

The transnational Chinese family in Australia

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Over the past decade or so a number of Australian and New Zealand writers have published historical novels centred around romances between white women and Chinese men.

Probably best known is the ongoing and somewhat illicit liaison between Kerry Greenwood's lady detective, Phryne Fisher, and Lin Chung, the Cambridge-educated son of an established Victorian Chinese family of silk merchants, members of which had first arrived with the gold rushes. As many of you would know, the books have recently been adapted for television as *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* and the second series is now showing on the ABC.

Image 1 Lin Chung (Philippe Sung) and Phryne Fisher (Essie Davis) from *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*



Source: www.fanpop.com/clubs/miss-fishers-murder-mysteries/images/35224788/title/lin-chung-phryne-photo

Lin Chung first appears in the seventh book in the series, *Ruddy Gore*, published in 1995. He is an intermittent character across the 20 novels but, along with a string of other lovers, is central to the portrayal of Phryne's liberal attitude towards life and obvious pleasure in flaunting the social mores of respectable 1920s Melbourne.

Three other examples are worth mentioning.

Neridah Newton's *The Lambing Flat*, published in 2003 won of the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for an Emerging Author in 2002. It follows the intertwined lives of Ella, born and bred on a Queensland cattle station, and Lok, who arrives in Australia as a boy and experiences the violence of the Lambing Flat anti-Chinese riots of 1861 before heading north to Queensland where he takes up work on Ella's father's property. And the love story progresses from there.

In New Zealand, Alison Wong published her award-winning novel, *As the Earth Turns Silver*, in 2009 (Janet Frame Fiction Award, 2009). Set against a backdrop of white racist working-class Wellington in the early twentieth century, it tells the ultimately tragic story of the secret love affair between widow and mother of two, Katherine McKechnie, and Wong Chung-yung, a greengrocer.

And, most recently in 2012, Deborah O'Brien published *Mr Chen's Emporium*, a novel aimed clearly at the 'book club' market. It plots a fairly predictable romantic path to the marriage of Amy Duncan and Charles Chen in a small goldfields town in the 1870s, which, once again ends tragically. My least favourite of these works, *Mr Chen's Emporium* is nonetheless pretty spot-on with its history—perhaps some of its charm was lost on me because the story sounded very familiar as I read it, something of a pastiche. I eventually noticed that O'Brien cited my work in her notes at the end of the novel! *Mr Chen's Emporium* has been translated into German, included in a Reader's Digest Select Edition, and a sequel, *The Jade Widow*, has just been released.

As a historian I've spent the past fifteen years or so looking at the lives of white women and Chinese men who formed intimate relationships in colonial Australia, women and men like the protagonists in these novels. And, more broadly, I've looked at the history of the women, children and families of Australia's early Chinese communities. It interests me very much, then, to see stories of Chinese-European couples being told again through fiction. I say 'again' because more than a century ago, in the 1880s and 1890s, intimate relationships between white women and Chinese men were not an uncommon subject in popular Australian fiction.

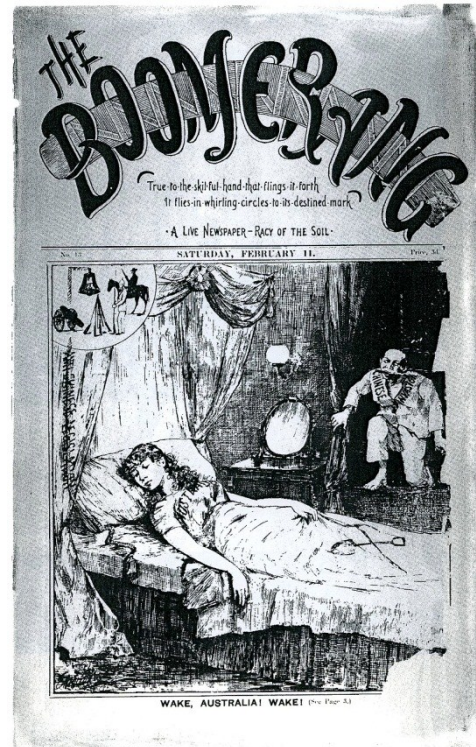
Typified by Edward Dyson's 'Mr and Mrs Sin Fat', published in the *Bulletin* in 1890, or William Lane's 'White or Yellow? The Race War of 1908AD' published as a serial in the *Boomerang*, late nineteenth-century stories tell a very different tale of interracial relationships, of their dangers on a personal and societal level. Such stories both drew on and fed accounts that appeared in popular newspapers such as the *Truth*.

