

Chinese Mining on the Turon: From Beginning to End

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From the late 1850s to the mid-1870s, Sofala, the main town on the Turon River gold fields, was a centre of Chinese settlement. The New South Wales Census of 1861 census recorded that 1,877 of the 3,420 males in the Sofala Registry District, or over 50 percent of the male population in the district were Chinese, and 642 Chinese men lived in the town of Sofala alone.¹ It was reported there were thirteen Chinese and fifteen European stores.² By the 1871 census, the total population in the Sofala Registry district had fallen by almost a half. The Chinese population of the district declined at a much sharper rate from 1877 to 507, whilst in the town of Sofala the Chinese population fell from 642 to 81.³ This paper considers the factors in the growth and decline of Chinese settlement in the Sofala district.

Records of the gold fields are rather sparse. As John Hamilton has pointed out in his study of adjudication on the gold fields of New South Wales and Victoria, gold commissioners who were responsible for settling disputes between miners did not keep records of adjudication.⁴ Few of the mid-yearly and half yearly reports of resident gold commissioners have been retained in the New South Wales State Archives.⁵ Annual reports on gold districts were not published until in 1875, when under the Mining Act of 1874, Gold Field Commissioners were replaced by Mining Wardens or Registrars. By that time, the Chinese population of Sofala and the Turon had greatly declined. One valuable earlier record of the Turon gold field which has survived is the Register of Extended Claims, 1862-68, which also contains a record of applications for gold leases between 1872 and 1886.⁶ The Register provides an important primary source for this paper. It is supplemented by census, newspaper reports and the insolvency file of a Chinese storekeeper, Jahun Ah Sue. The records of the Sofala Warden's Courts 1874-78, as listed in the appendix of John Hamilton's book are also considered.⁷

A law-abiding community

Brian Hodge's *Frontiers of Gold* utilised Gold Commissioners records, contemporary accounts and court records to write a history of the gold rushes on the Turon which recognised the Chinese as a dominant presence on these gold fields. While conflict erupted on new gold fields, Hodge characterised the Turon as one of the 'stable little communities' of the Western Gold Fields where 'peace, if not harmony prevailed'.⁸ The Chinese, he asserted, 'tended to lead a separate existence within Sofala and on the Turon while scrupulously obeying European laws'.⁹ Matthew Higgins' analysis of the Sofala Bench Books led him to concur that the Chinese were very much a law-abiding community.¹⁰ Neither Hodge nor Higgins discussed Chinese-European families in Sofala, a subject explored by Kate Bagnall in her article on the petition of Bah Fook.¹¹ In 1866,

of Parliament in England in March 1852 to mine for gold in New South Wales and Victoria. Edward Spence, the Superintendent of the Company, brought 55 Chinese men in two separate groups to labour on the Company's claims at Louisa Creek.¹⁵ This was arguably the first reef mining to take place in Australia.

In August 1854, chief importer of Chinese labour, Robert Towns gave evidence before the Select Committee on Asiatic Labour stated:

the Chinese I sent up set going the Colonial Gold Company ... that is the Company that is working the Great Nugget Vein. I sent fifty-four or fifty-five of these men to the Superintendent of that Company ... the most of these men have purchased their freedom as to time by paying the amount I had charged the company, and are on their own account at the diggings in the neighbourhood.¹⁶

Perhaps the 30 'remarkably sober and industrious men' observed working steadily behind the Commissioner's camp at Sofala in February 1855 may have been a party of men from the Colonial Gold Company, as large parties of Cantonese gold seekers did not arrive until the following year.¹⁷

The arrival of Cantonese gold seekers

In 1856, Senior Assistant Commissioner William Johnson visited the Western Gold Fields and wrote in his mid-year report, 'About 150 Chinese arrived here during this month, and apparently have determined upon remaining; they are a patient industrious race who do well where Europeans cannot.'¹⁸ Those who began arriving from mid-1856 were primarily from the Pearl River Delta area of Guangdong province. Ships chartered in Hong Kong initially brought Chinese gold seekers to Port Phillip, but after the introduction of restrictive legislation in Victoria in 1855 and South Australia in 1857, they began landing in Sydney. 1858 was the peak year for Chinese arrivals in New South Wales when 12,998 Chinese entered the colony.¹⁹ While they may have initially intended to walk to the Victorian fields, as fields in that colony declined, and new discoveries were made in New South Wales, the majority of those disembarking made their way to the Western Gold fields. A newspaper report in April 1858 described:

a continuous chain of at least five hundred Celestials bound for the Turon, which lasted without intermission for at least three miles on the road between Bathurst and the Green Swamp [Napoleon Reef].²⁰

In July 1858, Commissioner Harold Maclean described the Turon gold diggings as 'extending for forty miles, within which district there were thirty-four public houses and a large number of stores and other places of business, inclusive of many conducted by the Chinese'.²¹ Mark Hammond, who was a youth when his family moved to the diggings on the Turon was witness to the arrival of the Chinese gold seekers and commented on their skill in his memoirs:

The Chinese set to work as though they had come possessed of the experience of generations. There was no "new chum" business about them. John set to work like a man who knew what to do and intended doing it. They cut races and flumed them over to drain the river bed. They erected water wheels, undershot and

overshot, made pumps that lifted immense quantities of water, similar, I am told, to what are used in the rice fields of China...²²

