

‘John and Jackey’*: An Exploration of Aboriginal and Chinese People’s Associations on the Victorian Goldfields

By FRED CAHIR & IAN CLARK
Federation University, Ballarat

While much has been written about Chinese miners, much less has been said about Aboriginal miners and even less about Aboriginal-Chinese relations on the gold fields and elsewhere.¹ Historians and other writers, such as Stephenson, Dunstan, Gittins, Cronin, Ramsay and Edwards and Shen,² have largely ignored Aboriginal associations with Chinese people in colonial Victoria.³ Eric Rolls’s study is representative of this absence; - when discussing Australia’s colonial racial policies towards the Chinese on the Victorian gold fields, Rolls is reluctant to draw many parallels between the Chinese, one group of people largely hidden from the historical gaze, and Aborigines, another group almost expunged from memory.⁴ A similar pattern can be seen in the historiography of encounters in other nations between Indigenous and Chinese people, such as in New Zealand⁵ and British Columbia where the paucity of the records initially led Yu to note: ‘Here was a world only glimpsed’.⁶

At first glance there are many similarities between the portrayal of Aborigines and Chinese *viz a vis* their place with respect to Europeans on the goldfields – ‘hapless and submissive victims of European racial prejudices and violence, subsisting, at best, on poor and abandoned ground’.⁷ Cronin in her study of Chinese people on the Victorian goldfields opines that the British miners considered the Chinese as ‘unlike any other race of human beings’ and conversed with Chinese arrivals ‘in a vernacular of fractured English and Aboriginal words, scolding Chinese as ‘no good black fellows’.⁸ Curthoys has documented that in colonial New South Wales there were four principal aspirations or beliefs - ethnocentrism, racism, liberalism, and the desire to maintain the British character of the community - underlying the response of British to non-British people in the colony. The responses to Aborigines after dispossession was complete and were primarily of contempt and indifference, while the Chinese were ‘similarly regarded as racially inferior, but, because of their increasing numbers and economic competition with Europeans, were usually hated and feared’.⁹ Likewise in Victoria, relevant themes of similarity include the significance of spatial relationships and inclusion in the choice of living spaces and settlement; the specific evidence for conflict and discrimination; and finally the evidence for shared experiences in that both Aboriginal people and Chinese had much in common – government regulation which restricted their personal freedoms, a protectorate system, strong kinship and clan networks, and ethnic differences that saw them suffer prejudice from the European majority. Edwards and Shen have suggested that ‘Aborigines and Chinese were more culturally aligned than were Europeans with either group. Chinese society shared with many Aboriginal societies a strong sense of attachment to land, a belief in ancestral spirits, an emphasis on extended kinship groups, a sense of identity and naming patterns strongly tied to one’s age and familial ranking, an appreciation of the value of natural remedies and

herbal medicines, and acceptance of plural female partners in marriage, and the common intervention of older kinship members in prescribing marital partners'.¹⁰ However, they rightfully caution that despite this limited similarity there were considerable differences in belief systems and social norms especially relating to work and the accumulation of wealth and property. Nor should we discuss Chinese and Aborigines as if they are unified ethnic groups – both Chinese migrants and the Aboriginal people they interacted with came from diverse language groups.

Discussion will centre on evidence for the involvement of Chinese and Aboriginal people in non-mining activity and the closeness or otherwise of their dwelling places and camps. The degree of forbearance between Aborigines and Chinese will also be discussed. In general the discussion is currently gender-blind with no analysis of gender relations between the two ethnic groups due to the fact there has been no evidence found in Victoria yet for these relationships.

'Unrevealed' groups

According to Reeves and Mountford, seeking a sophisticated understanding of the goldfields Chinese in Victoria is difficult as they are a group who 'seemingly disappeared into the historical ether according to existing histories of the diggings and conventional modes of historical enquiry'.¹¹ How much more difficult will it be then to find documentary evidence for one historically imperceptible group and their relationships with another unrevealed group? Locating nineteenth century Victorian Aboriginal perspectives on Chinese people is fraught with difficulties given the emphasis placed on the transmission of oral history by Aboriginal people and the almost total absence of Chinese women on the goldfields for cultural reasons.¹² Furthermore, it has not been possible to locate any archival records describing Chinese perceptions of Victorian Aboriginal people. This is unfortunate as it would have been interesting to learn about Chinese perceptions of Indigenous Victorians, and to have challenged the perception that Chinese 'generally regarded all foreigners as barbarians'.¹³ This paper will outline some preliminary research indicating that Victorian Aboriginal people during the colonial period viewed Chinese people in a disparaging or disconcerting light. Yet this must be tempered by pictorial and textual accounts that show a close Sino-Aboriginal commerce and social interactions which indicate mutually amicable relationships also existed.

