P. Siu in his classic study of Chinese laundry workers in Chicago in the 1930s. See Paul C. P. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*, ed. John Kuo Wei Tchen (New York: New York University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ On early colonial attitudes regarding Chinese morality see, for example, Ann Curthoys, 'Race and Ethnicity: A Study of the Response of British Colonists to Aborigines, Chinese and Non-British Europeans in New South Wales, 1856–1881' (PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1973); Alan Dwight, 'The Chinese in New South Wales Lawcourts 1848–1854', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 73, no. 2 (October 1987): 75–93; J. M. Graham, "'A Danger That No Language Could Magnify": The Newcastle Morning Herald and the Chinese Question', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 69, no. 4 (March 1984): 239–50.

Table 2. Conjugal condition of Chinese in NSW (including half-Chinese), 1891 and 1901. Census of New South Wales 1891 and 1901

		Never married ¹⁸	Married	Widowed	Divorced	Total
1891	Male	13,001	409	145	–	13,555
	Female	493	104	4	–	601
1901	Male	10,007	524	56	3	10,590
	Female	514	147	12	0	673

was exacerbated with the social upheaval of the gold rushes. Mining was men's work and the colonies faced both an influx of white men from Britain, Europe and North America, as well as social dislocation caused by men already in the colonies leaving their families to join in the rush for gold.

The gender imbalance was worrying because it contradicted the Christian ideal of a society based around the family, where both men and women had roles to play in ensuring society remained ordered and controlled. In particular, the presence of suitable women in a community was considered important because they were thought to be a civilising force on men, who, if left alone, would become degraded and at the mercy of their most basic urges.¹⁹ The so-called 'shortage of women' and the fact that many men in the colonies had therefore been unable to marry apparently resulted in vices very similar to those raised in complaints about the Chinese—homosexuality, prostitution, gambling and drunkenness.²⁰ White colonists saw that it was only through the presence and influence of wives and families, and the creation of a stable domestic life, that society would be rid of such unsavoury practices.

In the case of the Chinese, one obvious possibility was the formation of relationships between Chinese men and non-Chinese women, something that occurred in most locations of overseas Chinese settlement. The Chinese in Southeast Asia, Cuba, Peru, British Guiana, Canada, Hawaii, the United States, Mexico, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands and Australia all outmarried, with the numbers and patterns of outmarriage dependent on a range of factors, such as toleration or resistance by local communities, government measures to either encourage or prohibit intermarriage and the numbers of Chinese women resident in overseas communities.²¹

¹⁸ Those men who described themselves as married but whose wives were not resident in the colony were placed in the 'never married' category. The figure for 'never married' men in 1901 includes 73 who did not state whether they were married or not.

¹⁹ On the ideology of domesticity during the gold rush period, see David Goodman, *Gold Seeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 149–88.

²⁰ See Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958), 88–90 and Clive Moore, 'Colonial Manhood and Masculinities', *Journal of Australian Studies* 56 (March 1998): 35–50.

²¹ See, for example, Robert Chao Romero, "'El Destierro de los Chinos": Popular Perspectives of Chinese-Mexican Interracial Marriage in the Early Twentieth Century', *Azilan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 113–144; Margaret E. Burns, 'Of Tongues and Temporalities: Notes Towards an Understanding of the Recent Chinese Past in French Polynesia', *The*

In Australia, white commentators mostly discounted the possibility of intermarriage between Chinese men and white women as a solution to the supposed problem of Chinese immorality. They did so not only from an abhorrence of the idea of racial mixing, but because it was thought that those white women who would contemplate life as the wife of a Chinese man would themselves be depraved and immoral, and therefore incapable of raising the moral standard of their Chinese husbands. After concluding that Chinese men were not likely to form relationships with Aboriginal women either—the difference between a Chinaman and an aboriginal of our colony, is perhaps as great as between the former and an Englishman’ noted Paul Pax in 1852—the introduction of another non-white female population to the colonies was offered as a possible course of action.²² In the same article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, Paul Pax suggested that Malay women could be brought to the colonies as wives for Chinese men as ‘they have for centuries consorted well together’.²³