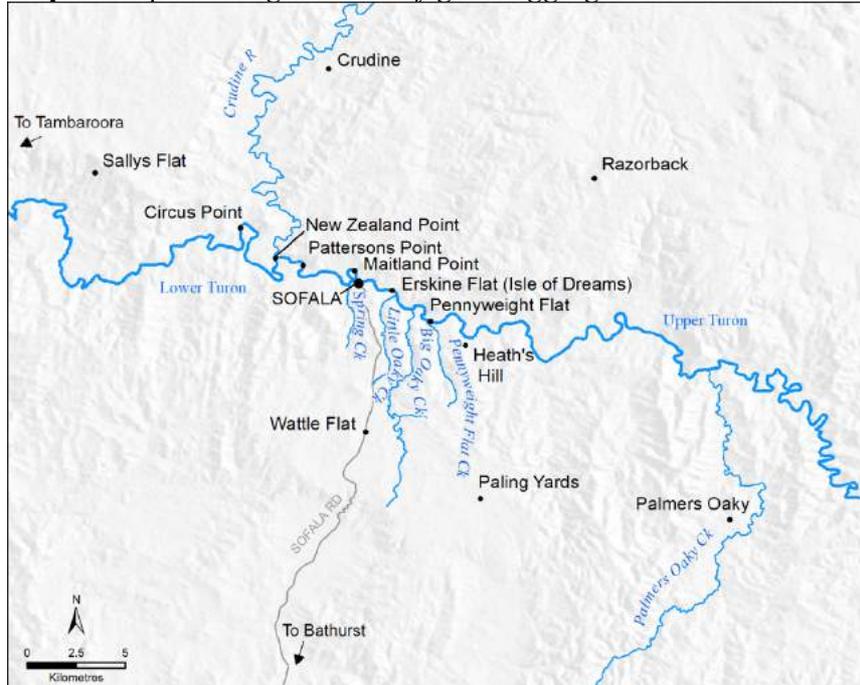
In response to the sudden influx of Chinese miners on the Turon diggings, anti-Chinese meetings were held in Sofala in July and August 1858.²³ A resolution adopted at the public meeting in Sofala urged that an Act be passed at once 'to prevent altogether the immigration of Chinese to Australia'. A petition to this effect sent to the Legislative Council asserted that a failure to act would 'lead 'ere long [to] a collision between the Chinese and the European population'.²⁴ Contrary to prediction, conflict was avoided on the Turon. The departure of at least two large parties of Chinese for the gold fields of Braidwood and Victoria in November and December 1858 and rain over summer, no doubt defused tensions²⁵ To better facilitate communications, Thomas Hoy was appointed official government Chinese interpreter on the Western Gold fields in June 1858.²⁶

Chinese mining activity on the Turon late 1850s to early 1860s

The *Herald's* correspondent, Frederick Dalton, who made an extended visit to the Western Gold Fields between December 1858 and August 1859 described communities of gold miners distributed over the breadth of the gold fields, the majority of whom were Chinese.²⁷ Beginning his journey at the headwaters of the Turon, Dalton travelled east along the river finding Chinese miners in small parties, and up to parties of 100 or more. Between Razorback and Heath's Hill on the Turon, Dalton observed:

about 60 Chinese ... busily sinking shafts, the whole of the lower part of the slope was pegged out in claims. Some of the holes were bottomed at twenty five feet and from what I could learn they were in high spirits and were doing well.²⁸

Map 2: Map showing location of gold diggings on the Turon River



Source: Based on map in John S. Rule, *Sofala Days and Turonites: with gold-nugget locations and metal detecting map*, Centerpak Research, Yagoona, NSW, 1980.

As Dalton followed the Turon westwards to Sofala, he described Chinese tents scattered up and down the steep declivities of Pennyweight Creek and a Chinese encampment of tents at the mouth of Little Oakey. At Maitland Point he encountered a large party of Chinese diverting the river so as to work the riverbed.²⁹

Despite predictions of conflict on the Turon, it was at the new diggings at Lambing Flat (later named Young) in the Southern Gold fields that Chinese were violently driven off the field. This occurred on a number of occasions in late 1860 and the first half of 1861, culminating in the major riots of 30 June 1861.³⁰ Chinese driven from Lambing Flat fled to Bathurst, arriving on 9 July 1861 'destitute and bearing the marks of ill-usage'.³¹ James Achay, 'sworn interpreter at the Bathurst Courts', wrote from Bathurst in August 1861, that 'myself and the Chinese storekeepers of this town have assisted upwards of 300 Chinese [driven from Lambing Flat] to reach the Turon diggings'.³²

Chinese Immigration Restriction

In the aftermath of the riots, the exclusion of Chinese from the gold fields was debated in Parliament in 1861. A motion to exclude newly arrived Chinese from gold fields was put to the vote in the Legislative Assembly but failed to carry. The *Act to Regulate and Restrict the Immigration of Chinese* (25 Vic. No. 3) introduced a limit on each ship of one Chinese passenger per 100 tons of ship's tonnage and a £10 entry tax on new arrivals from China into New South Wales, which deterred new Chinese migrants from entering the colony.

The *Act to Amend the Laws Relating to the Gold Fields* (25 Vic. No. 4), known as the *Gold Fields Act 1861* allowed all holders of Miner's Rights to take up claim upon alluvial prospecting ground or in rivers and creeks. It did not exclude Chinese miners from the gold fields, but it included a clause that discriminated against aliens, who were only authorised to mine for gold upon such 'Gold Fields named by Proclamation' and imposed penalties on aliens not authorised.³³ Whilst nominally, the term alien referred to any person not being a British subject or a naturalised subject of Her Majesty, in its operation, the Act was specifically intended to exclude Chinese from gold fields. In September 1861, a sign was erected in Sofala prohibiting aliens from the Lachlan diggings (located in the area around Forbes). When questioned in Parliament, Premier Charles Cowper said the sign, issued at knowledge of government was 'intended merely to restrict the Chinese'.³⁴

The Regulations of the Act were repealed in February 1862 and replaced by new regulations, which allowed for the Gold Fields Commissioner to have the power to determine the site, limits and regulations for encampments for Chinese parties exceeding 50 in number.³⁵ Despite this, Chinese on the Turon do not seem to have been confined to an encampment at any point. Instead, the Chinese community lived in the town of Sofala and in settlements along the Turon.