Pre-gold period, 1830s-1850

During the pre-gold period, some squatters and pastoralists attempted to relieve labour shortages by importing indentured workers from Asia, often called 'coolies'.¹⁴ In 1846, thirty squatters formed the Malay Immigration Society with the aim of introducing coolie labour. Alexander Johnstone of Carranballac was deputed to visit Singapore where he secured 220 men. They arrived in 1848 and as most of them were Chinese, very few could speak any English. George Russell employed 14 of them as shepherds and hut keepers and thought they were likely to perform these roles well.¹⁵ Millar has estimated that some 3,000 Chinese had entered Australia by 1852 as labourers under the

contract system.¹⁶ Yet there is some evidence, albeit meager, that hints that Chinese people were not necessarily welcomed by Aboriginal people. One example of pre-gold fields' interaction comes from the reminiscences of Henry Mundy from c. 1846, and concerns the Wathawurrung from Geelong and some Singaporean workers:

a number of Singapore natives ... ranged the colony in search of employment; one day one of them ran into our hut in a wild, frightened, distracted state and fairly dropped on the floor with exhaustion. 'Missus, missus', he cried out, 'blackfellow kill me.' According to his account, two of them were travelling together when some natives saw them. Even at the then stage of civilisation, any blacks not aborigines, were wild blacks and they considered they were justified in killing them, which they would do if caught, without hesitation. Mother ran out, expecting to see a lot of blackfellows coming, but none were to be seen, they must have been on the tracks of the other fellow. Whether they caught him or not I never knew.¹⁷

On the gold fields together

Cahir has been able to demonstrate that in the archives Aboriginal people were frequently reported as miners and fossickers on the Victorian gold fields.¹⁸ Inquests held about Aboriginal deaths in the gold rush era (1850-1870) often reveal Aboriginal people's presence and activity on the goldfields. Some inquest deposition examples which clearly indicate the gold seeking activities of Aboriginal people include the death of Fanny Simpson, a Djadjawurrung woman in March 1865 which noted 'The Loddon natives had been some time fossicking at Daisy Hill'.¹⁹ At a later inquest into Eliza, a Djadjawurrung woman, at Maryborough in 1872, 'Mary Jane (half caste)' deposed: 'I know deceased Eliza good many years and travel with her everywhere and camp out under the trees and bushes. Sometimes I get gold finding it on top of the Pipe clay.'²⁰ Michael O'Grady, a quarry labourer deposed in September 1859 that around the Stony Rises Hotel in the Ballarat District 'There were a great lot of native blacks about this place and district some six or eight weeks ago'.²¹

Frequent newspaper records also indicate a sustained and very visible presence of Aboriginal people on goldfields²² which had large populations of Chinese miners:

We are indebted to the *Talbot Leader* for the following interesting incident: Our readers will remember the paragraph which appeared in our last issue, notifying that a party of aborigines had found a thirty-ounce nugget at the Emu. This gold realised about 120 pounds for them.²³

'The Aborigines of this district' says the *Talbot Leader*, 'seem to have a peculiar faculty for picking up valuable nuggets of gold. On Thursday, the remnant of the Daisy Hill tribe, while wandering about the old holes in Blacksmiths Gully, Amherst, picked up a nugget weighing six ounces.'²⁴

In the journals and letters of miners, the prevalence of Aboriginal people and the cosmopolitan nature of the gold fields population is reiterated. Miner, James Morgan noted that in the early days [1850s] he was often visited by Aboriginals but their visits were of a friendly nature.²⁵ Swedish miner Carl Lagergren made various references to

the proximity of a Djadjawurrung clan that had decamped next to him at Caledonian Reef and remained there for the entire winter season, stressing that ‘They stay close to the gold diggings’.²⁶ However there are very few written records which directly link the Chinese and Aboriginal miners in the same sources.

Yet there is some limited linguistic evidence such as the southern Ngarigu word[s] *guda / wurundibug* for Chinaman which Hercus in her seminal study ‘Victorian Languages: a Late Study’ notes was perhaps preserved due to the fact that ‘there were many Chinese people in the Delegate area late last century, probably attracted by gold mining.’²⁷ Moreover, there are numerous miner’s letters, paintings and drawings of Victorian goldfields which clearly depict a closeness and familiarity between Aboriginal people and Chinese people which support the notion that on some goldfields their interactions were relatively frequent. Representative examples include George Rowe’s (c.1857) painting ‘Parker and Macord, Potato Salesmen and General Fruiterers, Bendigo’ which attests to the close interactions between Chinese and Aboriginal peoples on the Bendigo goldfields [see Fig. 1].

Figure 1: George Rowe (1857), *Parker and Macord, Potato Salesmen and General Fruiterers, Bendigo*.

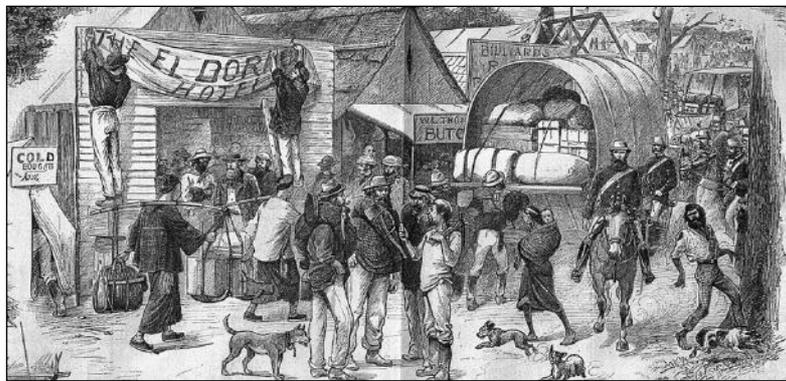


Source: National Library of Australia, Canberra, Call No. 7855-3121-4332, nla.pic-an14064538, Bib id vn1924429, Pic Drawer 2701#R11529.

