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## ‘THE LUCK OF A CHINAMAN’: IMAGES OF THE CHINESE IN POPULAR AUSTRALIAN SAYINGS

 Lachlan Strahan

*Bill Langford* told me a story from his childhood.<sup>1</sup> His mother, who was exceedingly hygiene-conscious, frequently retold this tale. In 1941 she was walking across Bourke Street in Melbourne when she saw a ‘Chinaman’—and she was quite specific about this term—knocked over by a tram. As the ‘Chinaman’ tumbled to the ground, a skinned cat fell out of his billy onto the road. The familiar mixed with the unfamiliar; a pet waiting to be served up as dinner in that quintessentially Australian receptacle, the billy. This encounter may or may not be true, but the point to be made here is the way in which it was elevated to the level of family and neighbourhood legend. It became an illustration of what all ‘Chinamen’ are like.

Australian perceptions of Chinese in the mid-twentieth century were conditioned by a myriad everyday sayings. One writer has argued that typical Australian racism “exhibits a distinctive quality of unimaginativeness,” an “emptiness”; resentments have lacked specific content and thus have failed to generate strong, entrenched stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on a wide range of written and especially oral sources, I would argue, to the contrary, that white Australians have developed a multi-faceted racist folklore concerning Chinese. Catch-phrases have played an important part in defining national identity.

The general literature on the experiences of Chinese in Australia is substantial. It is not intended to rehearse this material here. One aspect of this cross-cultural encounter, however, has been little investigated, namely folk sayings and their associated idiom. These oral fragments constitute one piece of a mosaic; their examination indicates how Chinese were perceived, remembered and encoded in the symbolic structures of everyday life for European Australians. In a complex interplay of fact and myth, some of these expressions were based upon Chinese language and cultural practices.

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I have made all reasonable attempts to obtain copyright permission for illustrations reproduced, and apologise for any omissions.

<sup>1</sup> Many people have provided me with first-hand material in letters, interviews and social conversations. For reasons of confidentiality they have here been given pseudonyms, indicated by italics. A number of collections of colloquialisms have proved to be rich sources, especially W.S. Ramson, *The Australian national dictionary: a dictionary of Australianisms on historical principles* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988); H. Rawson, *Wicked words* (New York: Crown, 1989); E. Partridge, *A concise dictionary of slang and unconventional English*, ed. P. Beale (London: Routledge, 1989); E. Partridge, *A dictionary of catch phrases: British and American from the sixteenth century to the present day*, ed. P. Beale. (London: Routledge, 1985); G.A. Wilkes, *A dictionary of Australian colloquialisms* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1978); and L. Johansen, *The dinkum dictionary: a ripper guide to Aussie English* (Melbourne: Viking O’Neil, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> M. Liffman, “Immigration and racism in the land of the long weekend,” in /OVER

*/Surrender Australia? Essays in the study and uses of history: Geoffrey Blainey and Asian immigration*, ed. A. Markus and M.C. Ricklefs (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p.116.

'Facts' are, however, not neutral; rather, they are cast in new forms by the act of seeing and defining. There is, for instance, a big gap between knowing that certain Chinese eat dogs for culturally specific reasons and the contention that Chinese are uncivilized and dirty because they eat dogs.

This article focuses upon the period between roughly 1920 and 1960. My oral sources are people who grew up and entered adulthood in this time. They imbibed through their parents and grandparents an oral culture which extended back to the gold rushes. Publications such as the *Bulletin* and *Smith's Weekly* used racist vernacular. It was not until 1960 that the *Bulletin* dropped its traditional motto, "Australia for the White Man." Some examples are drawn from earlier and later periods to demonstrate the durability or mutation of phrases. Many of these folk myths were spawned by the shrinking presence of Chinese in Australia; still others were engendered by the Second World War and subsequent conflicts. Certain phrases were distinctly homegrown while others circulated in English-speaking countries, indicating that there were common themes in popular reactions to Chinese in different places. Considerable research has been done on Chinese in the United States. While potentially fruitful, a detailed comparison with the American situation lies outside the scope of this article.

Sayings constitute a distinct genre. For an expression to be included in this generic grouping, it must have the ring of a truism, a phrase which has entered general circulation by a certain formulaic repetition. Popular sayings are repeated in broadly the same form of words in different social situations. Material of this kind is not readily quantifiable; one cannot adopt a statistical approach to ascertain that a certain percentage of everyday expressions referred to Chinese. Still less can one conclude what proportion of the population used such expressions. The very randomness of the sources used here reveals patterns of language which reached across the community. By their very nature these sayings are somewhat elusive and ephemeral, the more so because they were part of daily conversation and thus rarely written down. Oral evidence of this kind can so easily slip away into a historical void.