The Australian colonies were not dealing with these questions in isolation. British settlements around the world—in Singapore, the Philippines, Cuba, the West Indies, as well as Canada and the United States—all faced similar anxieties about the masculine nature of Chinese immigration. There was a transnational exchange in knowledge of the Chinese, their habits and customs, which came through correspondence between colonial governments, through migration and the press. California was a persistent site of comparison, but the British West Indies were also used as an early example of what could be done. There, the government and plantation owners had successfully implemented administrative measures, including financial inducements, to encourage Chinese labourers to bring their wives and children with them.²⁴

This idea of balancing the numbers of Chinese men and women through legislative means was frequently raised in discussions of the Chinese Question in both the press and in parliament from the 1850s to the 1890s. However, none of the Australian colonies brought in specific measures to ensure that a more balanced number of Chinese women and men arrived, or that the Chinese migrated in family groups. Such measures had their own opponents, since they

Journal of Pacific History 35, no. 2 (September 2000): 181–93; James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past: How the Cantonese Goldseekers and Their Heirs Settled in New Zealand*, four volumes (Dunedin: Otago Heritage Books, 1993–1999); Ben Featuna’i Liua’ana, ‘Dragons in Little Paradise: Chinese (Mis)fortunes in Samoa, 1900–1950’, *The Journal of Pacific History* 32, no. 1 (June 1997): 29–48; Verena Martinez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Romanzo Adams, *Interracial Marriage in Hawaii: A Study of the Mutually Conditioned Processes of Acculturation and Amalgamation* (Montclair: Patterson Smith, 1969); and Ta Chen, *Emigrant Communities in South China*, English version ed. Bruno Laskar (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1940).

²² *SMH*, 3 April 1852.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See *SMH*, 31 March 1854; *Argus (Melbourne)*, 26 January 1859; *Empire (Sydney)*, 23 July 1861; ‘Chinese Immigration Act (Despatch)’, *Journal of the New South Wales Legislative Council*, vol. IX, part I (1862): 2.

would have resulted in a growth of the Chinese population through the birth of Chinese children on colonial soil. Consequently, the gender imbalance in the Chinese Australian population continued and one of white colonists' primary fears—the formation of intimate relationships between Chinese men and white women—became an increasingly apparent reality.

It is difficult to state with certainty the numbers of interracial relationships, but what is clear is that as the century progressed, their numbers increased. A report from 1868 estimated that there were fifty to sixty European women married to Chinese in Victoria; a decade later it was reported that during the eleven years prior to 1877, 217 marriages had been performed between Chinese men and white women there.²⁵ A report from New South Wales in 1878 noted there were around 350 European women living with Chinese men in the colony, with about equal numbers of these being married and not married.²⁶ Colonial marriage registrations similarly document steady numbers of interracial marriages throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, with total numbers in New South Wales and Victoria reaching over 1,000 in the period to 1901.²⁷ As well as these formalised unions, there were as many, if not more, relationships of other kinds, ranging from long-term de facto partnerships to casual liaisons and prostitution.

Despite the increasing numbers of Chinese-European marriages, no legislative measures were taken to prevent their formation. This was in contrast to the United States, where, from the 1860s, anti-miscegenation laws were introduced or extended to ban marriages between Chinese and whites.²⁸ Andrew Markus attributes this difference to America's stricter taboos against interracial sex, something which also led to the importation of many Chinese women to work as prostitutes.²⁹ In Australia, marriages between Chinese men and white women were legal and the children of such marriages were legitimate. Other forms of legislation designed to limit contact between white women and Chinese men, such as the Canadian law stipulating that white women could not be employed

²⁵ Young, 'Report on the Condition of the Chinese Population in Victoria', 50; Rev. John F. Horsley, 'The Chinese in Victoria', *The Melbourne Review* 4 (January to October 1879): 422.

