

Ping Que - Mining Magnate of the Northern Territory 1854-1886

By TIMOTHY JONES

There is a widespread image people have of the Chinese on the goldfields as being workers who toiled on the periphery of mining and who faced hostility and distrust by the wider European community. By and large, the presence of the Chinese was resented in most of the Colonies but a very different situation prevailed in the Northern Territory. There, for many years the Chinese formed the major part of the population, and were an essential part of the workforce. The two races, European and Chinese, were mutually dependent, racial animosity was minimal and not at all significant. What little agitation there was against the Chinese emanated from a small group of Darwin business people whose profits had suffered from competition by Chinese merchants.¹

The story which follows shows that Ping Que, a merchant, was not only heavily involved in mainstream mining and other entrepreneurial activities, but was also a respected figure amongst the mining and wider European community.

In 23 June 1854, a lad named Ping Que arrived in Victoria on the ship *Cornwall* from Hong Kong.² There is some doubt about his age at the time but it appears that he was about 17 years of age. The only written records of his activities in Victoria appear to be entries in the Rate Books of the town of Creswick for 1872, 1873 and 1874. These entries disclose that Ping Que was the owner of tenement and land at Black Lead, net annual value £12 and amount of rate paid 18 shillings.³

According to R. Brough Smyth, the Black Lead was an ancient watercourse which strikes across the present Creswick Creek.⁴ It and other leads and alluviums were stated to be very rich. The whole area was the subject of a Rush in September 1854, that attracted up to 20,000 miners.

On 26 November 1873, Ping Que, having been resident in the Colony of Victoria for 19 years applied for Naturalisation. The application form included a sworn statement that he was by occupation a miner. J. Lewers JP, the first manager of the Creswick branch of the Bank of New South Wales and President of the first Bowling Club, certified that he had known Ping Que for 10 years and that he was of good repute. The other signatories on the document were C. Chomely, Police Magistrate and

Warden, and J. Martyr, Land Agent and early businessman, also Secretary of the Bowling Club.⁵ It is significant that Ping Que was obviously well known and favourably regarded by the leading citizens of Creswick. Naturalisation was granted by G.F. Bowen, Governor of Victoria, on 18 December 1873.⁶

The conclusion to be drawn from this limited information is that Ping Que had been a successful miner, that he had spent most if not all his time at Creswick since he arrived in Victoria and that he was an important member of the merchant class. It seems likely that his forbears in Canton were of the merchant class. Another Chinese merchant, resident in Creswick at the time was Lee Hang Gong who later moved to the Northern Territory where he became a mining magnate, mainly by mining tin. There seems little doubt that he was friendly with Ping Que.

Ping Que decided to move to the Northern Territory and arrived in Darwin from Adelaide on the *Claude Hamilton* on 24 April 1875.⁷ The local newspaper published a letter of thanks to the captain of the *Claude Hamilton* for his seamanship on his first voyage to Darwin up the Queensland coast,⁸ this letter being signed by several of the passengers including Ping Que and Adam Johns, the latter later to become a well known and highly respected prospector. According to the shipping notes at the time, Ping Que travelled Steerage, while all other signatories to the letter travelled Saloon class. One conclusion is that it was during this voyage that a friendship developed between Adam Johns and Ping Que that lasted until the death of the latter. It seems that Ping Que wasted no time in proceeding to the gold country, or 'the reefs' as it was then known. 'Off to the reefs' conjures up a vision of Ping Que and his small group of indentured labourers or 'coolies' as they were then known proceeding along the track to the goldbearing country. There was no road as such, only a bush track but along this quite a number of hotels had appeared. Ping Que most likely rode a horse whilst the coolies walked, carrying their possessions and other items on their backs for the 110 or so miles to their destination. This was the normal means of travel for the coolie class.

