Archaeology of the Chinese in Australia

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This paper reviews the present state of archaeological studies of sites associated with the overseas Chinese in Australia. No such studies were done in Australia until 1982, but there has been a rapid growth in the field since then. However, the archaeological work that has been done in recent times is still in the form of brief fragmentary studies and most of it has been concentrated in only a few parts of the country. Because of the circumstances in which most of the work is commissioned and carried out, the overall archaeological effort on the Chinese in Australia has been ad hoc in design and hasty in execution, and the product is very poorly disseminated. This paper examines the resource available up to the 1993 conference at the Chinese Museum in Melbourne, which the author sees as providing an important impetus to Chinese historical studies. An earlier version of this paper was given at the 1995 AIMA/ASHA conference in Hobart.

HISTORY

The archaeological work on Chinese sites in Australia to the present is all very recent and mostly very thin. This response by archaeologists echoes the earlier behaviour of Australian historians; despite the numerical significance and the political and economic influence of the Chinese in Australia from the mid-nineteenth century onward, little serious attention was paid to them in historical accounts until the 1970s. There are at least four reasons for this. The first is the natural and largely unconscious 'mirror effect' common to almost all historical writing, which causes historians to feel most comfortable when writing about people who are most like themselves. Until recent decades, almost all mainstream Australian history was written by adult male Anglo-Celtic historians who naturally wrote at greatest length about the activities of people who resembled them closely; hence most published Australian history is about Anglo-Celtic adult males. The second is the fondness for the Whig interpretation which dominated most early Australian historical writing: the historian-as-imperial-propagandist was keen to demonstrate the achievements which had led to the successes of the present time. The Chinese were not on the agenda of British settlement in nineteenth-century Australia, and neither their unexpected arrival nor the subsequent European reaction to them offered the heroic and morally uplifting subject matter which the colonies wanted in their history books.

Further, historians tend to write what they have read, and early histories and other writings on the Chinese in Australia were almost invariably hostile. After the initial hostility had faded, the whole topic became simply embarrassing. Local histories usually repeat the earlier folklore of the district; it is unusual for an amateur historian in the mainstream of local history writing to give anything other than an updated version of the nineteenth-century stereotype of the Chinese, even today. And fourth, the majority of the Chinese themselves were not in Australia for very long, and few of them wrote very much about their experiences, at least in English. So what we can read now from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about the overseas Chinese is from only one viewpoint, usually bigoted, at best condescending.

This discouraging picture of the scene in Australian historical writing fifty years ago cried out for the remedial attention of archaeologists, but that was to take some time. With the broadening of academic interest in Australian history from the Second World War onward, some honours and postgraduate students began to research aspects of Chinese history in Australia. One topic which exercised some early researchers was the evolution of the White Australia policy. Their work, of course, was not about the Chinese, but about how European Australians reacted to the Chinese presence. The first substantial account of the Chinese themselves was Pyke's 1946 account of foreign (a word which still meant non-British) immigrants to the goldfields in an MA thesis at the University of Sydney. Accounts by Rendell (1952) for South Australia and the Northern Territory, Easteal (1966) for Tasmania, Yong (1966) for Sydney and Melbourne, Cronin (1967 & 1971) for Queensland and Victoria respectively, Choi (1971) for Melbourne, May (1977) for Cairns, Ryan (1983 & 1989) and Atkinson (1991) for Western Australia slowly added up to a fairly comprehensive overview of the Australian picture. There are notable gaps; surprisingly, no-one has yet written a good overall history of the Chinese in New South Wales, for example. And the writers' differing emphases further complicate the picture, as some have concentrated on immigration, administrative policies, race, gender or industrial relations. By the 1980s, there was at least a good honours thesis on some aspects of the local history of the Chinese in each state; as a result there are a few historians in Australia today who believe that Chinese history has been 'done'.

Outside the universities, there were other developments in the published history of the Chinese in Australia. From the early twentieth century, there had been occasional biographies and autobiographies such as those of Quong Tart of Sydney or Tom See Poy of Innisfail, invariably men who had succeeded in commerce within the majority society. In recent times, local histories have begun to treat the Chinese in particular regions in greater detail and with greater respect (Jones 1987 & 1990, Slade 1990, Walden 1991, Wilton 1989), and there has been a recent blossoming of oral and family history research within the Australian Chinese community. In 1992, the first volume of Eric Rolls' history of the Chinese in Australia was published. This is the closest thing we have to a definitive work at present; I have expressed strong misgivings elsewhere about its usefulness (Bell 1992b).