²⁶ Edmund Fosbery, 'Information Respecting Chinese Resident in the Colony', *New South Wales Legislative Assembly Votes & Proceedings*, 1878; see also *SMH*, 20 November 1878. A later report similarly found about even numbers of married and non-married Chinese-European couples in New South Wales. See Martin Brennan and Quong Tart, 'Reports Upon Chinese Camps', *New South Wales Legislative Assembly Votes & Proceedings*, 1883–84.

²⁷ See Bagnall, 'Golden Shadows', Section 2 and Appendix 1; Pauline Rule, 'The Chinese Camps in Colonial Victoria: Their Role as Contact Zones', in *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation, and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860–1940*, eds. Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (Kingsbury, Victoria: Otherland Literary Journal, 2004).

²⁸ On U.S. anti-miscegenation legislation relating to Chinese see Henry Yu, 'Mixing Bodies and Cultures: The Meaning of America's Fascination with Sex Between "Orientals" and "Whites"', in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 444–45; Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁹ Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850–1901* (Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger, 1979), 258–59.

by Chinese businesses, were also not considered.³⁰ Chinese men and white women were therefore able to associate with relative freedom and, indeed, did so.

The earliest scattered relationships between Chinese men and white women were met primarily with curiosity by white colonists, but by the end of the 1850s reports about their occurrence began appearing more frequently in the colonial press, and discussion of them was entering the larger discourse on the merits or otherwise of Chinese immigration.³¹ As noted in the earlier discussion of Dick and Eliza Davis, it was also from this time that European commentators began to speak in exaggerated tones of the ruination of white girls and women, the pollution of the British race and the creation of a 'piebald breed'. These arguments were stated more fiercely throughout the 1870s and 1880s, when the spectre of the opium den, the seduction and drugging of innocents, the corruption of young girls and their subsequent fall into prostitution, as well as the squalor of the urban Chinese quarters and rural Chinese camps all found much sensational expression in the press and through government inquiries. Concerns about interracial relationships also became an important part of the labour movement's anti-Chinese stance in the 1880s and were used by journals such as William Lane's *Boomerang* in Queensland and Sydney's *Bulletin* to demonstrate the problems caused by Chinese immigration.³²

For the most part, white colonists expressed disapproval of Chinese-European relationships, but there was some acknowledgement that Chinese partners could provide women with domestic comforts and stability that they may have struggled to find elsewhere. Chinese husbands were reputed to treat their white wives well because they did not get drunk or beat their women, and if anything, spousal abuse was said to go the other way.³³ Young Eliza Davis, for example, was reported to have told a doctor that she had never been beaten and, indeed, that she was 'able to thrash the Chinaman'.³⁴ Despite the close scrutiny of some relationships, such as the *Empire's* reporting of Dick and Eliza Davis, many discussions of interracial relationships in both the press and in parliament inferred that they were not genuine and that they could not form the basis of a real family. As Peggy Pascoe has described in the American context, regardless of

³⁰ For a discussion of this legislation, the Act to Prevent the Employment of Female Labour in Certain Capacities, enacted in Saskatchewan in 1912, see Constance Backhouse, 'The White Women's Labor Law: Anti-Chinese Racism in Early Twentieth-Century Canada', *Law and History Review* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 315–68.

³¹ See, for example, *Empire (Sydney)*, 26 May 1858; *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 29 May and 28 August 1858; *Border Post (Albury)*, 9 April 1859.

³² On the writings of William Lane, the *Bulletin* and other similar publications see, for example, Markus, *Fear and Hatred*; David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999); Neville Meaney, 'The Yellow Peril', Invasion Scare Novels and Australian Political Culture', in *The 1890s: Australian Literature and Literary Culture*, ed. Ken Stewart (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1996); Ouyang Yu, 'The Chinese in the *Bulletin* Eyes', *Southerly* 55, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 131–43.

³³ On the personal backgrounds and motivations of Chinese-European couples, see Bagnall, 'Golden Shadows', Section 2.