I want to suggest, however, that the telling of these two very different narratives of love and sex across racial boundaries have something very much in common. And that is that their meaning, their power as stories, comes from the acknowledgement of not just the possibility, but the reality, of intimate relationships between white women and Chinese men in colonial Australia.

Image 2 *The Bulletin*, 14 April 1888



Image 3 *The Boomerang*, 11 February 1888



The scare power of stories like those published in the *Bulletin* and the *Boomerang* came from an understanding that all around the colonies white women and Chinese men were getting together. Yes, in opium dens and brothels, but also through contacts at church, at the store, across the threshold, in the neighbourhood. These stories presented a threatening future of racial mixing in Australia that was made more real by the presence of mixed-race couples and their mixed-race children in colonial communities—they were simply there. Figures for Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland put the number of legal marriages between Chinese men and white women in the nineteenth century in the thousands—but of course there were many other relationships not formalised through marriage.

Over the course of the twentieth century, though, the obvious presence of mixed-race couples and their families faded for various reasons, within families, in popular memory and in historical accounts. The perception that lingered was that interracial relationships were bound up with prostitution, alcoholism, opium addiction and so on, and that only 'a few illiterate Irish girls' were desperate enough to marry themselves to Chinamen. What was forgotten were the thousands of Chinese-European couples who, mostly unremarkably, met, formed relationships of different kinds for longer or shorter periods of time, had children and raised them together or apart.

Families like that of Tasmanian-born Hannah Mason and Amoy-born William Chi. They married in Newtown, Sydney, in 1865, four years after William was baptised as a Christian. After the stillbirth of their first child in 1866, Hannah and William went on to have another son and five daughters. William was naturalised as a British subject in 1868 and became a respected member of the community of Scone, in central New South Wales, where the family made its home.

Image 4 Hannah and William Chi with their baby, at Scone, NSW, c. 1867



Source: Elaine Hetherington

It has only really been in this new century, in the last decade or so, that early Chinese-European families like the Chis are being remembered on a broader scale. The historical novels I mentioned are one manifestation of this. The interest in family history is also largely responsible for a shift in our understanding, as family researchers have pieced together often-hidden parts of their own histories. These same family historians, and local and community historians, are increasingly visible online, creating their own websites, making family trees in ancestry.com, and participating in specialist Chinese heritage forums. They are self-publishing family history books. They are collaborating with researchers in universities and other institutions like museums.