Interactions between Europeans and Chinese

Whilst there were no Chinese born women in Sofala, there were relationships between Chinese men and European women on the Turon. Between 1861 and 1869, the births of

24 babies born to Chinese-European couples were registered in Sofala.³⁶ The first of these babies was born to Hannah Price and Penang-born Chinese interpreter William Sengchai, who married at the Bathurst Registry Office in 1860.³⁷ Sengchai was popularly elected interpreter by the Chinese in 1859 and in 1861, appointed the second salaried Chinese interpreter for the Western Gold Districts.³⁸

Chinese and European gold miners on the Turon interacted with each other on a daily basis out of necessity. As John Hamilton writes, parties with joint use of water races had to work together to keep races clean or relied upon each other to clean their sections of the race. If a party further up the river diverted the water to their own workings or races, they deprived parties down the river of water.³⁹ The Register of Extended Claims on the Turon 1862-1868, which lists 507 applications for extended claims on the Turon, recorded the location, size and type of claim, the name of the person applying and the number of persons in their party.⁴⁰ It shows that Chinese and European parties often worked side by side. On the Turon in 1862, for example, Aa Ty and a party of ten and W. Hall and a party of eight, each had 120 by 120-yard⁴¹ alluvial claims at Chinaman's Flat.⁴²

They also worked together out of choice. Hammond remarked 'I have known European parties of five or six men to take twenty or thirty Chinese into partnership with them to help them work their claim, and depend upon it, John always did most of the work.'⁴³ The Register of Extended Claims shows applications made by European miners to work together with Chinese parties. Robert Webster for example, applied for extended claims with Chinese parties in May and July 1863.⁴⁴

When the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter, Charles De Boos toured the Western Gold Fields in 1865, he found a gold mining population of at least 600 Europeans and 2,000 Chinese on the Turon. He was highly impressed by the engineering skills used in the construction of the races at Sofala which often had underground sections and used floodgates to control the flow of water:

For a length of over 25 miles the bed of the river is now being worked at every spot that offers the slightest prospect of success and for the greater part of the distance, more particularly up the river from Sofala, it is completely seamed with races. In fact the whole of the water of the river is entirely diverted from its bed, and you may cross it almost anywhere bare-footed ... Some of the claims that are being worked upon a large scale occupy a great number of hands. This kind of work however, is chiefly confined to the Chinese and it is no unusual thing to see from 50 to 100 Chinese working upon one claim. In one instance I was informed that fully 200 Chinese were employed.⁴⁵

Whilst the majority of extended claim applications made by Chinese parties were alluvial or river-bed claims, in 1865, Chinese parties were also sinking shafts to reach leads. On 23 January 1865 Aa Fatt and party of seven, and Allain and party of 12 registered to extend their claims at Pennyweight Flat, where they were sinking 70 feet.⁴⁶ On 27 November 1865, Ah See and party of eight applied for an extended claim for deep sinking on old ground and slabbing shafts at Pennyweight Flat.⁴⁷

The departure of Chinese miners from the Turon

The intense activity De Boos described in 1865 can be contrasted with Anthony Trollope's description of Sofala when he visited in 1871. He described it as 'now a poor little town, consisting of 644 inhabitants, of whom a considerable portion are Chinese ...'⁴⁸ Census records show the number of Chinese males in the town's population in 1871 had fallen to 81.⁴⁹

What precipitated the departure of Chinese from the Turon? Did they all return with their loot to China as Hodge asserts? As Michael Williams has argued, it was not the intention of Cantonese *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) who went to work in the Pacific ports of California, Sydney and Melbourne between 1849 and 1949 to settle in the labour destination. The normative pattern was to 'return home with glory', often after decades of living abroad. Williams demonstrates that at least 60 percent of overseas Chinese resident in New South Wales before 1901 ultimately retired to their villages.⁵⁰ Returns to China were undoubtedly part, but not all of the equation.

The *Act to Regulate and Restrict the Immigration of Chinese* was repealed in 1867, removing restrictions on Chinese arrivals. Nonetheless, the Chinese population in New South Wales declined between the 1860s and the 1870s. Between 1862 and 1876, 5,403 Chinese arrived in New South Wales by sea whilst 11,525 departed - a decline in population of 6,122 Chinese.⁵¹ The figures are inconclusive as they do not distinguish between the number of Chinese who returned home permanently and the number who visited China then returned to New South Wales or another of the Australian colonies.

Barry McGowan attributed the declining Chinese population on gold fields in the Braidwood district in the early 1870s to falling yields and low rainfall.⁵² In 1865, the Turon experienced a prolonged drought. Yet as De Boos witnessed on the Turon, the adaptable Chinese miners turned the lack of water to their advantage by working the riverbed.