³⁴ *Empire (Sydney)*, 30 May 1861.

their situation interracial couples were 'subjected to the powerful stigmas associated with immorality, illegitimacy and vice'.³⁵ Marriage and the family were central to the colonial project but the Chinese were viewed as failing to contribute to the future fortune of the colonies, even when they formed domestic partnerships with white women and took on the role of breadwinner, husband and father.³⁶ In the words of Kathryn Cronin, 'Chinese sexuality became immorality' and the choices and voices of men and women like Dick and Eliza Davis were drowned by prevailing ideas that interracial relationships were both unnatural and disruptive to society.³⁷

Chinese-European relationships in Australian history

The enduring responses by white colonists to the gendered nature of Chinese immigration and to the formation of interracial relationships had a fundamental impact on the way Chinese family life in Australia was subsequently framed. Twentieth-century histories of the Chinese in nineteenth-century Australia were predominantly written as histories of men without families. Family formation was seen as possible only by a return to China or, in rarer instances, by the migration of a Chinese wife. C. F. Yong wrote that 'the most appalling feature of Chinese communities was a lack of family life'; Kathryn Cronin stated Chinese men were 'bereft of female or family companionship'; Vivien Suet-Cheng Burrage claimed the 'lack of family life' was 'a tragic element, fundamentally detrimental to the normal, healthy running of the [Chinese] community'; and Weston Bate stated that Chinese men were unable to 'participate in the forward-looking, family-making life' of the colonies because they migrated without women.³⁸

In these early studies, historians were blind to much within the history of the Chinese Australian family. They gave scant attention to the Chinese women who *were* part of the early Australian Chinese community—as wives, mothers, daughters, servants and workers. They also wrote little of the non-Chinese women who became part of Chinese families and communities when they formed intimate relationships with Chinese men and mothered their children. They gave little consideration to how Chinese men in Australia remained an integral part of their families in China—as part of what Adam McKeown has termed the 'transnational overseas Chinese family'. And they paid little regard

³⁵ Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 12.

³⁶ On marriage, the family and colonialism see Penny Russell, *For Richer, For Poorer: Early Colonial Marriages* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 2.

³⁷ Kathryn Cronin, *Colonial Casualties: Chinese in Early Victoria* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982), 128.

³⁸ C. F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia 1901–1921* (Richmond: Raphael Arts Pty Ltd, 1977), 171; Cronin, *Colonial Casualties*, 126; Vivien Suet-Cheng Burrage, 'The Chinese Community, Sydney, 1870–1901' (Masters thesis, Macquarie University, 1974), 26; Weston Bate, *Lucky City: The First Generation at Ballarat, 1851–1901* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978), 150.

to the family connections between men themselves, including the migration of fathers and sons, brothers, cousins, uncles and nephews.³⁹ What resulted from these oversights was a significant gap in the historiography of the Chinese in Australia. For the most part, early studies maintained the idea that wives, mothers and daughters were most notable by their absence and that Chinese women, non-Chinese wives and their children were oddities and exceptions in a population of single men.⁴⁰

The early studies relied heavily on the obvious and most accessible sources—government reports, official inquiries and the major urban newspapers and journals—sources which reflected the ideas about the Chinese presence discussed earlier in this article. These sources put forward the idea that intimate relationships between Chinese men and white women were unnatural, uncommon and unaccepted because they fell outside the usual bounds of both white and Chinese family traditions. They also enforced ideas of difference—that there were fundamental and irrevocable differences between Chinese and Europeans; differences which were based, if not in race and biology, then in culture, habits, language and custom.

Failing to examine sources critically for the moral and racial biases of their time, scholars repeated and compounded nineteenth-century thinking about the sexual, social and family lives of the Chinese in Australia. C. F. Yong, author of one of the earliest major studies of the Chinese in Australia, was particularly prone to this, uncritically adopting the nineteenth-century vocabulary used by those disapproving of intimate relationships between European women and Chinese men. As Jan Ryan has noted, Yong accepted the idea of great Chinese ‘immorality’ in the colonies caused by a lack of family life, proved by the fact that Chinese men frequented brothels on the goldfields, and he gave credence to the idea that the Chinese were frequent ‘seducers’ of white girls.⁴¹ Taking their sources at face value, scholars were blinded to the possibilities of intimate interactions between Chinese men and European women in the Australian colonies. This led to comments such as that by Jean Gittins, herself a descendant of an Anglo-Chinese family, that ‘few European women would wish to marry a Chinese, nor did the Chinese contemplate taking on European wives. They would prefer to do without’.⁴²