It is important to note that the composition of 19th century images was often a creative act of the imagination, particularly when it came to including particular types of people in the scene, where they might be placed in the image, how dressed, and undertaking what activities. As an example, quantities of Chinese in certain 19th century Victorian goldfield images, for instance, are sometimes well under the actual number of Chinese known to be in those areas at the time, and often shown as a minority of one or two, when they were instead 30% of the town's population. Caution is also required due to the colonial practice of what has been termed ‘pictorialism’ whereby artists could carefully select their subjects to appear more suitably English and

manipulate the image to suit their idea of reality. Art historiographers have documented how artists created or doctored scenes to represent particular views and assumptions about the societies, events and circumstances they were depicting.²⁸ Rowe's letters and his artistic work do reflect however other historical sources which depict a busy commercial scene with Anglo, Chinese and Aboriginal peoples intermingling in front of shops as does Samuel Calvert's (1879) 'Digging life twenty five years ago'. Calvert's illustration in figure 2 depicts possibly three Djadjawurrung figures in his illustration, a scene often corroborated by miners such as William Nawton who recorded his impressions thus: 'You have of course every grade of character amongst the diggers – from the most courteous gentleman to the commonest black – but all seem to harmonise with each other'.²⁹

Figure 2: Samuel Calvert (1879), 'Digging life twenty-five years ago'.



Source: Samuel Calvert, Alfred May and Alfred Martin Ebsworth, Melbourne, December 20, 1879, Accession No.(s) A/S20/12/79/156-157, State Library of Victoria.

An unknown artist's depiction of *Ballarat, Victoria* (ca 1854) shows two Wathawurrung people walking along a roadway with other miners, including Chinese miners - clearly demonstrating a great deal of familiarity between Wathawurrung and Chinese people in this period.

Figure 3: 'Ballarat, Victoria, c. 1854.



Source: Anonymous, ca. 1854, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla pic-an6618003 Bib id vn2673229, call no(s) PIC Drawer 6159#T2252 NK 166. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/17033432>.

Artist George Rowe, like many other miners as described above wrote of his relations with Aboriginal people on the goldfields of central Victoria. Rowe was particularly impressed by the ease with which Djadjawurrung traded with the non-Indigenous community in gold and their valuable possum skin cloaks.

Their dress is only a blanket or an opossum skin rug thrown over their shoulders and wrapped around them the opossum fur is beautifully soft and makes a warm covering to sleep under and is what most diggers have as it is very light a good one costs 4 pounds ... Since I took a sketch of King Billy I have had a visit from all the tribe every day – they bring me small quantities of gold which they pick up from the surface they begin to search for it just behind our tent and go away over the hills they creep along leaning on a stick they are very keen sighted.³⁰

In the colonial records there are many references from both before and after the gold rushes to Chinese and Victorian Aboriginal people living and working together on sheep and cattle stations. Roger Therry, a large landholder in NSW and Victoria noted how in 1854 ‘owing to the great immigration in consequence of the gold discoveries...we were obliged to have recourse to the Chinese and native labourers, or we should never have been able to keep our flocks together.’³¹ In the 1860s visits from Chinese hawkers or traders to the Aboriginal communities at Coranderrk, east of Melbourne were reputed to be very popular: ‘Jimmy the Chinaman’ was a favourite. His jars of preserved ginger, gaily coloured silk handkerchiefs and sticks of lolly and licorice were always welcome.’³² There is also some pictorial evidence that Aboriginal and Chinese relations were positive. Joseph Johnson's (ca.1867) painting ‘Euchre in the Bush’ portrays a scene of racial tolerance in the back blocks of Victoria.

Figure 4: J.C.F. Johnson, ca 1867, *Euchre in the bush*.



Location: Art Gallery of Ballarat, Ballarat, Bequest of Clarice May Megaw, 1980.

Figure 4 is believed to have been painted after the 16 year old Johnson left Geelong for the bush in 1864, 'Euchre in the Bush' shows men of three races intently playing a card game that was enormously popular during the gold rush era. According to a summary compiled by the Ballarat Art Gallery the image may 'depict a game that actually took place but more likely it was intended to represent harmonious companionship instilled by a simple pastime'.³³ Stephenson contends that the Blackman's racial identity remains 'somewhat ambiguous' but a contemporary summary of the drawing is strongly indicative of an Aboriginal identity.³⁴ Johnson also produced a similar scene in woodcut which formed the basis of a print titled 'A game of Euchre'³⁵ that appeared in the Christmas Supplement of the *Australasian Sketcher*, December 25, 1876. The explanatory text described the image's narrative for its readers:

Our plate depicts a scene not infrequent at some out-of-the-way goldfields in this [Victoria] or either of the other colonies ... It is a bright Saturday afternoon, and Jack, the black packer, 'Harry my friend', the digger, and Ah Sin, the Chinese fossicker, have met to while away an hour or two at a game of 'cut-throat euchre'... the aboriginal has not 'turned his cards' or in other words, has not made a point. The Chinaman has taken the first trick on suit and led the ace of trumps...³⁶