Ping Que set himself up with quarters and a store at Union Reefs where a number of European miners had established claims. The Chinese have a term called *guanshi*, which means 'connections' and there is ample evidence that Ping Que had plenty. It is likely, if not probable, that word had reached him in Creswick of Adam Johns' and Phil Saunders' discovery of a reef at Union Reefs that yielded 70 ounces to the ton. Profits were considerable, sufficient to enable Adam Johns to purchase and erect a battery.⁹

It was not long before Ping Que commenced mining at Union Reefs. According to Chief Warden Plunkett, in August 1875 there were 'half a dozen coolies working at quartz mining'. As the 173 Chinese coolies imported by the government in August 1874 were bound to serve wherever directed for two years it is a reasonable conclusion that the coolies referred to by Plunkett were brought up to the Territory by Ping Que and were bound to him under arrangements peculiar to the Chinese at the time .

In May 1876 John Knight, the new Mining Warden visited the Union and inspected all the claims. His report to the Government Resident said *inter alia*:

Lambert Smith and Ping Que are now the principal workers at the Union and are turning out a fair quantity of stone. They pay their coolies one pound and provisions. Ping Que manages his countrymen very well and works them to make his mining pay which is more than can be said of other employers of coolies. He added, The most enterprising miner in this district (the Union) is Ping Que, an intelligent Chinaman who speaks good English. He employs about fourteen coolies.¹⁰

The Chinese merchant, or storekeeper, was much more closely involved with his workforce than his European counterpart. His store supplied his labourers with all their necessities; anything from picks and shovels to fowls, rice, opium and rice wine in stoneware flasks. In many cases the labourers were bound to the merchant by contract. He bought their gold at something less than the official price and required them to buy their provisions and other items from his store. When the labourers fell on hard times the merchant loaned them money at a high rate of interest which often had the effect of binding them to him for a long time. These arrangements reflected the universally accepted practices in China at the time.¹¹

Initially Ping Que had a tribute at Claim No. 5 South Union (the term 'tribute' means that the miner who worked the claim paid the owner a percentage of the value of gold won.) He certainly wasted no time as in August 1875 he had 30 tons crushed at Adam John' battery.¹² He then joined forces with Lambert Smith, another of the independent white miners, to work a claim at No. 3 North Union with nine coolies. After a few tribute crushings, Ping Que decided to start working on his own account. The Union correspondent of the *Northern Territory Times* said:

Ping Que's party deserve great credit for energy and perseverance and it is time that fortune smiled more favourably upon them. They have tried several claims on tribute and have not been successful although the coolies employed took out large quantities of stone. They tried No 3 North for two or three months at a loss

of 3 or 4 hundred pounds. The stone raised on No 5 South for the first two months did not pay more than carting and crushing but they seem determined to stick to it and I understand they have taken No 2 South. I believe that if Ping Que could get any run of stone to turn out even a steady ounce he would employ all the coolies in the Territory.¹³

Ping Que's fortunes did improve early in 1877. Adam Johns crushed 107 tons for him from No. 5 Lady Alice for 135 ounces of gold and in the following months he consistently obtained returns of over an ounce to the ton.¹⁴ Newspaper reports disclose that he was working five separate claims and on one, No. 5 South Union, he had 15 coolies working three shifts, with a shaft 140 feet deep (42.7 metres) put down at a cost of £360. The stone was raised with a horse whim (an ancient mining device whereby a horse travelling a circular path turned a drum to which a rope was attached). This seems to have been the only machinery in use at the time. With pick and shovel 400 tons of ore were delivered to Adam Johns' battery during a four-week period in July and August 1877. The yield was 227 ounces of gold. A phenomenal crushing from another claim was 230 ounces from 20 tons.¹⁵ Operations were now on such a scale that more labour was needed, so in May 1877 Ping Que went to Singapore and engaged coolies on his own account. On reporting this at the time, Adam Johns referred to Ping Que as, 'The whitest man in the Territory'.¹⁶

At the same time, Warden Knight, reporting a perceived labour shortage on the goldfields, stated that at least another 100 coolies could be profitably employed. He went on to say,