In short, what emerged in the debates about Chinese colonists—and later imbibed by historians—were persistent myths or stereotypes of domestic life in

³⁹ See McKeown, ‘Transnational Chinese Families’ and *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago and Hawaii 1900–1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Bon-wai Chou, ‘The Sojourning Attitude and the Economic Decline of Chinese Society in Victoria, 1860s–1930s’, in *Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific*, ed. Paul Macgregor (Melbourne: Museum of Chinese Australian History, 1995), 60–4. Chou argued that those Chinese men who took white wives were remarkably broadminded, a trait they owed to their ‘exceptional cosmopolitan backgrounds’.

⁴¹ Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, 174; Jan Ryan, *Ancestors: Chinese in Colonial Australia* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995), 36.

⁴² Jean Gittins, *The Diggers from China: The Story of Chinese on the Goldfields* (Melbourne: Quartet Books, 1981), 118.

Australia's Chinese communities. These included: the scarcity of 'real' families (Chinese husband and Chinese wife living together); the spread of 'immorality' and 'vice' (opium use, gambling, white prostitution) which resulted from this lack of families; and the moral failings and tragedy of white women who married or lived with Chinese men (claimed primarily to be widows, unwed mothers, abused or deserted wives, prostitutes, and those who were destitute, illiterate or Irish). These discussions stressed the exceptional circumstances necessary for interracial relationships to take place, as they were seen to be in conflict with the social mores of both Chinese and white communities.

Scholars working in the field of race relations in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Ann Curthoys, Kathryn Cronin and Andrew Markus, made significant contributions to our understanding of how fears of racial mixing were central to white reactions to nineteenth-century Chinese immigration, but the stereotypes continued to dominate, particularly in less scholarly accounts of Chinese family life.⁴³ Eric Rolls' extensive two-volume study of the Chinese in Australia, published in 1992 and 1996, for instance, contained numerous references to interracial relationships and Anglo-Chinese Australians gathered from a wide range of sources, but Rolls still returned to the standard claim that 'many of [the wives of Chinese] were Irish girls who could not read or write and who otherwise faced bleak marriages with brutal European labourers'.⁴⁴

New perspectives

In 1993 Henry Chan called for research into women, marriage and the family in Chinese communities in Australia, saying that these were topics 'hardly touched upon', probably because of the assumption that, given the demographics of Australia's nineteenth-century Chinese communities, there would not be anything to say.⁴⁵ He reiterated this view in 2001, arguing that the study of Anglo-Chinese relationships needed to be taken out of its assumed context of 'nineteenth-century Victorian notions of "respectability" and returned to China and Chinese, and *Qiaoxiang* traditions and family practices'.⁴⁶ In the years since Chan's plea, different approaches have emerged which are providing

⁴³ See, for example, Curthoys, 'Race and Ethnicity'; Cronin, *Colonial Casualties*; Markus, *Fear and Hatred*.

⁴⁴ Eric Rolls, *Citizens: Flowers and the Wide Sea: Continuing the Epic Story of China's Centuries-old Relationship with Australia* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1996), 185. See also Eric Rolls, *Sojourners: The Epic Story of China's Centuries-old Relationship with Australia: Flowers and the Wide Sea* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1992).

⁴⁵ H. D. Min-hsi Chan, 'A Decade of Achievement and Future Directions in Research on the History of the Chinese in Australia', in *Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific*, ed. Paul Macgregor (Melbourne: Museum of Chinese Australian History, 1995), 422.