ARCHAEOLOGY

What were archaeologists doing to investigate Chinese sites while this process was going on? Not much at all until very recently. The first archaeological project on a Chinese site in Australia was initiated by Ian Jack of Sydney University as recently as 1982 to study a Chinese garden and habitation on the Palmer goldfield (Jack, Holmes and Kerr 1984). Campbell Macknight has pointed out to me that much earlier than this, Chinese ceramic shards had been found in small numbers in archaeological excavations on Macassan sites in the Northern Territory, however no-one has suggested that any Chinese were present at those sites. The Ah Toy's garden dig remains the only Chinese archaeological project in Australia to the present which originated in a university and was motivated entirely by academic curiosity. Most of the other work done since 1982

has been commissioned to assist in cultural resource management or environmental impact assessment.

The formation of the Australian Heritage Commission and heritage agencies in several states of Australia in the 1970s gave the initial impetus to site-based projects. Commencing in the early 1980s, a number of studies in widely separated parts of Australia have drawn up inventories of Chinese sites for heritage conservation purposes. Whether all of these are strictly archaeological projects is debatable, but they generally include more or less detailed site descriptions which constitute a basic archaeological record. Howard Pearce's survey of the Pine Creek district of the Northern Territory (1982) described a large number of Chinese sites connected with gold mining. In a remarkable study commissioned by the Queen Victoria Museum, Helen Vivian (1985) recorded the Chinese tin mining settlements of northeast Tasmania in detail, and collected valuable oral evidence from former residents. Elaine Van Kempen (1987) reported on Chinese sites across northern Australia for the Australian Heritage Commission. The administrative needs of the Palmer Goldfield Reserve in North Queensland led to lengthy site inventories being compiled by Gordon Grimwade (1990) and Jillian Comber (1992).

The circumstances surrounding these last two reports point to one of the problems that can arise when archaeological studies are managed by a government agency. There is now a belief in some Queensland government circles that because of the Grimwade and Comber studies, the Palmer goldfield has been 'done', whereas Reserve R12, the study area for both projects, is only about 10 percent of the land known to have been intensively occupied by Chinese miners in the 1870s (Kirkman 1984).

More detailed studies have looked at individual sites, generally ones in public ownership: the South Australian National Parks Service commissioned a study of the 'Chinamen's Well' site on the Coorong (Snoek 1984), Gordon Grimwade and the Material Culture Unit at James Cook University have done a series of studies of the Atherton temple and nearby Chinatown (Grimwade 1986–87, Grimwade & Reynolds 1986, Cutler & Reynolds 1991), and Peter Forrest has reported on Chinese sites associated with the phosphate mines on Christmas Island (Forrest 1989).

The gold mining revival of the 1980s generated another form of archaeological study as a component of environmental impact assessments of proposed mining operations on historic sites. New mines on nineteenth-century Chinese-occupied sites have given rise to studies by Gillian Alfredson (1988), Gordon Grimwade (1988–1993) and Resource Consulting Services (1989–1991) in Queensland, and Justin McCarthy (1986–1989), NSR Environmental Consultants (1992) and Kinhill Engineers (1989–1993) in the Northern Territory. The briefs for these reports generally require the consultant to undertake intensive scrutiny of a relatively small area of land. They rarely set out to test hypotheses, or have more than a rudimentary research design, but are exercises in detailed observation and accurate recording.

These studies have amassed data on hundreds of sites — about 200 on the Palmer goldfield alone — ranging across a spectrum of types including habitations, stores, temples, gardens, irrigation ditches, alluvial diggings, underground mines, hearths, ovens, forges, wells, and graves. There are distinctive structures and artefact assemblages associated with Chinese occupation which seem remarkably consistent right across the country from the Alligator River in the Northern Territory to the Ringarooma River in Tasmania. Yet these are at present merely intuitive observations; no-one has ever put these data together and tested them. The varied nature of the studies would probably make it very difficult for such a project to adopt rigorous methods. And unfortunately, because much of this data was collected in the course of environmental impact studies, many of the sites identified in these reports have subsequently been destroyed or damaged by mining operations. No one has yet done a post-disturbance inventory of these sites, but it is likely that a large proportion of the Chinese historic places identified in the 1980s no longer exist.