Diminishing returns is another obvious reason for a move to greener pastures, but escort returns in 1865 show the Western Gold Fields were the richest in New South Wales, and Sofala was the pre-eminent gold field.⁵³ It should be noted that escort returns are not an entirely reliable gauge of the earnings of a field, and even less so with Chinese miners. On visiting the Western Gold Fields in 1865, De Boos stated:

... it is very difficult to account for the gold attained by them as they send it through so many and such devious channels that it is almost impossible to trace it. I do not myself believe that the half of the gold obtained by the celestials is accounted for in the escorts at all, for though there are frequently Chinese consignors, they are entered for amounts very far below what their celestial brethren have been known to raise.⁵⁴

The 1858 Report of the Select Committee on the Seizure of Gold on Board the *Ethereal* and *Mary Nicholson*, and Bew Chip's Register, an individual record of gold remitted to China, show that Chinese returning to China from the New South Wales gold fields carried gold on their person, not only for themselves, but also for other Chinese on the gold fields.⁵⁵

Another important reason for the decline is that the Chinese population migrated to rushes elsewhere which presented better opportunities. There was mobility between

the Turon and Tambaroora, the other Chinese settlement in the area. Tambaroora was a dry diggings area, so if the Turon flooded, Chinese miners could temporarily migrate there. New fields were also discovered: in mid-1865, a new, privately owned, speculative field at Glanmire, about eight miles north east of Bathurst, opened to the public.⁵⁶ Though initially excluded, by September the field had opened to Chinese miners and by October, the *Herald* reported 'a number of Chinese have settled on the field and the sight presented on the flat, at the head of the township is one of busy industry'.⁵⁷

Gold was discovered at Emu Creek (Grenfell) in late 1866, and whilst between 1867 and 1870, Sofala's yield steadily declined, Grenfell recorded double the aggregate receipts of Sofala.⁵⁸ A photograph of On Gay's Chinese store taken at Hill End circa 1872, shows that a branch of the store opened at Grenfell.⁵⁹ But besides the odd Chinese store, Emu Creek did not attract large numbers of Chinese miners, as like the Lachlan, Emu Creek was a reef mining field.

There was also migration east to the Macquarie River, where both the Gold Commissioner at Stoney Creek and newspapers reported intense Chinese mining activity in the mid-1860s.⁶⁰ 'The Macquarie', wrote De Boos when he visited in 1865:

which usually by the large body of water that passes along its bed, offers an almost insurmountable obstacle to the miner, is this year so low, that it is being worked for nearly one hundred and fifty miles of its course, by the Chinese principally but also by Europeans.⁶¹

A Chinese petition in 1864, provides another source of information on where Chinese miners were concentrated. Chinese who gathered at Tuena to sign a petition claiming compensation for losses suffered at Lambing Flat, stated that they had assembled from the Gulph (Nerrigundah), Kiandra, Rocky River (Uralla) and the Macquarie.⁶² As Barry McGowan and Kate Bagnall have shown, there were also significant Chinese settlements at Bell's Creek, Majors Creek, Araluen and Jembaicumbene.⁶³ The movement north into Wellington County became more evident in the late 1860s and early 1870s.

Apart from New South Wales, gold fields were also opening up in Queensland in the latter half of the 1860s. Gold was discovered at Bouldercombe, south of Rockhampton in September 1865, and the following year, the field was gazetted as a gold field.⁶⁴ Discoveries at Ravenswood and Charters Towers ensued, and as will be seen, there is evidence that Chinese from Sofala moved to the gold fields in Queensland.

Beyond the attractions of gold fields in other colonies, other trans-Pacific migrations should be taken into account, particularly the migration to New Zealand. The goldrushes had commenced in Otago in 1861, but by 1865, the population had declined to the point that Otago businessmen, backed by the Otago Provincial Council, sent two invitations to Chinese in Victoria, to come and rework the province's goldfields.⁶⁵ One of the debtors in the 1872 insolvency file of Sofala storekeeper Ah Sue was Ho Kay in New Zealand, which suggests that Chinese went not only from Victoria but also from the Turon to Otago. Joyce Ee's research on migration to Singapore suggests that it was not until restrictive immigration legislation was introduced in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and America that Chinese migration to Singapore began in earnest.⁶⁶

Changes to the status quo on the Turon should also be considered as a factor in migration. The decrease in the Chinese population and Chinese mining activity on the Turon can be seen to correlate with changes to adjudication on the gold fields and the introduction of new Gold Field Regulations in 1866.

Changes to New South Wales Gold Field adjudication in 1866

In January 1866, the Premier of New South Wales, James Martin appointed a board to inquire into the best means of effecting a reduction in public expenditure on the gold fields. The Board recommended 'the abolition of several offices presently useless', amalgamating the office of Police Magistrate and Gold Commissioner, and transferring the duties of Assistant Gold Commissioners to Clerks of Petty Sessions.⁶⁷ In February 1866, Gold Commissioners were directed by the Secretary of Lands to inform government-employed Chinese interpreters that after March 1866, their services would no longer be required.⁶⁸ Amongst the six Chinese interpreters in New South Wales given notice were William Sengchai, who had been assisting Captain William Browne, the Chief Commissioner in Bathurst, and Thomas Hoy, who had been assisting Whittingdale Johnson, Assistant Commissioner at Sofala.