In obtaining these men, I would avoid the gilt-edged paraphernalia that surrounded the previous shipment and which cost about 30 pounds a head. I simply propose that Mr Ping Que, the most enterprising miner in the Territory, be engaged to go to Singapore to select say fifty suitable men, giving them a free passage, provided by the Government, on condition of their signing an undertaking to repay the amount in monthly instalments of one pound, to be deducted from the wages due to them from any employer.¹⁷

During 1877 and 1878, Ping Que had consistent returns of at least one ounce of gold to the ton, at times much more. He had leases of his own, joint ventures with Tennant and other Europeans and indeed was so busy supervising his interests that he found it necessary to tribute some leases to lesser merchants such as Chew Fong and Ching Yok Sing.¹⁸

When Mr. Knight took up duty as Warden of Goldfields he decided to set up a Miners Hospital in a vacant hotel building and called for subscriptions, Ping Que

headed the list with £5; Chew Fong gave ten shillings. Other merchants subscribed, as well as several coolies who gave one shilling each. The *Northern Territory Times* published the list of subscriptions in its issue of 1877 and this seems to be an almost complete list of miners on the goldfields at the time.¹⁹ The Union Reefs are shown as having 14 Europeans and 2 Chinese merchants. Ping Que was friendly with Knight and seemingly popular with most if not all the European miners. He had a good intelligence service. When in 1878 the government was considering the imposition of customs duties on a range of items including opium, he received a telegram from Loo Koul, a merchant in Darwin, 'Stand firm on opium'.²⁰ Late that year when the white teamsters' charges for freight to the goldfields soared to £45 a ton and higher, Ping Que learned that on their own initiative, 20 coolies had carried one ton of freight to Southport and had completed the round trip in 10 days. He immediately despatched 100 of his own men to do the same thing, which action shocked the white teamsters into reducing their rates to an acceptable level.²¹

Late in 1878 Ping Que heard of a new find at a place called The Driffield, about 40 miles from Pine Creek where he joined forces with J. W. Tennant to work it. Somewhere between one and two hundred Chinese were engaged, the terms being that equipment and rations would be provided until they found payable gold. *The Northern Territory Times* reported the departure of the caravan for the Driffield:

Hundreds of Chinamen could be observed flitting from tent to tent, tying baggage on, securing water bags and massing all things ready for their long journey. The line moved off at 12. First came 20 horses heavily loaded with well filled pack saddles, next came about 100 Chinamen in single file each carrying 140 pounds on their bamboo sticks, following them came the boss, Mr Ping Que and on his left the Superintendent, Mr J W Tennant, both surrounded with four servants, bearing umbrellas and cowtails and close in the rear a fife and drum band consisting of a man and a boy with a piccolo and drum. There was a solemnity about the procession, almost funereal.²²

On arrival at the Driffield the men were set to work stockpiling washdirt. The country was very dry, the nearest drinking water being at a waterhole a mile distant from the camp. In this way several weeks went by until the rains came. Gold panning began and it quickly became apparent that apart from a few small patches the field was very poor and unpayable. There was no option for the unfortunate Ping Que and Tennant but to return to the Union with what stores remained. By then the 'wet' had set in and no teamster would attempt the trip. The only means of transport was some 50

Chinese and eight horses, so they loaded and set off. All creeks were in flood and the track a quagmire but they eventually reached the Cullen River where they camped. During the night there was a storm of unprecedented violence, the river rose some twenty feet and washed away practically all of Ping Que's stores including some tons of rice. The venture had turned into a disaster with high cartage costs and wages, with no gold of consequence and loss of profit on the stores which would have been sold to the men.²³ This was one of the very few, possibly the only business activity of Ping Que that ended up a failure.

In March 1879, Ping Que and Tennant purchased 600 head of cattle and engaged a slaughterman. The availability of fresh beef for the goldfields population was very popular and no doubt profitable to the joint venturers.