Though the editor of the *Australasian Sketcher* considered that Johnson may be implying far more than simply a notion of racial harmony, he added:

But it may be that there is a meaning in the picture besides the plain matter-of-fact one that appears on the surface. The three races have been for some time playing a game of life on this continent. The aboriginal race has very nearly played their last card, and the game is henceforth between the whites and their yellow-skinned competitors. John Chinaman holds his own remarkably well, and in some parts, as in North Queensland, scores one point after another...³⁷

Whilst it is difficult to substantiate Esau observes that Johnson's 'Bush Euchre' was probably modeled on Bret Harte, the American poet, whose work 'The Heathen Chinese' inspired artwork which is strikingly similar to Johnson's work.³⁸ As both Harte and Johnson had experienced similar frontier experiences, cultural transformations and an influx of many ethnicities – and that both shared a plea for ethnic harmony – it seems probable that Johnson's illustration is ostensibly based on his own experiences in the Australian bush.

Shared space

Though poorly recorded it seems likely that the admixture of Aboriginal and Chinese peoples on the Victorian goldfields would probably have been most active via a shared geographical and performance space. Cahir and Clark,³⁹ and Cahir,⁴⁰ have confirmed touristic cultural ceremonies performed by Victorian Aboriginal people, described under the banner of 'corroborees' were significant theatrical entertainments for goldfield audiences which drew large crowds of people from all social strata.

Paintings such as 'White Hills Bendigo Jan. 1854' by Ludwig Becker which depict a presumably Djadjawurrung corroboree [Fig. 5] testify to the fact that

Aboriginal people performed corroboree performances in the midst of a sizeable Chinese community (visible in the background) – and numerous newspaper reports attest to the popularity of non-Indigenous spectators at these public performances.⁴¹ One such staged performance at Ballarat seems likely to have attracted Chinese spectators too – or at least their knowledge of the event.

The aboriginal corroboree and display of fireworks at the Copenhagen grounds on Monday evening drew together a large number of persons, and the novel entertainment proved a decided success. Aboriginal habits in their most primitive style were displayed by about thirty-five natives, from various tribes around Ballarat, including about a dozen lubras, who were nearly naked. Without offering any comment upon the propriety or otherwise of the corroboree, it may be stated that it afforded amusement to the number of persons, between five and six hundred, who assembled to witness it. A plentiful supply of coloured fires added to the savage appearance of the scene, and after it was concluded some beautiful fireworks were displayed.⁴²

Figure 5: L. Becker, *[White Hills] Bendigo Jan. 1854.*



Location: National Library of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. H5197.

Coming to terms with the Chinese

References to Aboriginal perceptions of other immigrant indigenous people in colonial Victoria, however, whilst not numerous, are extant. Clark and Cahir, in their discussion about Aboriginal perceptions of Europeans in nineteenth-century Western Victoria, have closely examined how Aboriginal people in most parts of Australia understood the arrival of Europeans and how they recognized Europeans as *ngamadjidj* (or an equivalent word), meaning deceased clan members who had returned to life. The belief

in Australia of transmigration or reincarnation was widespread during the early years of European colonization.⁴³

There is strong evidence indicating that Victorian Aboriginal people prior to and during the gold fields period viewed Chinese people in a disparaging light for from an Aboriginal cosmological perspective they were neither *ngamadjidj* (resuscitated clans people), as many Victorian Aboriginal people in the colonial period considered whites to be, or *mainmait* foreign undesirable Aboriginal people.⁴⁴ P.E. Costello, a shepherd in the western district of Victoria during the 1840s recounted the first instance that an unidentified Wathawurrung Aboriginal elder encountered a scarecrow, and upon recognition that it was foreign, mute and immutable, he pronounced with some fear 'Mine think it Chinaman'.⁴⁵ The uneasy notion that Costello noted Aboriginal people had of Chinese people being foreign and not easily placed in their worldview is more apparent in later documents. For instance a newspaper report titled 'Arrival of Strangers' from the *Argus* in July 1853 commenting on the appearance of exotic animals (monkeys, exotic birds) into Victoria also noted how the arrival of Chinese immigrants:

excited the attention of the Geelong blacks, who held a public meeting in the road in Moorabool street, where they came to the resolution, after much 'yabber,' that as they did not understand such changes in public affairs, it would be best not to fraternize with the strangers.⁴⁶

While it is likely that reports of this nature, highlighting the confusion experienced by Aboriginal people upon encountering Chinese possibly reflects the Eurocentric viewpoint of the writer rather than of Aboriginal peoples 'excitement' about 'changes' (as indicated earlier Aboriginal people in Victoria had had much exposure to Chinese people for over a decade), there is however sufficient evidence which indicates some degree of Indigenous prejudice. The Reverend Arthur Polehampton, who spent much time in western Victoria in the 1850s, stated that 'The blacks are said to have a strong prejudice against the Chinese, whom they accuse of being neither black nor white'.⁴⁷ Polehampton's view is supported by a number of newspaper reports in this period such as a *Ballarat Star* article which reported in 1862 on an 'exchange of insults' between an Aboriginal and a Chinese man in Avoca.⁴⁸ Four years later, on 1 December 1866, an Aboriginal man (presumably Djabwurrung) at the Moyston diggings, named 'Black Peter' was sentenced to seven days imprisonment for 'assaulting a Chinaman whilst drunk'.⁴⁹