The retrenchments of the Chinese interpreters occurred at a time in which racial tension was coming to a head on the Glanmire gold field. On 22 March 1866, there was a clash between Chinese and European miners. It came about after Chinese miners discovered gold on government land near Napoleon Reef. When some Europeans tried to jump their claim, a row erupted.⁶⁹ Captain Browne was called from Bathurst to resolve the dispute and demarcated areas to be exclusively worked by Chinese and Europeans respectively. After Browne departed the field, the dispute over the boundaries resumed and turned violent. The Chinese miners defended their claim. One newspaper account described '100 persons on each side; the Chinese using pointed saplings, the Europeans sticks and stones. The fight lasted a considerable time'.⁷⁰ The *Bathurst Free Press* reported that Chinese tents were set alight and Chinese left the field, a great number arriving in Bathurst at nine o'clock that night after wending their way from Glanmire. The correspondent declared the Chinese were the originators of the fire, as no Europeans were on the spot where tents were set alight, and 15 Chinese men were seen leaving the burning tents carrying bundles under their arms.⁷¹ The evicted Chinese miners later waited on the Commissioner, who found the Europeans to be the transgressors and reinstated the Chinese.⁷² Two European men were charged with offences relating to the riot and appeared before the Bathurst Circuit Court on 21 April 1866, where they were convicted and sentenced to three months hard labour in Bathurst Gaol.⁷³

The day after the fight occurred, John Rae, the Under-Secretary for Public Works, sent a letter to Henry Parkes, the Colonial Secretary, to inform him that 'the English' had thrashed and driven off a number of Chinese from the diggings at Napoleon Reef and set fire to their huts.⁷⁴ Two weeks later, 13 Assistant Gold Commissioners were given notice that their services were no longer required. In their place, three Commissioners were appointed for the Northern, Western and Southern Gold Fields.⁷⁵ There is no record of the reaction of the Chinese miners on the Western Gold fields, but the Chinese on the

Rocky River Gold Field in Northern New South Wales petitioned the Minister of Lands and the Executive Council for the return of their resident Assistant Gold Commissioner and Police Magistrate, Frederick Dalton.¹ John Hamilton attributed the changes to the need for cost cutting, while noting that there didn't appear to have been a general economic downturn at that time.⁷⁶

Gold Fields Amendments in 1866

Under the *Gold Fields Act Amendment Act of 1866*, which took effect on 1 May 1866, the authority and jurisdiction of the Commissioner was vested in Justices of the Peace.⁷⁷ Disputes which had up to this time been resolved on the field by Resident Commissioners with expertise in gold fields regulations, were now resolved by unpaid Justices of the Peace in a Court of Petty Sessions.⁷⁸ On 9 August 1866, the Secretary for Lands instructed Whittingdale Johnson and the other two Gold Commissioners to provide a return of all extended alluvial claims on abandoned ground to be laid before the Legislative Assembly.⁷⁹ The returns would have shown the dominance of Chinese parties working the bed of the Turon River.

The *Gold Fields Act of 1866* (19A) which took effect on 1 January 1867 privileged gold leases.⁸⁰ The 1861 Act had granted leases of from two to eight acres of alluvial land, from two to five hundred yards of river bed and from one to five hundred yards on the line of a quartz vein, for a period limited to five years.⁸¹ Under the 1866 Act, the area of land available to lease was extended to one to fifty acres of alluvial ground and quartz reef, and from two hundred to one thousand yards of a river bed. The length of time a lease could be held was also extended from five years to fifteen years and the annual rent was reduced from £5 pounds per acre, £5 per hundred yards of river bed, and £5 per hundred yards of quartz vein to £2 respectively under the amended Act.⁸² The 1866 Act also privileged the use of machinery, allowing any number of claims to be amalgamated whenever machinery may be employed, or other sufficient reason may exist.⁸³ The new Act also decreed that the Gold Commissioner was required to submit every lease application for the approval of the Minister for Lands before leases could be issued.

As shown in Table 1, the Register of Extended Claims shows that between 1866 and 1867, the total number of applications made for extended claims on the Turon dropped significantly from 108 to 35 applications and in 1868 declined to 25, while the number of applications for extended claims made by Chinese parties more than halved between 1866 and 1868. In the peak year for applications, 1865, Chinese parties made 55 or 43% of the 129 applications, but by 1868, this number had fallen to 25, though Chinese parties made 96% of the applications. The records also show an increase in mixed parties occurred from 1866. Robert Webster again being teamed with a party of 11 Chinese in May 1866 to take out a riverbed claim at Circus Point; and in June 1867, Webster teamed up with James Moony, James Ah Hoon and James Ah Hoy.⁸⁴

Family histories, newspaper reports and the insolvency file of a Chinese storekeeper in Sofala indicate that by this time, Chinese miners were moving to other less populated fields. Were the departures a consequence of the changed environment or a coincidence? Lacking both a government employed Chinese interpreter and an

adjudicator on the field, disputes over boundaries would have become more problematic for Chinese miners. So too would other incidents that required police intervention. McGowan argues that in Braidwood, the police considered it utterly impossible to proceed without interpreters.⁸⁵ The places to which Chinese were moving were not crowded out with speculative leases which the new regulations had encouraged.

Table 1: *Table showing number of applications for extended claims and number and percentage of Chinese parties applying for extended claims.*

Year of Application	No. of Applications	Chinese Parties	Chinese percent
1862	33	19	58
1863	90	28	31
1864	87	20	23
1865	129	55	43
1866	108	60	56
1867	35	29	83
1868	25	24	96

Source: NSWSA: Assistant Gold Commissioner Sofala 1862-68, NRS 4327 [4/7854. 1 vol.] Register of Extended Claims, 1862-68.

Migration from Sofala

After 1866, there was a shift to work on privately owned land at Glanmire, and Kerrin Cook and Daniel Garvey claim that the Glanmire Gold Mining Company employed a great number of Chinese who built a water race 11 miles long.⁸⁶ An 1869 newspaper report on Glanmire stated that the water race, which was about eight miles long and ran from the lower gulf, was constructed by Mr Combes of the Glanmire Gold Mining Company. According to the report, in 1869 the race was full and sluicing operations were being carried on vigorously.⁸⁷

Sofala storekeeper Sun Quong Fung, who signed the Bah Fook petition in 1866, had by 1867 moved to Bathurst.⁸⁸ Records of business licences show that Sun Quong Fong applied in Bathurst in 1867 for a hawker's licence to travel with a pack horse.⁸⁹ By the late 1860s, Chinese were beginning to establish themselves in towns as market gardeners.