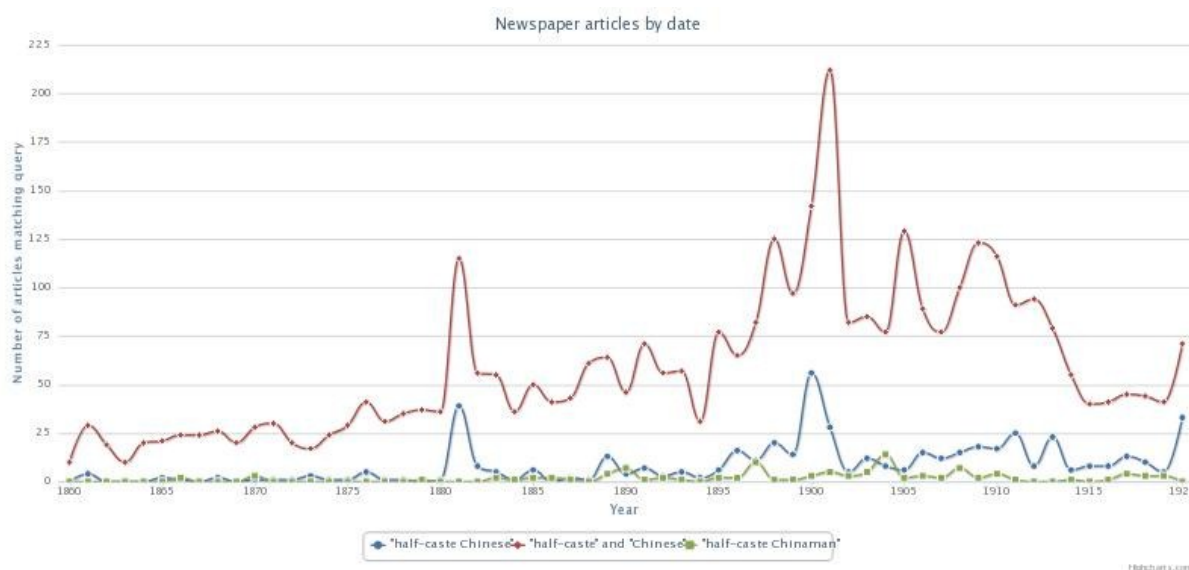
To give a couple of examples of this. This year, family historian Claire Faulkner produced a lavish, self-published history of the Yung Sing and Mann families, called *Conquest: An Inside Story*. It runs to over 700 full-colour pages, and includes a mountain of meticulously referenced primary source material about one of Australia's earliest Chinese-European families, the Manns. And, a couple of years ago, the *From Canton with Courage* exhibition at Parramatta featured some really interesting and significant items from a substantial family collection relating to the extended Ah Poo/Harper family.

The most common question I've been asked about my work on Chinese-European couples is 'why?' In particular, 'why did white women chose Chinese partners?'—the implication being, I think, a slightly different question, and that is 'Wasn't there anyone better (i.e. white) to marry?' The decisions made by mixed-race couples in their choice of partner can seem extraordinary, but they may in fact have been very simple ones to make, based around love, sexual attraction, the need for companionship, circumstance and convenience, economics.

Despite some failings in historical accuracy that I won't go into now, one of the things I like most about seeing Chinese-European relationships portrayed in historical novels is the way that, through the romances of their protagonists, through their portrayal of the logistics of the relationships (Where did they meet? How did they communicate? What could they have had in common? And so on ...) and of the emotions involved, these novels present historical possibilities that it seems are still often hard to imagine.

The evidence of interracial relationships and families is abundant and, with the digitisation of primary materials, that evidence is increasingly easy to reach. Some fairly simple searching in the newspapers in Trove, or in digitised police gazettes, or in the National Archives collection demonstrates this.

Image 5 Articles mentioning 'half-caste' Chinese in Australian newspapers, 1860 to 1920



Source: <http://dhistory.org/querypic/7h/>

Here, for instance, are references to the term 'half-caste' and 'Chinese' or 'Chinaman' in the digitised newspapers in Trove for the period from 1860 to 1920, graphed using a nifty program called 'QueryPic'. The articles that come up range from invectives in major city newspapers about opium and smallpox and 'the Chinese Question' to reports in small country papers on all manner of moments in the everyday lives of Chinese Australian families and individuals. As a historian, I'm lucky that race was thought to be worth mentioning in such cases, as it marks these articles as immediately of interest to me. But, of course, names too can be traced through time in the newspapers in a way that was near impossible before.

Trove gives us the ability to easily uncover small stories of ordinary lives and this helps break through a barrier in thinking about the place of mixed-race couples and individuals in colonial Australia, a barrier that often seems to me to be little more than a lack of imagination.

So, how does all this fit with the idea of 'the transnational Chinese family in Australia'?