Arguably, the almost reflex use of ethnocentric expressions indicates that certain attitudes were deeply embedded though not fully recognized. The very consistency of Australian sayings regarding the Chinese exposes a substratum of interconnected archetypes. Over the years, clusters of similar phrases coalesced. Sometimes, different versions of the same cliché emerged, suggesting the stereotype had a continuing life which was reinvented and hence reaffirmed. It had not become a dead metaphor or merely a charming old turn of phrase. Although some suggested a generalized anti-foreignness, other expressions were directed specifically at Chinese. Some 'aliens' were more alien than others. Until well after the Second World War Chinese were the only truly exotic 'strangers' that most European Australians encountered in any significant numbers, apart from Aborigines.

Idiom of this kind reveals a diffuse everyday wittiness which dealt with the travails of life and unfamiliar peoples in linguistically inventive ways. A

strong streak of good-natured, larrikin playfulness underpinned this neighbourhood theatre. It has been argued that ethnic humour can act as a safety valve for racial tension. While this argument has some merit, I would maintain that humorous sayings tended to preserve, rather than disarm, myths about Chinese. Racist jokes constitute an important means of reinforcing group solidarity through negative integration and scapegoating. A sense of Otherness was created and reaffirmed in countless daily conversations.

Racist names were the most obvious form of idiom which referred to Chinese. 'Chows', 'Chinees', 'Chinkies' and 'Chinks' have been stock figures in Australian folklore since colonial times.<sup>3</sup> 'Pat', 'pong', 'quang', 'dingbat', and 'canary' were common derogatory names.<sup>4</sup> People referred to the strange, far-away country of 'Chinkieland'. 'Paddy' was another derisive name, presumably referring to rice paddies, though Chinese resented this name because of its negative association with the Irish. "Today anything or anyone objectionable," Sidney Baker argued in the 1940s, "can be called a *cow* and it is probably through the influence of this word that we have taken *chow*, used for a Chinaman, and made it a permissible synonym for *cow* when applied to a person."<sup>5</sup> Chinese were called John, Johnny or Charlie. 'John Chinaman' was a character who variously evinced contempt, curiosity, fear and respect. Presumably, the difficulties of recognizing and remembering seemingly bizarre Chinese names led Australians to opt for common European tags. Chinese in the nineteenth century were also called 'Tartars', 'Sons of Heaven' and 'Celestials', invoking images of the mysterious, barbarous Orient and perhaps deriving in part from the Chinese term for the empire, or 'heavenly dynasty'. These particular phrases were, however, archaic by the mid-twentieth century. References to the 'yellow hordes' summoned up visions of uncontrolled, animalistic fecundity. From the 1920s, Chinese were also called 'dinks', perhaps to rhyme with chinks, and 'horries', doubtless a corruption of Orientals. 'Yellow bastards' was a much harsher term.

Even the name 'Chinaman' indicated that Chinese were constructed as outsiders. Many people believed that this was the proper identification for the people of China. One dictionary of the late 1930s, in a supplement on Austral-English, noted that 'chink and chow' were 'colloquial for Chinaman'.<sup>6</sup> A loaded term was recognized as a part of 'polite', 'formal' speech. The *Australasian Universal Dictionary* (1969) merely stated that a 'Chinaman' was a native of China.<sup>7</sup> The derogatory overtones of the name were apparently not recognized. In sheering parlance, a 'Chinaman' was the unshorn lock (resembling a pigtail) on a sheep's rump. A species of poisonous fish found off the Queensland coast is called the Chinaman fish. The old Australian 'china' for a friend seems to have no real connection with Chinese as it is a piece of rhyming slang, 'my mate, my china plate'.

Some Australians regarded the words 'chow' and 'chink', like 'coon' and 'nigger', with disgust. Anti-racism was bred into certain families and social groups just as intolerance was inherited in others. Dame Enid Lyons recalls

<sup>3</sup> Ramson, *Australian national dictionary*, p.264, claims that these terms, though not exclusively Australian, were first recorded in Australia.

<sup>4</sup> S.J. Baker, *The Australian language* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1945), p.185.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in B. Homadge, *The yellow peril: a squint at some Australian attitudes towards orientals* (Dubbo, NSW: Review Publications, 1971), p.15.

<sup>6</sup> *The modern standard English dictionary and world atlas* (London: Odhams, 1937?), p.698.

<sup>7</sup> A.H. Irvine, ed., *Australasian universal dictionary* (Sydney: National Library Association, 1969), p.178.

<sup>8</sup> Dame Enid Lyons, *So we take comfort*, (London: Heinemann, 1965), p.22.

<sup>9</sup> Power-points in Australia are not rectangular but have three holes, the bottom one vertical, and the upper two slanting.

<sup>10</sup> J. Jupp, ed., *The Australian people: an encyclopaedia of the nation, its people and their origins* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1988), pp.299, 304; and W.H. Wilde et al., *The Oxford companion to Australian literature* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.155.

from her childhood that Charlie Vo Kong, a Chinese hawker, visited her family home in Tasmania before the Great War. "My mother insisted that we call him Mr Vo Kong, addressing him as formally as we did all adults; and this pleased him."<sup>8</sup>

More recently, slang such as 'gook', 'slopehead', 'slit-eye', 'plate face' and 'slant-eye' has become common in Australia to describe various Asian groups. Many of these phrases testify to the increasing influence of American culture. Often spawned during the Pacific, Korean and Vietnamese wars, they emphasize the supposed physical abnormality of Asians. Curiously, the classic Second World War name for the Japanese, 'Nips', has been found amongst schoolchildren today as a term of abuse for all Asians. Chinese are also called 'chogies', 'chongers', 'zipper-heads' and 'power points', the latter referring to 'slanting' eyes.<sup>9</sup> Literature at times preserves this kind of oral image-making.