Muriel McGivern, in her history of the Rutherglen district, has commented that 'The Aborigines, making their peace with the Europeans, could never bring themselves to like the Chinese. In the earliest days of colonization, when Aborigines were still in a savage state...Chinese often fled when natives were about, the faster if shown signs of the Aborigines chasing them...'.⁵⁰ McGivern's summary of the negative relationships between Chinese and Aboriginal people is somewhat contradicted later in her publication where Aboriginal guidance and assistance in dealing with bushfires [c.1880s] was sought by European and Chinese residents.

The Aborigines one evening warned Carl Butcher of a bad bushfire approaching from the north. All night the wind screamed and raged furnace-hot. About fifteen tribesmen arrived at the homestead the next morning ... and Carl discussed the fire threat with them. It was decided to make a firebreak at once on their advice, to run it from the orange grove down to the Chinese camp ... Carl and the Aborigines, with the Chinese to help, started the firebreak, getting it well down in a triangle; the Victoria swamp tribe was brought up and went into the cart and buggy as the wind grew stronger.⁵¹

McGivern (1983:103) goes on to describe how closely the Chinese followed Aboriginal instruction and that by virtue of paying attention to local Aboriginal ecological knowledge the Chinese community had been able to preserve their lives and property from the bushfire.

The journal of William Thomas (Guardian of Aborigines in Victoria, 1850-1869) reveals more evidence of the varying hues of intercultural relationships between Aboriginal people and Chinese people. Thomas recorded the presence of foreign Aboriginal people (not from Victoria) who are of Aboriginal and Chinese descent in Melbourne. Thomas wrote in 1856: 'A number of foreign blacks in parties of 6 & 7, 2 of them, like Chinease [sic] pass for the Diggings. Each of these parties had one European with them.'⁵² A further scrap of evidence that Aboriginal people near Melbourne had regular contact with Chinese people is revealed in his journal entry for December 1856. Thomas includes a census of the 'Western Port Blacks' and some Boonwurrung vocabulary which in part reads: 'Do he understand Chinamen. Narngerin Boolander Noular Chinamen' Thomas noted the translation: 'hear their sound/language/voice of the Chinamen'.⁵³

In a letter (6 November 1856) to Surveyor General, Thomas discussed the presence of 'Chinese industry' at Mordialloc (a suburb of Melbourne) next to the gazetted Aboriginal reserve where a thriving salted fish enterprise was being carried out by '8 or 10 Chinese'. Thomas interviewed both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents in the area about the state of relations between the various groups and assured the Surveyor General that 'My blacks and the whites say that they are a peaceable sober people.'⁵⁴ A year and half later Thomas wrote again to the Surveyor General about the 'Chinese fish salting establishment' at Mordialloc and added: 'my blacks said 'they were so quiet, and liked them better than the whites.'⁵⁵

Representing Chinese people

Comedic creations born from epochal events, that were usually satirical with a dark ironic edge, were often recorded in colonial Australia. Casey in her discussion about performer/audience exchange has demonstrated the prevalence of Aboriginal performances during the colonial period which were designed to educate the white audience and also to parody non-Aboriginal communities and individuals they encountered.⁵⁶ Whilst the satirizing of English colonists by Aboriginal performers in colonial Australia is very well documented the reported incidence of parodying non-Anglo people that Aboriginal people encountered is not as well documented.⁵⁷ Research

by Berndt⁵⁸ and more recently Cahir and Clark have emphasized how there is a considerable corpus of evidence demonstrating the gold period 'was a catalyst for corroboree performances to morph, probably aided by the movement of Aboriginal people across the continent becoming more common'. It seems likely that the parodying of Chinese people in performances by Victorian Aboriginal people would have occurred.⁵⁹ One fragmentary account of Chinese people by two Queensland Aboriginal drovers in Victoria is contained within the reminiscences of James Sinclair [circa 1880s] who wrote that upon the subject of Chinamen being broached in conversation, one of them:

gave us an exhibition of his wonderful powers of mimicry, by at once started yabbering away like a Chinaman. So perfect was his imitation of their language that if any person was approaching our camp at the time they would have imagined there was one of the 'yellow agony' in our midst. When he finished he laughed heartily and from what he and his father said about the 'longtails' as they termed them, it was evident that they held 'John' in thorough contempt.⁶⁰

Some writers and cartoonists commented upon the disdain by Aboriginal people for the Chinese. Robert Brough Smyth, a noted ethnologist in the 19th century reproduced an anecdote about Aboriginal people's supposed racial attitudes towards Chinese people in the 1870s.