Census records show the Chinese mining population were also migrating north-west into the Wellington and Mudgee Registry districts. The 1871 census shows there. Chinese-European families were leaving Sofala for various locations. After Sengchai was laid off as government interpreter in 1866, he and his family moved to Young, where Hannah died in 1868.⁹⁰ Amoy man James Tanko, whose son, James Tanko Junior, was born to Flora Perry in Bathurst in 1866, made an application for naturalisation in 1868. By this time, he was living in Uralla working as a butcher.⁹¹

Chinese who moved to Queensland were amongst the earliest on the new gold fields. Sofala storekeeper William Ah Sang and his wife Elizabeth, who married in Sofala in 1866, registered the birth of their first child, Theresa, in Bouldercombe in October

1867.⁹² Whilst families were leaving Sofala, few new births were being registered there. Between 1870 and 1876, the births of only five babies born to Chinese-European couples were registered in Sofala.⁹³

In March 1869, it was reported that Chinese were arriving from Sofala to work the bed of the Timbarra River, Northern New South Wales.⁹⁴ Chinese miners were not only heading north for gold, but also for tin which was found at Oban in northern New South Wales in March 1872. Evidence that Chinese merchants began to invest in establishing stores elsewhere can be seen in the insolvency case of Sofala storekeeper John, or Jahun Ah Sue.⁹⁵ Ah Sue was a storekeeper in Sofala for eight years before his estate was sequestered in February 1872. At the time of sequestration, Ah Sue had assets to the value of £842, which included a house and store erected on leased land, and five horses and a stockyard for cattle at Spring Creek in Sofala. Ah Sue's debtors were distributed along the east coast as far north as Rockhampton and south to Melbourne, in inland New South Wales at Rocky River (Uralla), Tuena, the Snowy and Darling Rivers and in New Zealand.

Gold Mining Regulations of 1872

It was not only Chinese miners who were unhappy with the new regulations. Such was the general dissatisfaction with the *Gold Fields Amendments Act 1866* that a Royal Commission into the working of the Act and Regulations was held. Between 1870 and 1871 over 100 witnesses were called upon to give evidence before the Commission.⁹⁶ Amongst those giving evidence was Charles De Boos, who stated that nine out of every ten disputes arose upon questions of boundary. Whittingdale Johnson, Commissioner of the Western Gold fields, stated that in cases where miners refused to take the decision of the unpaid Magistracy, he had been required to travel 100 miles from Bathurst to settle disputes on the field.⁹⁷ The Commission found the 1866 Act to be unworkable. It recommended that Northern, Western and Southern Gold Districts be replaced by smaller Mining Districts and that Mining Wardens, who would also be the Police Magistrates of the District, adjudicate on all questions arising upon mining matters in periodical Wardens Courts. Whether the investigation in a dispute was conducted in court or on the ground was at the discretion of the Warden.⁹⁸

After the report of the Royal Commission was handed down in October 1871, regulations in New South Wales were repealed and replaced by the Regulations for Gold Mining upon Crown Lands of 21 March 1872 (*Gold Mining Regulations of 1872*).⁹⁹ The Regulations curtailed alluvial leases to a maximum of 25 acres in tested and abandoned workings of any depth and new alluvial ground of a greater depth than 300 feet. Alluvial leases were also allowed in ground of any depth on any gold field proclaimed for at least five years where alluvial deposits contained water of such quantity as required the intervention of machinery, expensive head or tail races or blasting between the surface and the drift.¹⁰⁰ Holders of a miners right wishing to take out a lease were to erect a sign providing his/her name and intentions, lodge the application to the Mining Registrar with rent for a year, and the fee for survey. Objections to such leases were to be made in writing

and lodged within 14 days.¹⁰¹ This would have created bureaucratic barriers for non-English speakers.

The Gold Mining Regulations of 1872 ushered gold mining into the age of capital and company mining. Although the restrictions on alluvial leases did not apply exclusively to Chinese, they had the effect of limiting the ground on which Chinese, who for the most part were alluvial miners, could work. Chinese had begun sinking shafts to work shallow leads, but they rarely worked at a depth of 300 feet, or used machinery, which restricted them to working on tested and abandoned ground.

A list of approved auriferous leases published in the Government Gazette in June 1873 showed that of the thousands of mostly quartz leases taken out in the Western Gold District, only one Chinese person took out a lease in 1872: Ah Tong who applied unopposed for ten acres at Quartz Ridge on the Lower Turon.¹⁰² The only other Chinese party to apply for a lease before June 1873, was that of Ah Ching and Wang War, who took out a lease of four acres for sluicing purposes at Willis Flat on the Lower Turon.¹⁰³ Another two Chinese parties and a mixed party of Chinese and Europeans took out leases in the remainder of 1873, while in 1874, Hee Yet obtained a lease on old alluvial abandoned ground at Chinaman's Flat on the Upper Turon.¹⁰⁴ Altogether there were only five Chinese applicants amongst the 515 gold lease applications made on the Turon between 1872 and 1874. From 1875 until 1886 when the Register ended, no Chinese names appear in the Register of Gold Lease applications made on the Turon.¹⁰⁵