Some of the ground this paper covers has been traversed by Ian Jack in two earlier papers, one delivered to the American Society for Historical Archaeology in 1986, and another which appeared in *Australasian Historical Archaeology* in 1995 (Jack 1986 & 1995). In his 1986 paper, Jack reported on the state of archaeological work on Chinese sites in Australia to that time - he knew of only his own on the Palmer and Vivian's in Tasmania. He described the outlook of historical archaeology in Australia to that time as 'excessively Eurocentric' and work on Chinese sites as 'in its infancy compared with America or New Zealand'. Jack's more recent paper analysed the contribution which archaeology has made to the historical study of the Chinese in Australia, and in doing so, briefly summarised the work which has been done in the archaeology of overseas Chinese sites in the Pacific region. He accurately pointed out that a bibliography on the archaeology of the overseas Chinese in Australasia published two years previously (Bell, Grimwade & Ritchie 1993) includes very few references which report the results of archaeological work; in fact the bulk of the bibliography is historical source material which may be useful to archaeologists.

Jack also drew attention to the large proportion of the bibliography which is related to temples ('joss houses'): over 8% of the entries. This may reflect the fact that a large proportion of the work on the Chinese in Australia has been generated within museums and schools of material culture or architecture. But it probably also arises from a more general preoccupation with physical distinctiveness. The overseas Chinese in Australia were often disappointingly ordinary to observers; much of their behaviour was identical to that of the population at large. Temples usually presented the most visibly exotic appearance of all the buildings in Chinese communities, and they are frequently the last element of the community's fabric to survive.

Slender as is this body of archaeological work, some of it has been greeted with interest outside Australia, and a number of Australian practitioners have established informal links with overseas researchers, particularly in New Zealand and the USA. Priscilla Wegars of the University of Idaho has made comparative reference to Australian archaeological findings in her published works on Chinese sites in North America (Wegars 1991 & 1993), and Patricia Jones of San Jose University corresponded with a number of Australian archaeologists while writing her study of Chinese ceramics from the wreck of the *Frolic* (Jones 1992). In Australia, shipwrecks also present a potential source of information on the Chinese which has not yet been tapped. For years, South Australian maritime archaeologists have been searching without success for the wreck of the *Phaeton*, which sank off Robe in 1857 while inbound with Chinese gold miners, and was apparently never salvaged (Jeffery & Kenderdine 1991).

When we compare the publicly accessible work by historians on the Chinese in Australia with that produced by archaeologists, a pattern becomes evident. Academic historians tend to have written one or more major works, usually an honours, masters or PhD thesis, which sum up their contribution to the discipline (Atkinson 1991, Choi 1971, May 1977, Rendell 1952, Ryan 1983, Yong 1966). Some of these have been published in book form and then become widely accessible. However, no thesis has yet been written in Australia on a Chinese topic in the discipline of archaeology; virtually all the work referred to in this paper is in the form of brief papers or consultants' reports. Australian archaeological consultants as a rule do not produce a single major work, but

have their research findings dispersed through a number of reports and conference papers (Alfredson 1988, Comber 1992, Grimwade 1985–1983, McCarthy 1986–1993). Thus the work of historians in this field tends to be far more coherent and accessible than that of archaeologists.

This need not necessarily be the case. If we look across the Tasman Sea, we find a very large body of archaeological literature on Chinese sites in New Zealand, in the form of both consultants' reports and journal articles, the bulk of it produced since 1980 by the extraordinarily prolific Neville Ritchie. However, Ritchie has also written a significant summative work in the form of his 1986 PhD thesis at the University of Otago.

Chinese historical studies in Australia took a great leap forward in October 1993 when a major conference was held at the Chinese Museum in Melbourne. The significance of this event lay in bringing together people from diverse backgrounds and disciplines who do not normally talk to each other, and successfully integrating a number of previously independent lines of research. All the archaeologists who participated were previously known to each other, but the contact with academic, local and family historians, and specialists from fields as diverse as linguistics, theology and medicine were extremely valuable. The conference also made it known how much work is going on within the Chinese community, particularly in the field of family history. In 1994 another conference on Chinese history was held at Edith Cowan University. Hopefully the proceedings of both conferences will be published soon.