⁴⁶ H. D. Min-hsi Chan, 'Becoming Australasian But Remaining Chinese: The Future of the Down Under Chinese Past', in *The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions*, ed. Henry Chan et al. (Taipei and Canberra: Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies, National Taiwan University and Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian National University, 2001), 9.

new perspectives on the place of the family in nineteenth-century Chinese Australian communities—family histories, micro-histories such as biographies and local history studies, and what Chan called the *Qiaoxiang* (native place) approach.⁴⁷

Family history has provided a real breakthrough. The now seemingly obvious presence of mixed Chinese-European families is, to a large extent, due to family historians who have made available the fruits of their tenacious and dedicated research in the form of detailed biographical and genealogical information, oral histories and family papers.⁴⁸ There has also been a corresponding interest in Chinese women's experience, as wives, workers and mothers.⁴⁹ Grace Karskens has commented on how learning family stories can free the historian from the otherwise overwhelming discourse of those standing outside; this is particularly applicable to research into Chinese Australian families.⁵⁰

Micro-histories have also moved the focus from broad-level discussions to in-depth studies of historical moments, communities, families and individuals, uncovering the lives of Chinese women in the colonies, and, perhaps more significantly, revealing the frequency of interracial relationships throughout New South Wales and Victoria and suggesting their importance to the history of the Chinese in Australia.⁵¹ Researchers have broadened the types of sources used, including oral history and family lore, local newspapers, previously under-used colonial and national archival collections, material culture and archaeology. By asking different questions of familiar sources they have also begun to tell more nuanced stories of Chinese family, social and cultural life in the colonies. This approach is showing the personal choices made by Chinese men and white women as they formed relationships and families, and our growing knowledge of their lives is challenging earlier ideas of colonial race relations, particularly

⁴⁷ See H. D. Min-hsi Chan, 'Qiaoxiang and the Diversity of Chinese Settlement in Australia and New Zealand', in *Chinese Transnational Networks*, ed. Chee-Beng Tan (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴⁸ Australia has not seen the publication of Chinese family histories and memoirs in the same way the United States has. For example, however, see Barbara Moore, *Eurasian Roots: A Story of the Life and Times of George Ah Kin and Mary Higgins and their Descendents* (Canberra: self-published, 2007); Dawn Wong, 'Four Generations of Wong Sat Women', in *From Great Grandmothers to Great Granddaughters: The Stories of Six Chinese Australian Women*, ed. Nikki Loong (Katoomba: Echo Point Press, 2006); Sophie Couchman, ed., *Secrets, Silences and Sources: Five Chinese-Australian Family Histories* (Melbourne: Asian Studies Program of the La Trobe University, 2005); and the work of Monica Tankey, including 'English on the outside and Chinese on the inside', *Australia-China Review* 11 (February 1983).

⁴⁹ Few publications have yet to result but see, for example, Sophie Couchman, 'Oh I Would Like To See Maggie Moore Again: Selected Women of Melbourne's Chinatown' in *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation, and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860–1940*, eds. Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (Kingsbury, Victoria: Otherland Literary Journal, 2004).

⁵⁰ Grace Karskens, 'Family matters', *Phanfare: Magazine of the Professional Historians Association of NSW Inc.* 150 (November 1998): 3.

⁵¹ See, for example, Barry McGowan, 'From Fraternities to Families: The Evolution of Chinese Life in the Braidwood District of New South Wales, 1850s–1890s', *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 2 (2008): 4–33; Gary Osmond and Marie-Louise McDermott, 'Mixing Race: The Kong Sing Brothers and Australian Sport', *Australian Historical Studies* 39, no. 3 (2008): 338–55; Ken Oldis, *The Chinawoman* (Melbourne: Arcadia, 2008); Paul Jones, 'Bureaucratized Identities: Family Reunion in the First Years of the White Australia Policy', in *Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives*

concerning the complex, often contradictory nature of personal interactions between whites and Chinese as neighbours, friends, lovers, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers.