Chinese were not completely averse to reef mining, as evidenced by Chinese parties engaged in sinking on the Turon and at Tambaroora before 1866. Anna Kyi asserts that in Victoria, the greater portion of Chinese had exchanged shallow sinking and washing of refuse for deep sinking by 1856, and by 1857 were working on some of the deepest leads in Ballarat.¹⁰⁶ Kyi's research into the Chinese-owned and worked Woah Hawp Quartz Mining Company established in Ballarat in 1882, and Timothy Jones' research on quartz mines in the Northern Territory owned by Chinese merchants and worked by Chinese miners on the tribute system, are further testament to Chinese involvement in reef mining.¹⁰⁷ As Ralph Birrell observed of mining law in Victoria, there were no laws to prevent Chinese miners pegging out claims or taking quartz leases, but few such leases were taken out by them, probably because they had to be approved by the Local Courts which were antagonistic to such leases. Birrell also contends that whilst the small number who took out quartz leases were tolerated by the Europeans, any suggestion of Chinese doing so in large numbers would have raised resistance both from the government and the miners.¹⁰⁸ In an environment of shifting legislation and racial tension, Chinese merchants avoided risking capital investment required in taking out quartz leases in New South Wales.

Between 1867 and 1874, Sofala's gold yield underwent a steady decline, halving from almost 21,000 ounces in 1867 to less than 10,000 ounces in 1873.¹⁰⁹ In 1873, the combined Western District gold fields yielded 268,418 ounces, far outstripping the Southern Gold District (50,692 ounces) and the Northern Gold District (9,086 ounces). Yet half of the gold received by escort from the Western Gold District came from Mudgee and Gulgong. Only 9,507 ounces was received from Sofala.¹¹⁰ The question of whether the Chinese population declined because of decreasing gold yields, or gold yields

decreased in response to the decline in the Chinese population is one which requires further testing.

In 1872, gold was discovered on the Palmer River in Queensland, and it was to this field that new arrivals from China rushed in 1873.¹¹¹ In 1874, gold production in Queensland outstripped the other colonies for the first time.¹¹²

The Mining Act 1874

On 1 May 1874, the 1872 Regulations were replaced by *An Act To Make Better Provision For The Regulation Of Mining 1874* (37 Vic No. 13). The 1874 Act exempted the leasing of 'all alluvial ground except such as in the opinion of the Secretary for Mines may have been worked and abandoned', or for other sufficient reasons ought not in his opinion be exempt, and carried similar rights to objection.¹¹³ It allowed for the creation of a Department of Mines, authorised the Governor to appoint Mining Wardens and establish Wardens Courts and abolished the old division of the gold fields into Northern, Southern and Western Gold Districts and replaced them with eight Mining Districts. The Tambaroora and Turon Registry districts were combined as the Tambaroora and Turon District (Sofala Division). In Whittingdale Johnson's annual report on the Western Gold fields in 1874, he stated 'both on the Turon and at Wattle Flat, a large area of quartz bearing country exists and almost every available foot of it has been leased'.¹¹⁴ Most of these leases were on the reef bearing ground high above the Turon, at Box Ridge and Wattle Flat and were worked by syndicates or company employees.

Chinese miners who remained on the Turon engaged in sluicing in the early 1870s. The Register of Complaints from the Sofala Wardens Court and in the years 1874-78 show they were not alone. Thirteen of the 50 cases decided by the court in these years involved Chinese people, 10 of whom were defendants. There were six cases over water trespass, three over water deprivation, three over land trespass, and one was a contract case. Decisions went against Chinese plaintiffs and defendants in the majority of these cases.¹¹⁵

When Charles De Boos visited Sofala in 1870, he described it as 'to a certain extent a celestial township and terrestrials and celestials appear to hobnob together with that degree of intimacy which naturally comes of long acquaintance'.¹¹⁶ By the late 1870s, this was changing. In 1878, storekeepers Wong Gee, Kam Yun, Wong Ching, and Chinese doctor Sang Chew petitioned for an acre of land in Sofala to be dedicated as a Chinese burial ground vested in trustees. Nine years earlier, the Police Magistrate Hugh Bridson had allotted land to the Chinese for that purpose, but the land had not been formally dedicated. The petitioners complained that after Bridson's death in 1877, the post and rail fence around the burial ground had been destroyed, or removed for use as firewood by carriers, and rails around the gravesites similarly destroyed.¹¹⁷ The area proposed for a Chinese cemetery adjacent to the Sofala General Cemetery is now covered by the road which leads to the town's rubbish tip. The only remaining gravestone of a Chinese person in the Sofala Cemetery, is that of Sofala storekeeper Wong Gee, who died in 1907 at the age of 72, having lived 47 years in New South Wales.¹¹⁸

The reef mining boom of the early 1870s was a short-lived phenomenon on the Turon. In 1876, the Mining Registrar, Hugh Bridson reported 'Many of the leases applied for some years ago, have been cancelled, and very few retaken'.¹¹⁹ In 1877, M. Fagan, who replaced Bridson, described mining in the Sofala division to be at a very low ebb, claiming that not more than half a dozen leases and claims were at work.¹²⁰

The abandonment of the leases and a scarcity of water led to a return to alluvial mining at the end of the decade. In the 1880s, Chinese miners returned to work the bed of the river. Fagan reported in 1880:

a considerable portion of the bed of the Turon River, for some miles on either side of the township of Sofala, has been effectually worked by Chinese ... My efforts to obtain returns from individual claims have not been successful ...but judging from the quantity of gold sold by them to the bank and storekeepers in the township, I believe them to have been the most successful miners in the division during the year.¹²¹

A police report from 1881 indicates that it is not likely that these miners were new arrivals from China. In 1881, the Superintendent-in-Charge of Police Station No. 1, Sydney, forwarded a report on Chinese arrivals to the Inspector General of Police.¹²² Between 1 January and 21 April 1881, 2,404 Chinese arrived in Sydney. About 200 were returning from a visit to China. The superintendent reported that 1,425 of the Chinese arriving had gone to the tin mines at Tingha and other places in the northern districts, while 314 arrivals were going on to New Zealand and 215 to Victoria. Only about 50 went to Bourke, Dubbo, Wellington, Cooma and other places in the interior. Sofala did not rate a mention.