THE STATE OF THE ART

The nature and geographical distribution of archaeological projects on Chinese sites in recent years is a poor reflection on the state of the discipline in Australia generally. The references appended to this paper cover virtually all the archaeological work that has been done on Chinese sites in Australia. Most of them take the form of brief descriptive surveys done to meet the needs of a bureaucratic agency. Only the projects at Ah Toy's garden, Atherton Chinatown and the Union Reef at Pine Creek have seen any excavation done, and all of that was on a very limited scale. No one has yet written one word of a theoretical model relating to Chinese sites, and little of the work done to the present would be regarded very highly by advocates of 'pure' archaeology.

Thirty-seven studies selected from the references for this paper have been analysed for their dates, their geographical spread and their clients. The criteria for selecting these 37 references are (a) that they are predominantly archaeological rather than historical in their methodology, (b) that they are concerned primarily and not merely incidentally with Chinese sites, both characteristics involving a degree of subjective judgement, and (c) that they were in print before the 1993 Melbourne conference. The chronological distribution (Fig. 1) shows the growth of interest in the topic, with one published work a year commencing in 1982, then a steady upward trend through the 1980s, until the graph sits on about five a year from 1989 to 1993, when it blows out because of the papers at the Melbourne conference.

Only one of the 37 works can be described as academic, in the sense of not being commissioned for a specific purpose. Some of the other work has originated in universities, but more is by independent consulting archaeologists. Virtually all of the projects were commissioned to report on specific sites, slightly more than half (19) by cultural heritage agencies for immediate resource management purposes, and nearly as many (17) as part of impact assessment studies of proposed mining developments (Fig. 2). One of the largest sponsors of archaeological research on Chinese sites in Australia in the past ten years has been a somewhat unenthusiastic gold mining industry.

As a result, there are no published reports of major extent in existence in Australia. The output consists of a number of brief reports which are also remarkable for being concentrated in a few small parts of Australia. Of the 37 studies, more than half (20) were on North Queensland sites, the majority of these (12) on the Palmer goldfield, with a smaller cluster near Atherton. Another 14 were in the Northern Territory, nine of them in the vicinity of Pine Creek. Three studies were in northeast Tasmania, and four represent all the rest of Australia. Amazingly, there appear to have been almost no studies reporting on Chinese sites in Victoria or New South Wales (Fig. 3).

The geographical distribution of the reports is very curious, and at first I assumed it was an artefact of the study process; probably the result of local development pressures driving research in particular places. However, it is difficult to see in what way the robust economic pressures on the Northern Territory goldfield sites in the 1980s resembled those of northeastern Tasmania where economic development was, to put it nicely, less vigorous. Then, in a study of Chinese pig ovens presented at the Melbourne conference I discovered exactly the same distribution of these structures: relatively large numbers on the Palmer and Pine Creek Goldfields, a smaller cluster on the northeast Tasmanian tinfields, and hardly any elsewhere in the country (Bell 1993). In that case I am confident that this is a reasonably complete and certainly representative sample of most of the ovens in Australia, and that the data is not a product of the research methods. The