Further to this, there is a growing body of research on interactions between Indigenous Australians and the Chinese which has demonstrated that Chinese men also found partners in Aboriginal women, despite government efforts through policy and law to prevent them.⁵² Most of this research focuses on northern Australia, and while it can be argued, as Henry Reynolds does, that there were two very different Australias in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the north and the south—this northern history of Chinese-Indigenous relationships also has important implications for the study of the Chinese family in southern Australia.⁵³

New contexts have also provided new historical insights. The *Qiaoxiang* (native place) approach redirects the study of Chinese family life in Australia back to China itself, placing it within the context of Chinese family practices and traditions. International scholarship has shown how the family was central to Chinese migration over the past century and a half, with much migration based on networks of kin and clan and undertaken with the interests of the family in mind. Marriage patterns and family traditions in emigrant districts changed as a result of overseas migration, just as the immigration of Chinese men changed life in their overseas destinations, including the Australian colonies.⁵⁴ Working within a transnational framework shifts the focus to the ongoing connections

on the Construction of an Identity, eds. Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing in association with the School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2007), 98–105; Charlotte Jordan Greene, “Fantastic Dreams’: William Liu, and the Origins and Influence of Protest Against the White Australia Policy in the 20th Century” (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2005); Dinah Hales, ‘Lost Histories: Chinese-European Families of Central Western New South Wales, 1850–80’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 6 (2004): 93–112; Heather Holst, ‘Equal Before the Law? The Chinese in the Nineteenth-century Castlemaine Police Courts’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 6 (2004): 113–36; Pauline Rule, ‘Challenging Conventions: Irish-Chinese Marriages in Colonial Victoria’, *Irish-Australian Studies: Papers Delivered at the Ninth Irish-Australian Conference, Galway, April 1997* (Sydney: Crossing Press, 2000); Jane Lydon, *Many Inventions: The Chinese in the Rocks 1890–1930* (Melbourne: Monash Publications in History, 1999).

⁵² See, for example, Penny Edwards and Shen Yuanfang, eds., *Lost in the Whitewash: Aboriginal-Asian Encounters in Australia, 1901–2001* (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, 2003); Guy Ramsay, ‘Cherbourg’s Chinatown: Creating an Identity of Place on an Australian Aboriginal Settlement’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 29, no. 1 (2003), 109–22; Christine Choo, ‘Chinese-Indigenous Australian Connections in Regional Western Australia’, in *A Changing People: Diverse Contributions to the State of Western Australia*, eds. Raelene Wilding and Farida Tilbury (Perth: Office of Multicultural Interests, 2004); Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations: Narratives of Asian/Aboriginal Contact in North Australia* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2005).

⁵³ Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia’s North* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), vii.

⁵⁴ On the overseas Chinese family see, for example, McKeown, ‘Transnational Chinese families’; Michael Szonyi, ‘Mothers, Sons and Lovers: Fidelity and Frugality in the Overseas Chinese Divided Family before 1949’, *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1, no. 1 (May 2005): 43–64; Chan Kwok Bun, ‘A Family Affair: Migration, Dispersal, and the Emergent Identity of the Chinese Cosmopolitan’, *Diaspora* 6, no. 2 (1997): 195–213.

and continuities of Chinese identity and cultural practice overseas, including among those who intermarried.⁵⁵

The *Qiaoxiang* approach allows us to understand more fully the historical and cultural context which resulted in the migration of many men but few women, as well as the ways in which Chinese men remained tied to their Chinese families and homelands through ongoing correspondence, overseas remittances and return visits. It encourages creativity in the search for source material, particularly that which presents a Chinese perspective or comes from within the Chinese Australian community itself, as well as causing us to re-interpret what we already 'know' about Chinese Australian family life. By taking research into Chinese Australians outside of national boundaries, and by referring to China and other overseas Chinese communities, interracial relationships can be seen as part of a broader shift in marriage patterns and family culture rather than as an aberration or exception. It can also reveal previously overlooked parts of Chinese Australian family life, such as the taking of multiple wives (in Australia and China), the remigration of Chinese Australian families back to China and the journeys of Australian-born Chinese, including those of mixed race, to China for education.⁵⁶