They are strongly impressed with the idea of their superiority to other dark people, especially to the Chinese. The following amusing illustration of this conceit took place a few years ago in Heathcote, Victoria: - A Chinaman was making a purchase in a grocer's shop when an Aboriginal man came in, passed on higher up the counter. The shopman turned to him and said, 'What you want John?' The native instantly replied-'Me not John; that fellow John;' and seizing the Chinaman, he flung him into the street.⁶¹

Whilst purely speculative it is possible this anecdote inspired a cartoon which appeared in the *Melbourne Punch* (11 February, 1875) titled 'Outraged Majesty' which intimates the scorn which Aboriginal people may have held for Chinese people. Or possibly it may simply reflect the Eurocentric and racist opinions endemic to large sections of Victoria's non-Indigenous community.

New Chum: 'Hi John, is this the right way to Toowambie?'

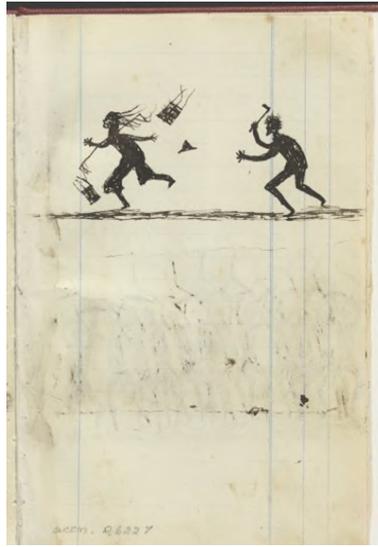
King William: 'Who you call 'um John, take me for dam Chinaman? Go to the debbil.'

[Cartoon shows an Aboriginal in a stove pipe hat with nose in the air walking along track and new chum with swag stopping to ask directions].⁶²

A painting by Tommy McCrae (McRae) or Yackaduna/Yagadoona, a Pallanganmiddang man from northeastern Victoria depicting Chinese miners being chased by Aboriginal warriors was interpreted by historian Michael Christie as depicting an actual historical event⁶³ [Fig. 6]. Cooper and Urry dissented from this position claiming that 'details of Aboriginal/Chinese relations in northeastern Victoria

are totally lacking, but it is unlikely that they were hostile'.⁶⁴ Stephenson and Choo consider that Cooper and Urry's reconstruction of the life of artist Tommy McCrae 'remains an exemplary introduction to the social, economic and legislative disadvantage that one Aboriginal person experienced in nineteenth-century Australia. But its focus is historical rather than biographical.'⁶⁵

Figure 6: Tommy McCrae, c. 1880 'Chinese man fleeing from an Aboriginal man wielding an axe, Wahgunyah region, Victoria'.



Location: National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.pic-an6431252-7.

Figure 7: Tommy McCrae, c. 1880, 'Chinese Sketch'.

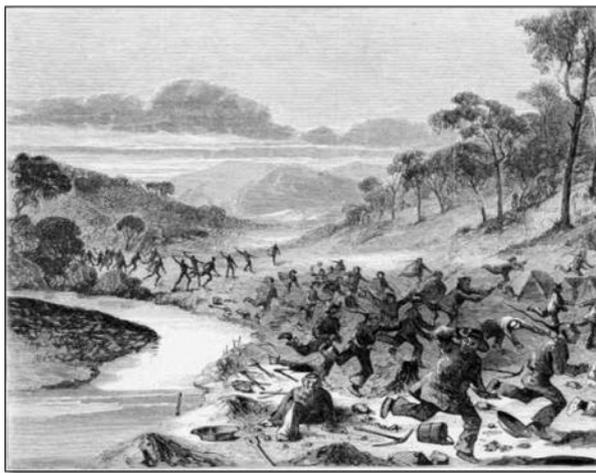


Location: Victoria Museum, Melbourne.

The proposition that McCrae's illustration[s] 'Aborigines chasing Chinese' [in Figures 6 and 7] did not represent anything he had ever witnessed surely suggests the figure of the trickster or fabulator, the same stereotype applied in other popular contexts

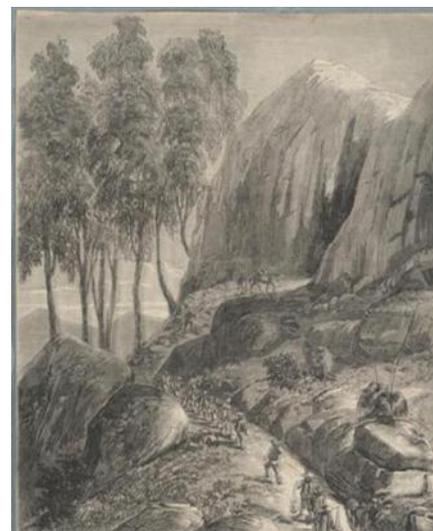
to the opium-smoking 'Chinaman'. Sayers contends that the drawings of confrontation were 'probably intended to be more humorous than descriptive: the joke being at the expense of the Chinese, thrown into startled disarray by the appearance of armed Aborigines'.⁶⁶ Cooper and Urry also posit that it is extremely unlikely Aboriginal people were in a position to mount such an attack as depicted in McCrae's drawing and that it is more likely the violence towards Chinese miners is a reference to violent interactions between Queensland Aboriginal people to Chinese miners on northern Queensland goldfields, but this view assumes that McCrae was in a position to know about these clashes.⁶⁷ Stephenson agrees, and adds that 'a picture showing Chinese being attacked by Aborigines reflected the tastes of his [McCrae's] European audience'.⁶⁸ Given that Aboriginal ceremonies commonly include stories and statements about how other people live, or what people do in other places, as well as about local happenings⁶⁹ – the scene of Chinese people fleeing from Aboriginal people may well be an event which McCrae had seen depicted in a corroboree performed in Victoria by Queensland Aboriginal people. It is also possible that McCrae's pictures which depict Aboriginal people in conflict with Chinese people are emulating newspaper illustrations of events (Figures 8 and 9) that were published in newspapers such as *The Illustrated Australian*, as Barwick has noted that many Aboriginal people in this period spent their money on illustrated weeklies which contained 'engravings of stirring events' to decorate their walls.⁷⁰