When I started my research on Chinese-European couples and their children, the available literature at the time said little that was of help to me, particularly in understanding these families within the context of Chinese migration. Mostly they were framed as stories of assimilation or of 'pioneer families', unusual exceptions to the dominant story of the sojourning

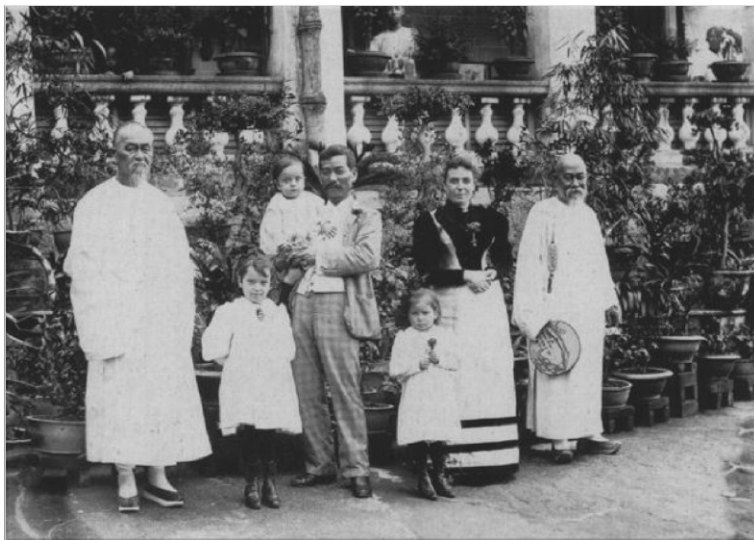
gold-seeker living a lonely life working to make his fortune and return home to China. Many family histories are easily slotted into this narrative and it can make sense to tell them in this way—particularly for descendants and community activists and historians of many kinds struggling to assert the history of the Chinese into a national story that remains one predominantly about white people.

However, the assimilation/pioneer narrative did not fit so well with other evidence I was finding about the mixing of language and cultural traditions within the home and about the ongoing connections mixed families maintained with local Chinese communities and with China itself. For example, the mixed-race daughters of Chinese men were commonly married to migrant Chinese, sometimes men as old as their own fathers, creating networks of kinship ties and drawing young Australian-born women towards their Chinese, rather than European, heritage.

And many mixed-race children were sent to China—sometimes with their parents and siblings, sometimes alone—to ‘become Chinese’ by being raised within their extended Chinese families or receiving a Chinese education. White wives, too, went to China, where some encountered for the first time the unhappy reality that they were not their husband’s only wife. Other wives said goodbye to children and husbands who left for China and never returned.

Such evidence didn’t fit neatly with the idea that Chinese men who formed relationships with white women, who fathered mixed-race children, were turning their backs on their own ancestry and heritage or were abandoning an identity as Chinese for them and their children—even when it might have seemed that they were on the surface. Quong Tart, the Sydney tea merchant, shown here with his wife Margaret and their three oldest children in Hong Kong in 1894, is an interesting example of this. We know Quong Tart best as the dapper businessman and philanthropist, anti-opium campaigner and friend to Sydney’s elite (and coincidentally, my great-grandfather, Harry Bagnall), beloved husband of Margaret (nee Scarlett) and father to a brood of handsome children.

Image 6 Quong Tart, Margaret Tart and their three eldest children in Hong Kong, 1894



Source: Tart McEvoy papers, Society of Australian Genealogists 6/16/4

Yet his business interests were reliant on ongoing contacts with Hong Kong and China and it seems he remained close to his family, returning to China three times, including in 1894 to

introduce his young family to his elderly mother. Research by a historian of the Mei family in Toishan, Mei Weiqiang, and information gathered within the family, also suggests that he was married (in absentia) to a Chinese woman and that one, perhaps, two sons were adopted in his name. How to reconcile all this in a man known as the ultimate ‘assimilated’ Chinese?

An article by US historian Adam McKeown, published in 1999, nearly 15 years ago, on transnational Chinese families and Chinese Exclusion suggested to me that there was an alternative way of viewing these relationships, an alternative explanation for why Chinese men outmarried, and a real way of understanding these families within the context of Chinese migration.¹ McKeown is among a number of scholars who have outlined the family strategies used by Cantonese in the sending districts of the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province in southern China, from where most nineteenth-century Chinese migration took place.