Conclusion

This article began by describing an eventful moment in the otherwise unremarkable lives of Eliza Davis and her partner Dick. Like many small lives, theirs has left only a faint trace. Eliza, at least, can be tracked through scattered newspaper reports and the registrations of birth and death for her children, as well as the record of her own death in 1877.⁵⁷ In 1863, for example, her name appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in a brief report on the conviction of Tommy, a Chinese man, for the theft of a pair of her boots from her home.⁵⁸ Eliza remained living at the Bark Huts, later known just as Liberty Plains, until her death. There, it seems, she bore six more children, three who also died early—baby Frederick in 1864, three-year-old Edward in 1865 and, in 1875,

⁵⁵ For studies with a transnational approach see, for example, Madeline Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882–1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change*; John Fitzgerald, 'Transnational Networks and National Identities in the Australian Commonwealth: The Chinese-Australasian Kuomintang 1923–1937', *Australian Historical Studies* 37, no. 127 (April 2006), 95–116; Keir Reeves, 'Tracking the Dragon Down Under: Chinese Cultural Connections in Gold Rush Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand', *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 3, no. 1 (2005), 49–66.

⁵⁶ See Bagnall, 'Golden Shadows', Section 5; Michael Williams, 'Destination Qiaoxiang: Pearl River Delta Villages and Pacific Ports, 1849–1949' (PhD thesis, University of Hong Kong, 2002), 166–69.

⁵⁷ See NSW birth registrations for Edward (3703/1862), Frederick (3987/1864), John (4122/1866), William (4327/1868), Mary (4881/1869) and Thomas (3177/1872) Davis; and NSW death registrations for Frederick (2399/1864), Edward (2075/1865), William (2925/1875) and Eliza (2232/1877) Davis.

⁵⁸ *SMH*, 24 January 1863.

seven-year-old William, whose death came suddenly and painfully with suppressed measles.⁵⁹ Whether any of these children were Dick's is uncertain. Eliza never married and, with the children therefore illegitimate, their father's name was not officially recorded. One possible clue as to her younger children's paternity, however, can be found in a press report on the death of young William, where he was described as 'William Kew, aged seven years, the son of one Eliza Davis, of the Liverpool-road, Liberty Plains'.⁶⁰ Eliza's own death two years later from uterine cancer was reported by a John Kew, of Bankstown, who was described as her 'friend'.⁶¹ It seems likely that Dick was no longer a part of Eliza's life by that time, and without more information about his identity, it is impossible to trace him with any certainty.

It was through the telling and re-telling of stories such as that of Dick and Eliza Davis that white colonists constructed a narrative where intimate relationships between European women and Chinese men became irrevocably intertwined with ideas of immorality and vice, desperation and destitution, as well as with the language of race. Reflecting anxieties about the presence of a large number of 'single' Chinese men and the possibilities of interracial relationships, white discussions of the Chinese population in Australia were overwhelmingly negative about the circumstances, motivations and outcomes of racial mixing, ideas which carried through to much of the early scholarship on the Chinese in Australia.

As recent research is demonstrating, however, white women and Chinese men came together for reasons of economics, physical security, companionship, love, comfort, sexual fulfilment and the formation of families. These interracial relationships occurred with a perhaps surprising frequency, diversity and degree of toleration, such that they formed a substantial part of nineteenth-century Chinese Australian family life. Including these relationships within the story of the Chinese Australian family changes long-held assumptions about the lives of Chinese men in the colonies, of their domestic arrangements and social lives, and of the role women played in the nineteenth-century Chinese Australian community. Including these relationships within the wider narrative of Australian history also fundamentally changes our ideas of the interactions of Chinese and white Australians. The story was not necessarily one of difference and distance, but of contact and communication, often in the most intimate of ways.

⁵⁹ The birth registration for Eliza Davis' son Thomas in 1871 lists two other sons and two daughters living, as well as three deceased sons. NSW birth certificate for Thomas Davis (1872/003177).

⁶⁰ *Queanbeyan Age*, 28 April 1875.

⁶¹ NSW death certificate for Eliza Davis (1877/002232).