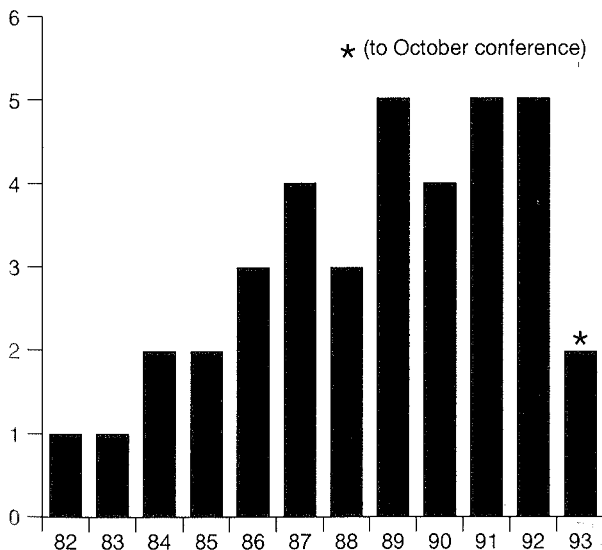

Fig. 1: Studies Published by Year 1982–1993

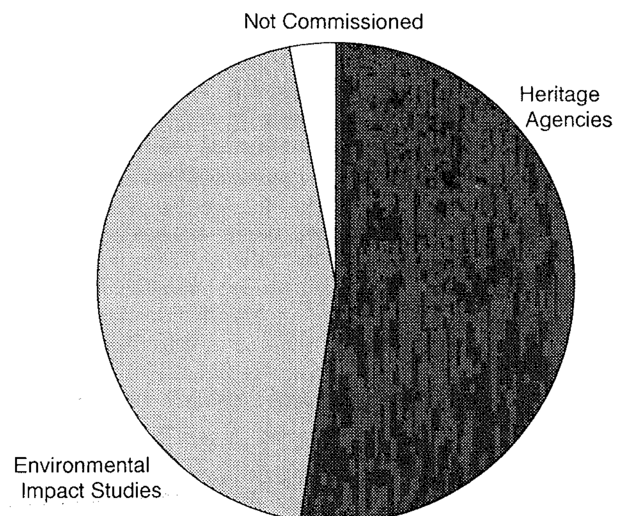

Fig. 2: Breakdown of Studies by Client/Purpose

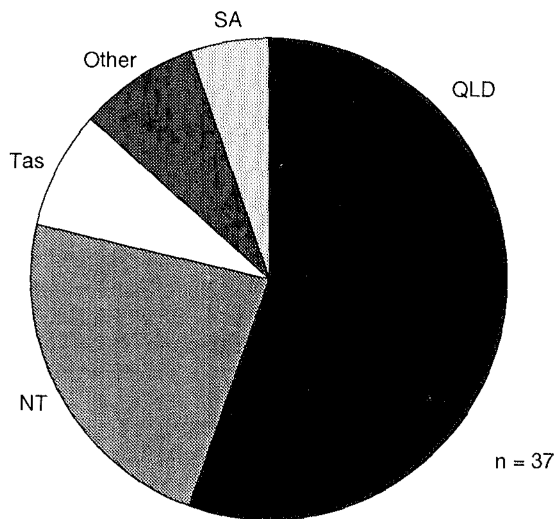

Fig. 3: Distribution of Studies by State

repetition of the same pattern suggests that there was in fact something distinctive about the material culture of these three regions, and the reports published to the present may accurately be reflecting the distribution of the most significant Chinese archaeological sites in Australia.

If this is so then clearly further research is needed to explain why, and all that can be done at present is to hypothesise why these three widely-separated regions might be presenting archaeological evidence different from that in the rest of the country. There were Chinese miners in many other places, and it is improbable that all the evidence in those places has been destroyed. One intriguing thing all the archaeologically rich sites in Australia have in common is that they were all settled in the mid 1870s, and intensively occupied by Chinese miners for the following decade. Is there something we have yet to learn about that period? Was there a change in the material culture of the Chinese arriving in Australia at that time which has left us different evidence today? By comparison, strikingly little archaeological evidence of Chinese miners and their society has been reported from the first 25 years of the gold rushes. Was the change to do with the new steamer routes after the Suez Canal was opened, calling at Chinese and Southeast Asian ports en route to Australia? Or are we simply looking at the different archaeological evidence of majority Chinese societies? The Chinese on the Palmer, at Pine Creek and in northeast Tasmania for years constituted the majority of the local population, with their culture imported largely intact. Is that the necessary prerequisite for building pig ovens?

The archaeological study of the Chinese in Australia still seems to be as Ian Jack described it a decade ago, 'in its infancy'. Much work has been done in that ten years, but that work does not yet exist as a synthesised coherent body; and much of it is inaccessible to the public and extremely difficult even for other researchers to access. The finished environmental assessment reports rarely exist anywhere outside the consultants' and the clients' offices. There is no central collection of them, and probably no-one on earth has ever seen them all. At the very least, Australia needs a central repository and a good index for archaeological studies. Archaeologists frequently complain that historians do not read their reports, but to be fair, we must make it possible for them to do so.

(This paper has been prompted in part by a consultancy funded by the National Estate Grants Program, which the Museum of Chinese History in Melbourne has offered to Peter Bell, Gordon Grimwade and Justin McCarthy, to identify sites associated with the overseas Chinese in Australia. The project will begin with a summary of historical and archaeological research to date, collate information in reports, on databases and heritage registers throughout the country, and produce a comprehensive summary of places with cultural significance to the Chinese community. The consultants would appreciate hearing from anyone who can contribute information on Chinese sites or studies, particularly those which are not mentioned here.)

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