The end of Chinese community on the Turon

In 1887 the Mining Registrar reported that it was believed that several parties of Chinese working in the old and abandoned alluvial diggings in the Sofala Division had been successful.¹²³ New South Wales introduced the *Chinese Restriction & Regulation Act* in 1888, which increased the poll tax to £100 and changed the tonnage to one Chinese per 300 tons of ships tonnage. It also prohibited the issuing of naturalisation certificates to Chinese for any reason whatsoever and prohibited any new arrivals from China from engaging in any kind of mining without the express authority of the Minister in charge of the Department of Mines.¹²⁴

Probably the last big Chinese venture in Sofala took place in 1893, when a Chinese party was working the bed of the river near Wallaby Rocks. The works were completely filled in when the Turon flooded in March 1893.¹²⁵ At the end of 1895, it was estimated that 425 Europeans and 60 Chinese were engaged in mining work in the Sofala division.¹²⁶ At the Mining Conference in Sydney in 1896, a Mr Crossley of Sofala raised a motion that no Chinese or Asiatic be allowed to mine on any gold field until five years after discovery, and that Chinese should not be employed in a mine at any time. The motion was agreed to.¹²⁷

The Chinese who remained on the Turon turned from mining to market gardening and tobacco growing. When Chin Ah Yin of Pennyweight Flat, Sofala, died in 1896,

amongst the possessions in his estate was a tobacco shed, seven allotments of land and a four-roomed house.¹²⁸ One might question why he did not return to China when he evidently had the means. Perhaps he was settled and had no wish to do so. He was almost certainly the last Chinese person in Sofala with that amount of capital. By 1898, about 35 miles of the bed of the Turon had been taken up for dredging.¹²⁹ Unlike in New Zealand, where Chinese entrepreneur Choie Sew Hoy led the way in dredging in the 1880s, in New South Wales dredging was an exclusively European concern.¹³⁰

Figure 1: *The Isle of Dreams, Chinese Settlement – Sofala, 1905,*



Source: Photo from Robert G.V. Baker, *'Historic Sofala - a Goldfield that changed a nation, 1851 -1943'*, Centrepak Research, Cronulla, NSW, 1985.

Figure 2: *A cottage now stands in the location of the Chinese settlement or joss house on the Isle of Dreams, Sofala,*



Source: Photograph by Juanita Kwok 2018.

By the turn of the century, Chinese remaining on the gold fields scratched out a difficult existence re-working alluvial ground and market gardening to supply a much diminished and impoverished population. The 1901 census in Sofala recorded a Chinese joss house on the Turon River¹³¹ A postcard titled 'The Isle of Dreams Chinese settlement' is popularly believed to be a photograph of the Chinese joss house at Erskine Point on the Turon. Dated 1905, it shows the joss house as barely habitable (Figs 1 and 2).

Chinese who were non-British subjects, were disqualified by the *Old Age and Invalid Pensions Act 1908* from receiving a pension unless born or naturalised in Australia.¹³² A small Chinese population remained on the Turon River until the early decades of the twentieth century.¹³³

Conclusion

From 1866, Chinese began moving away from the Turon. Some Chinese were drawn to other gold fields in New South Wales and the new fields in Queensland, or to tin mining in northern New South Wales. The main argument of this paper is that there was not only the pull factor of returning to China or migrating to new fields, but the push factor of legislation. Once Chinese-European families and the bulk of Chinese miners had left Sofala, the town itself slipped into terminal decline.

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- ¹¹⁸ NSW BDM Registry, 6675/1907.
- ¹¹⁹ Annual Report Compilation, Sofala Division 1871-1975, Sofala Division 1876.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1877.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 1880 and 1881.
- ¹²² Letter from George Read Esq. Superintendent in Charge, No. 1 Police Station, Sydney, 21 April 1881, Colonial Secretary Special Bundles, Chinese Immigration 1880-81, NRS 7933, 81/2897, NSWSA.
- ¹²³ Annual Report Compilation, Sofala Division 1871-1975, Sofala Division, 1887.
- ¹²⁴ Chinese Restriction and Regulation Act of 1888, 52 Vic No. 4, http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/num_act/crarao1888n15390/
- ¹²⁵ 'Sofala', *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 14 March 1893, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62183520>.
- ¹²⁶ Annual Report Compilation, Sofala Division 1871-1975.
- ¹²⁷ 'The Mining Conference', *National Advocate*, 13 February 1896, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/156711419>.
- ¹²⁸ 'Advertising,' *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 7 September 1896, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/63933165>.
- ¹²⁹ Annual Report Compilation, Sofala Division 1871-1975, Sofala Division, 1898.
- ¹³⁰ Biography of Charles Sew Hoy, *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2s14/sew-hoy-charles>
- ¹³¹ New South Wales Government 1901 Census. [2/8433] NRS 685, Collectors' Notebooks Household Number 341 NSWSA.
- ¹³² Gwenda Tavan, *The Long Slow Death of White Australia*, Scube Publications, Melbourne, 2005, p. 8.
- ¹³³ When Ah Kow died at Sofala Hospital in 1924 he was said to have been the last Chinese on the Turon. See, 'The Last Chinese', *National Advocate*, 9 August 1924, p. 5, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/159169858>.