Central to the family was the patriline, the ongoing line of descent from father to son, father to son. Cantonese families in the sending districts undertook economic strategies to ensure their survival and prosperity—such as establishing sons in different occupations or sending them to different overseas locations, Australia, the United States, Canada. They also developed strategies to ensure the continuation of the family line when more usual patterns of family formation were not possible due to the often long absences of men overseas.

Most common was the split family, where a man lived overseas for shorter or longer periods, while his wife remained at home in his ancestral village, often living with her in-laws or other members of her husband’s family. When a man had left unmarried and was not easily able to return, he could be married by proxy to a woman who then took up residence in her parents-in-law’s home. Sons could be adopted to ensure the patriline continued, even if husband and wife never met. Non-Chinese women were drawn into this when they formed relationships with Chinese men—and it was not uncommon for men to already have a wife and sometimes children at home when they formed relationships overseas.

Chinese families could be opposed to men taking foreign wives, out of fear that his interests and energies would be redirected away from the ancestral home and his filial obligations there. (In the early decades of the twentieth century there were also warnings by Chinese community leaders overseas against relationships with non-Chinese women, fearing that patriotic sentiments towards a new China might dissipate). But families formed with foreign women in places like Australia and New Zealand, Hawaii, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Jamaica and Peru still counted both as ‘Chinese’ and as part of their Chinese families. Their paternity (both biological and adoptive), not their maternity, mattered. The evidence for this is in the number of children of mixed race who went to China, for the period of their education or permanently.

Our National Archives houses hundreds of documents that trace the journeys of young Australians to China and back over the early decades of the twentieth century, after the introduction of the federal Immigration Restriction Act, but it was happening from as early as the late 1850s. Included in their number were children of mixed Chinese and Aboriginal heritage, as well as white step-children of Chinese men. Internationally, a small body of

¹ Adam McKeown, ‘Transnational Chinese Families and Chinese Exclusion, 1875-1943’, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1999, pp. 73–110.

scholarship documents similar travels for other young people of mixed Chinese descent back to China up to the early decades of the twentieth century.

Placing the history of mixed Chinese Australian families within a transnational frameworks allows us to see the parts of the story that took place beyond our shores. Chinese migration to Australia wasn't a simple one-way trip—economic, cultural and legal factors meant that Australian Chinese were highly mobile, travelling back and forth between Australia and China. Their formation of families followed a similar path, and limiting our definition of 'family life' to the 'geographically localized nuclear family' (to use Adam McKeown's phrase, p. 100) ignores a range of experiences and choices made in the process of migration, sojourning and settlement.

So, to conclude I will go back to those historical novels.

We can see aspects of the transnational Chinese family in the historical novels I've discussed. Phryne Fisher sees lover Lin Chung married to a Chinese woman, Camellia, in an arrangement that benefits both their families, if not themselves. I'm currently rereading the books to get to the bottom of quite how Camellia manages to come to Australia at a time when the Immigration Restriction Act largely (but not altogether) prevented the arrival of Chinese wives.

In *As the Earth Turns Silver*, Katherine McKechnie also becomes the lover of a man with a wife and child in China, while his brother works for years to be able to bring his wife to New Zealand too.

In *The Lambing Flat*, Ella has to confront Lok's yearning for his homeland and his ultimate decision to return. He asks her to go too, and some of my favourite passages in the book describe Ella's feelings as she contemplates whether she could go with him—she doesn't.

While the idea of the transnational Chinese family is becoming part of the accepted story among researchers in the Chinese Australian history community, I would like to see mainstream Australian historians flex their imaginations a bit more in the way that they describe our early Chinese communities, to include a narrative of 'Chinese family life' in the colonies that goes further than simply 'only a small number of Chinese women came to Australia' and 'only a few Chinese men married and formed families here'. Stories of transnational family lives are messy and complex, and don't sit necessarily easily within a 'national story'. But for me, this messiness and complexity is where the real interest lies.