Figure 8: "Queensland Blacks attacking Chinese diggers on the Gilbert River", 30 January 1873'. [Renamed: 'Queensland Aborigines attacking Chinese diggers on the Gilbert River'].



Source: *Illustrated Australian*, Ebenezer and David Syme, Melbourne, 1873.

Figure 9: Oswald Rose Campbell, 'Hell gates, on the road to the Palmer River'.



Source: *The Illustrated Australian News*, 22 March 1876.

McCrae's 'Aborigine chasing Chinese man' bears a striking resemblance to an image originally titled 'Queensland Blacks attacking Chinese diggers on the Gilbert River' which appeared in *The Illustrated Australian*, January 30, 1873 edition [Fig. 8].

Parodying – or accommodating the ‘other’?

Frost has noted that paintings such as the one by McCrae were popular with Europeans ‘because they confirmed a view that the Chinese were even inferior to the Aborigines.’⁷¹ However, the models for McCrae’s works were most likely the valued Chinese agricultural labourers on the next property. Roderick Kilborn, the owner of that farm, employer of the Chinese, and beneficiary of their industry, was also a key patron of the artist’. A painting by McCrae in figure 10 of a Chinese man carrying two buckets across his shoulders in the traditional manner is a theme often repeated in McCrae’s drawings which may reflect how accustomed he was to their presence.

There is some evidence that Victorian Aboriginal people saw all Chinese people as ‘mainmait’ or undesirable foreigners and therefore McCrae may have painted a scene which took place in an earlier period (1840s) but depicted the Chinese in the attire of miners from the 1860s.⁷² It is possible that McCrae was depicting a scene of Aboriginal people with malicious intent chasing some Chinese, and thus there may be deliberate humour in the depiction.

Figure 10: Tommy McCrae, c. 1880, ‘Chinese man, Aboriginal men dancing and an Aboriginal man spear-fishing from a canoe, Wahgunyah Region, Victoria’,



Location: National Library of Australia, Canberra, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an6431252-5>.

Chinese workers were present in Victoria prior to the gold period, and therefore Aboriginal people in some districts were certainly aware of their presence. In some areas Chinese-Aboriginal work interactions would have been very common, such as at 'Bushy Park' on the Avon River in Gippsland, where in 1854 there was a Chinese cook in the midst of 'a suburban environment of blackfellows' camps'.⁷³ In many contexts Aborigines and Chinese and others worked alongside one another.⁷⁴ For example, Alfred William Howitt employed whites, Chinese and Aboriginal pickers in his Eastwood hop gardens near Bairnsdale in Gippsland in the early 1870s.⁷⁵ Similarly, at the Aboriginal station at Coranderrk near Healesville, in 1877 Chinese worked alongside Aboriginal people and Europeans picking hops at the station (Massola 1975: 22).⁷⁶ George Sugden's (c.1849-1870) 'Reminiscences of pioneering life in outback stations of Victoria' refers to the worker's camps being populated by numerous Aboriginal and Chinese workers.⁷⁷ Gilbert too in her discussion about 'cosmopolitan encounters' in colonial Australia notes that Chinese acrobats (Chin Foo Lam Boo) and Aboriginal performers such as Mongo Mongo and Harry Cardella appeared together in Australian based circus troupes such as Ashton's circus in 1861.⁷⁸ Clark and Cahir⁷⁹ and Cahir⁸⁰ also give numerous examples of Aborigines trading with diggers on the gold fields, particularly in possum skin rugs. That such exchange went on between local Aborigines and Chinese diggers near Linton is evidenced by the fact that when Na Hock, aged 48, was found dead in his hut at the Hard Hills in 1872, his body was covered 'with old bags and an old piece of opossum skin'.⁸¹

There is also an (as yet) solitary allusion reported in the *Argus* (21 July, 1864) to the possible monetary trade in emus' eggs between Aboriginal people and Chinese people in Victoria. The *Argus* correspondent was concerned about Aboriginal people taking large numbers of emus' eggs not for their own food but to sell them, and added: 'In connexion with this subject we may remark that the Chinese on the goldfields are great egg fanciers; but for culinary purposes, sheep's brains stewed with eggs is said to be a dainty dish in the celestial *cuisine* of digger-land'.⁸² A curious report in the *Argus* (11 July 1864) highlights the need for more scholarly research into the field of Sino-Aboriginal relations on the Victorian goldfields: 'Chin yen, a Chinaman, sued "John McIntosh," an aboriginal native, in the Castlemaine Police Court, on Thursday, to recover for work and labour in building a house for said native; whose defence was, that he agreed to pay plaintiff the money when the house was finished, and it was not yet finished'.⁸³