In June 1879 four Chinese were accused of stealing washdirt worth £86 being the property of Ah Kow and Chin Hi at the Chinaman's Rush, Ping Que having given a letter to the police about the matter. The prisoners let it be known that if Ping Que came they would shoot him. Found guilty, they were sentenced to 18 months prison with hard labour.²⁴ Soon after this, Ping Que departed on a holiday, presumably to China. The only evidence of his absence from the Territory on this and subsequent occasions is the appearance of a notice in the advertising columns of the *Northern Territory Times*. The first example being in form of a written statement:

I the undersigned have Appointed Ah Soey my agent in Palmerston to collect all monies Due to me and his receipt for the Same will be sufficient discharge. Ping Que Palmerston 14th June 1879²⁵

In August of that year Ping Que was back at the Union and resumed work on No. 5 South, which he had purchased from the Curator of Deceased Estates for £175. Twenty hands were employed on the lease, 900 tons of stone were raised but gold recovered went only 13 pennyweights, thus only marginally payable - a disappointing result for a great deal of work. Ping Que went overseas again for a few months, presumably to China.

On his return Ping Que moved his operations and workforce to Pine Creek where a rich leader yielded two ounces to the ton. He had another phenomenally rich crushing through the John Bull Battery, which resulted in 216 ounces from two tons.²⁶ Apart from his extensive mining operations, Ping Que constructed sheep pens and slaughtering yards and then in May 1880 joined his friend J.W. Tennant in the purchase

of the Pine Creek Hotel, the former taking over the management.

In addition to his wide range of mining and other entrepreneurial pursuits, Ping Que played a prominent part in settling a dispute at the new Margaret River diggings. Macao men pegged claims and the same evening Hong Kong men overpegged and on one claim found a piece of quartz which was stated to hold about 150 ounces of gold. The Warden was sent for but could not be found and all agreed to wait until he arrived. Ping Que appeared for the Cantonese and Tommy Ah Sin for the Macaos. Ping Que managed to interview the Warden first and proceeded with him to the ground. At the stroke of ten a court was held. Ping Que assembled his men, evidence was heard and the decision given in favour of the Cantonese, to be settled by a 'scramble.' The defendants then appeared led by Tommy Ah Sin who asserted that he knew nothing of the court being held and had received no notice of the time and place of the hearing. He went on to say that to decide a case without the knowledge of the defendants was more like Chinese than English law and that he knew as much about mining as Ping Que or the Warden.

A fight then broke out in which picks, shovels, and sticks were freely used and a number of men injured. The sole trooper was powerless in a situation where he was surrounded by about 500 enraged Chinese. A Chinese squabble then took place in which Ping Que did most of the talking and the Chinese settled the matter between themselves without regard to the Warden's previous decision. A correspondent observed, 'I think the Warden rather liked that'.²⁷

In October 1880 Ping Que gave evidence in a court case when an ex-trooper was charged by the Southport Postmaster of stealing five parcels of gold from the Post Office. He said, 'I am a storekeeper, lately of the Union. I posted a parcel of gold on 5th of July. The weight was about 38 ounces, alluvial gold. The gold picked out is a portion of mine. I can swear to my gold and this is the inside wrapper of it'. The jury found the ex-trooper guilty. And sentenced him to seven years imprisonment.²⁸

In mid 1881 there was a new Rush to a place that became known as 'Saunders Rush'. Of this Ping Que told W. D'Arcy Uhr, correspondent to the *Northern Territory Times*, that over 150 Chinamen obtained nine to ten ounces in a week and that many were earning £1 a day. The gully carried gold the whole width of a flat, 30 yards (27 metres) down to 200 yards (183 metres), sinking being from four to five feet (1.2 to 1.5 metres).²⁹ No doubt Ping Que derived wealth from the field but late that year he departed for a year's holiday in China. During his absence Johnston and Williams

applied to be put in possession of the claim known as Ping Que's at the Margaret on the grounds that the claim was not being worked in a *bona fide* manner. Bon Chow, as Ping Que's partner, proved he had men working on the claim, or rather, had men engaged whom he supposed were working there but these men, unknown to him, were working elsewhere. The Warden ruled that the owner should see that a fair amount of work was done. In lieu of forfeiting the claim he inflicted a fine of £5.³⁰

Ping Que's activities seem to have reached a peak in 1883. He had mining claims of his own, or tributed on land extending from Pine Creek to the Union, Margaret River and Saunders Rush. He also had a close working relationship with W.G. Griffiths, for whom he managed several claims and several joint ventures with some of the leading prospectors of the time, such as Adam Johns. His principal claim was No. 5 South Union, an area of 20 acres where he regularly employed 60 or more men. At Pine Creek he owned the old Telegraph claim where one crushing gave 255 ounces from 9 tons. He made at least one trip to New South Wales in the early 1880s and returned with more indentured labour.³¹

As a citizen Ping Que was active in ways quite distinct from mining. He was a committee member of the Port Darwin Camp Progress Association and in June 1882 attended a public meeting called to consider the best means of suppressing future outrages by natives and being particularly concerned to see action taken on the recent murders of Chinese teamsters at Black Flat. In his address Ping Que said, 'It was high time some effectual means were taken to deal with offences committed by the blacks, in some cases right at our doors as instance a case in point two years ago when a party of Chinese packers were assaulted and robbed close to Southport'. He then offered to give £20 towards the fitting out of a party to punish the natives. J.W. Lawrie then moved, 'That a party be at once formed of volunteers and black trackers to follow and punish the tribe concerned and that the government be requested to allow a trooper to attend the party'. The matter was seconded by Ping Que and carried without dissent.³²

Probably the best recognition of Ping Que's standing with the European mining community was his appointment, under the Northern Territory Gold Mining Act of 1873, as a member of the Mining Board; along with such other well-known and respected members of the mining community as Olaf Jensen of Pine Creek, W.K. Griffiths of Port Darwin Camp and D.B. Tennant of the 12 - mile. The appointment was notified in the *Northern Territory Times* of 1 September 1883.

During the first few months of 1883, a Parliamentary delegation visited the Territory.

This was the subject of a book by W.J. (later Sir William) Sowden. Who referred to the Union Reefs where noted:

The principal store is owned by Ping Que who seems to be a Napoleon amongst his countrymen. He is by far I believe the largest employer of their labour on the Territorian goldfields. Ping Que is a practical miner himself having worked and taken his place with Europeans of all description of mining both in Victoria and New Zealand.³³ He is as superior to the herd with which he is surrounded as it is possible to be and I found him during my visit both intelligent and obliging and fully alive to the importance of having the rich reefs in the neighbourhood examined and reported on in the public press.³⁴

Writing on the Union in general, Sowden stated:

So rich has been this goldfield - alluvial and quartz - that (I have it on unquestionable authority) Ping Que alone has bought and sent home half a ton of gold from it and its surroundings. A once flourishing township has dwindled down to about a dozen Chinese bark and bamboo habitations and a store or two. The party entered one belonging to the famous Ping Que, and were received with fully celestial etiquette by a sleek, well fleshed intelligent Comprador who obsequiously weighed the gold specimens the Minister brought, and showed that he had his own ideas respecting gold weighing. No 5 South is the celebrated Ping Quee's (sic) and the deepest on the Union, 200 feet. At that depth no water or mundic has been reached.

On Ping Que's reef at the Margaret his 3 Chinamen got 500 pounds worth of gold from one bucket of stone a few days before our visit.

I had a most interesting interview with a most intelligent Chinese merchant at the Margaret - Quong Wing Chong, second only in wealth and power to the almighty Ping Que.³⁵

In October 1883 fortune again smiled on Ping Que. Harry Roberts and his mate discovered gold at a place that was later known as the Eureka mine. They sold it to Ping Que who obtained 1,000 ounces of gold from it, all alluvial. His other mining operations continued to be successful. In 1884 he was granted a publican's licence for Union Reefs and then went overseas again.