Unhealthy liaisons

There is ample evidence that relations between Chinese miners and Aboriginal people formed as a result of the attraction to smoking opium by Aboriginal people. The Reverend Joseph Bulmer, under examination by the 1877 Victorian Royal Commission into the welfare of the State's Aboriginal peoples, elaborated on the widespread use of opium by Aboriginal people in far east Gippsland and confirmed 'they have acquired that dangerous habit of opium smoking from the Chinese in their district [Kiandra diggings]', adding that 'they tell me that they buy it from the Chinamen'.⁸⁴ By 1889 a

small group of Aborigines ‘were much addicted to opium smoking and other vices’. Howitt independently confirmed Bulmer’s observations when he recorded that a number of Monaro Aborigines had been living on the Kiandra goldfields and around Currawang, from about 1875 to 1881, associating with non-Indigenous gold prospectors.⁸⁵ According to Sue Wesson, the selling of opium by Chinese miners to Aboriginal people also occurred in gold mining camps at Yackandandah, Beechworth, Delegate, Craigie, Major’s Creek and Nerrigundah.⁸⁶ Lovejoy explains that opium ‘relieved pain and relaxed mind and body, but taken in excess was an addictive drug that could exacerbate illness’.⁸⁷ Anderson and Mitchell have noted that relations between Chinese and Aborigines in North Queensland often involved the exchange of opium, and suggest that it was used as a means of attracting and keeping Aboriginal labour. ‘Primarily because of the form in which it was taken by Aborigines – opium ash mixed with water and swallowed – opium did affect their health’. Local protectors in Queensland commented that opium was responsible for ‘thousands of deaths’ and exerted ‘a far more baneful influence on the aboriginal than even liquor and venereal disease’.⁸⁸

Conclusion

This unveiling of a shared history offers a positive tension, an edgier elucidation, to the task of history interpreters especially Sino-Australian heritage tourism providers. It contributes to the broadening of Victoria’s cultural cartography by including Chinese and their intersections with Aboriginal people. It adds to the scholarship from Curthoys and others challenging the black-white binary of Australian historiography. It has attempted to respond to the challenge of Edwards and Shen of contributing to a new history ‘where Aborigines, Chinese and other non Anglo-Celts are not relegated to footnotes and marginalia’.⁸⁹ This study shows that Aboriginal people had interacted with Chinese people in colonial Victoria, in the pastoral years before the 1850s gold rushes, and that a more nuanced reading of their interaction is necessary. Sources that suggest that the Chinese were considered by Aboriginal people to be different from Europeans and from other Aboriginal peoples have also been examined. It is hoped that historians will keep a look out for primary sources that provide further insights into the interactions between Chinese and Aboriginal people in the colonial period in order to create a more nuanced picture of their relations. The exploration of Aboriginal-Asian relations in nineteenth century Victoria is both an end-product, and a point of departure for new and different perspectives on the possibility of writing what Hokari has termed ‘alternative minorities history’.⁹⁰

Endnotes

* The reason why Chinese were often referred to as ‘John Chinaman’ is unknown. According to Maloney the epithet ‘Jackey Jackey’ entered the vernacular in the late 1840s after the celebrated Aboriginal guide who accompanied an expedition to Cape York in 1848 led by Edmund Kennedy. Maloney claims that the name ‘Jackey’ for whites ‘was a generic dismissive, denying blacks their individuality and hence their dignity. To blacks it meant a collaborator, the subservient native complicit in his [Jackey Jackey] own people’s dispossession.’ See: S. Maloney, ‘Jackey Jackey and the Yadhaykenu’, *Monthly*, 2008, p. 74.

¹ On the subject of Aboriginal people on the Victorian goldfields Rolls perpetuates the erroneous contention that 'at every camp small groups of Aborigines hung about quietly. They knew what gold was, but had no interest in it.' Cited in: E. Rolls, *Sojourners: the epic story of China's centuries old relationship with Australia: flowers and the wide sea*, St Lucia, Qld., UQP, 1992, p. 97. For a more comprehensive discussion of Aboriginal people's active roles on the Victorian gold fields both as guides and gold seekers see: I. Clark and D. Cahir, *Tanderrum*, FOMAD, Castlemaine, 2004; F. Cahir, *Black Gold: Aboriginal People on the Goldfields of Victoria, 1850-1870*, Aboriginal History Press, Australian National University, Canberra, 2012; F. Cahir, "'Are you off to the Diggings?": Aboriginal Guiding to and on the Goldfields' in Russell, L. and Arnold, J. (Eds), *Indigenous Victorians: Repressed, Resourceful and Respected*, State Library of Victoria Foundation, Melbourne, 2010, pp. 22-37; D. Cahir and I. Clark, 'why should they pay money to the Queen?' Aboriginal Miners and Land Claims', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol.10, no.1, 2010, pp. 115-128; D. Cahir, 'Finders not Keepers: Aboriginal People on the Goldfields of Victoria'. In A. Mayne, (Ed.), *Eureka: Reappraising an Australian Legend*. Network Books, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, 2006, pp. 143-153.

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