On his return to the Territory in November 1884, Ping Que applied to the South Australian Government for naturalisation, possibly believing that such was required by each separate Australian colony. He of course, already held Victorian naturalisation. Adam Johns JP countersigned the application form, while Mr. Knight wrote out the words of the required oath that was then sworn and signed by Ping Que.³⁶

From the end of 1884 Ping Que is rarely mentioned in the *Northern Territory Times*. He was absent, presumably in China in February, July and August 1885. After

his return in November 1885, he sued Goon Sow for £27, the value of three pigs destroyed by the defendant. The case was non-suited. Goon Sow then sued Ping Que for £72, being value of produce destroyed by the defendant's pigs. Verdict for plaintiff was one shilling.³⁷

Ping Que returned from another visit to China in December 1885 and was immediately consulted by Government Resident Parsons about likely future trends in Chinese immigration to the Territory.³⁸ His answer later proved remarkably correct. He departed for China again in April 1886. The following month, news was received by the ship *Taiwan* of his death in China. This led to public expressions of sorrow. The *Northern Territory Times* published a glowing Obituary, the first of a Chinese merchant to appear in its pages.

It is with sincere regret that we have heard of the death of Ping Que who was well known for twelve years in connection with mining enterprises on the Union Reefs. Many years of hard work and sterling pluck and enterprise earned for Ping Que the respect and goodwill of every Englishman with whom he was brought into contact. He was far and away the smartest mining man we have yet met in the Territory. Whether he was overseeing underground work or looking after a battery the work was always done heartily and well. Ping Que will be missed by many who have profited by his experience and advice. For ourselves, we can only express sorrow at the unexpected death of one of the pluckiest and straightest men it has been our lot to meet in the Northern Territory.³⁹

As a recognised historical figure of significance Ping Que is the subject of an entry in volume 1 of the Northern Territory *Dictionary of Biography*.

Endnotes

¹ Barry McGowan, 'The Chinese of the Goldfields: A Case Study in Stereotypes and Historical Neglect', *Proceedings of the Australian Mining History Association Conferences 1997-2000*, Australian Mining History Association, Crawley, WA, 2001, pp. 66-74.

² National Archives of Australia: Victorian Immigrants, A728, vol 1.

³ Rate Books for 1872, 1873 and 1874, Records of Creswick Historical Museum.

⁴ R. Brough Smyth, *The Goldfields and Mineral Districts of Victoria*, Melbourne, Government Printer 1869.

⁵ Heather Lay, Creswick Historical Museum, personal communication.

⁶ Victorian Naturalisations, A712 1873D16797, National Archives of Australia, Canberra [hereafter NAA].

⁷ *Northern Territory Times*. 24 April 1875.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ John Lewis Diary, South Australian State Archives.

¹⁰ *Northern Territory Times*, 27 May 1876.

¹¹ H.F. MacNair, *The Chinese Abroad* Commercial Press, Shanghai, 1933.

¹² *Northern Territory Times*, 4 September 1875.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23 September 1876.

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- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1877.
¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20 April 1878.
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1877.
¹⁷ *South Australian Parliamentary Papers: Report on Northern Territory Goldfields, 72/1877.*
¹⁸ T.G. Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1997.
¹⁹ *Northern Territory Times*, 18 August 1877.
²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11 November 1878.
²¹ *Ibid.*, 23 November 1878.
²² *Ibid.*, 26 October 1878.
²³ *Ibid.*, 8 March 1879 and 19 March 1879.
²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14 June 1879.
²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21 June 1879.
²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23 April 1881.
²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24 July 1880.
²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 October 1880.
²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21 May 1881.
³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29 April 1882.
³¹ *Ibid.*
³² *Ibid.*, 24 June 1882.
³³ I doubt that Ping Que was ever in New Zealand (author).
³⁴ Sir William John, Sowden, *The Northern Territory as it is*, W.K. Thomas, Adelaide, 1882.
³⁵ *Ibid.*
³⁶ South Australian Naturalisations A711, 1644, NAA.
³⁷ *Northern Territory Times*, 28 November 1885.
³⁸ *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, 53/1886.
³⁹ *Northern Territory Times*, 15 May 1886.

All other sources from the Debnam Index to the *Northern Territory Times* held by the Northern Territory Library and Information Service.