This is not the place for a thorough survey of the portrayal of Chinese in Australian literature. A rich body of material exists, stretching from Henry Lawson to Brian Castro. A valuable case for my purposes is Ruth Park. Her novels provide a revealing portrait of how Chinese were perceived within Surry Hills, an inner, working-class suburb of Sydney with a large Chinese community. Originally a New Zealander, Park settled in Australia in 1942, living for a time in Surry Hills, then a slum area. *The Harp in the South* won the *Sydney Morning Herald* literary prize in 1948. It was followed in 1949 by a sequel, *Poor Man's Orange*. Both books were extremely well received, running to numerous reprints; they simultaneously reflected and sustained popular representations of Chinese. Park carefully observed working-class life, sketching authentic characters and capturing the texture of everyday oral culture in description and dialogue.

Local folklore on the 'chows' was ambivalent. The main Chinese character is Lick Jimmy, a fruiterer who lives next door to the Darcy family, the centre of the saga. When he moves in, Mrs Darcy cries, "Chow gramophones miaowing all night. Prawns lying around the yard. Heaven knows what goes on." A local kid, observing the unloading of Jimmy's goods, chirps, "Hey, you! Your name John or Charlie?" Even the fruiterer's name is a play on Chinese names. Lick Jimmy becomes an accepted member of the community, noted for his peaceableness and kindness. He merges into the humdrum rhythms of the suburb, eventually growing old, contentedly and quietly, watching the passing life through his shop window. The Darcy family come to regard their Chinese neighbour with affection and respect. Long-term contact eroded some of the antipathy so evident in the nineteenth century. The diminished number of Chinese by the mid-twentieth century also played a part in lessening, though not removing, tensions. In 1881 there were over 38,000 Chinese in Australia, and seven years later they numbered 50,000; by 1934 this figure had dropped to 10,000. In 1947 Chinese numbered 12,094 in a population of over seven and a half million.<sup>10</sup> The occasional Lick Jimmy was not a threat. One Surry Hills resident exclaims:



What I say is, they ain't got no business allowing foreigners into the country. Chows, yes. Nobody can wash a collar like a Chow. But not blasted Dutch. Anyone with corners on their head is next best thing to a German, I always say.

Nevertheless, Jimmy remains apart, ever an object of curiosity tinged with suspicion. He is not asked in to share meals with the Darcy family, though he participates with gusto in local rituals such as lighting bonfires in the street.<sup>11</sup> Even in the very repetition of the name ‘chow’ Jimmy and his compatriots are constructed as the Other. After a family brawl, Hughie Darcy leans over the back fence to yell abuse at Jimmy to let off steam: “I can’t stand a bar of a chow.”<sup>12</sup>

Could names such as ‘chow’ be used in a matter-of-fact or even affectionate way? Much depended upon the tone with which they were used. *Colin James*, who fought in China during the Second World War, recalled with tenderness “the old vegetable chow who used to come around pushing a bloody barrow.” ‘Chow’ and ‘chink’ could suggest a certain paternalistic fondness. More often they were a sign of cultural incomprehension. Even in apparently neutral or affectionate usage, the underlying, irremovable sense of superiority and difference was still present. Derogatory, depersonalizing assumptions were built into the words. One Australian-born Chinese stressed: “I grew up in the era of the Cold War and the White Australia Policy. They saw me as a Commo Chow. They wanted to make me different. They succeeded, I am.”<sup>13</sup>

Name-calling could have ironic twists. Charles Chung recalls that his father, the son of a Chinese man and an Irish woman, was called the ‘red-headed chow’ because of his auburn hair.<sup>14</sup> One individual, at primary school in the late 1940s, thought that European children were singing to him when they chanted ‘Ching Chong Chinaman’.<sup>15</sup> Although his family had been in Australia for many generations, *John Chang* was called a ‘bloody New Australian’ in the 1950s, ‘new Australian’ being the term commonly applied to recent European immigrants. Racist names at times could become a way of insulting members of the dominant white group. John ‘Chow’ Hayes was one of Sydney’s most notorious gangsters from the 1930s to the 1950s. He earned his nickname in a street fight when his vanquished opponent called him a ‘Chow bastard’ because his eyes appeared to ‘slant’ like a Chinese.

At worst racist names signified violence and hatred. *Mathew Jones* was told by a resident of Stanthorpe, Queensland, that locals in the old days bashed and even killed Chinese tin miners “for sport.” Almost wistfully, the townsman claimed that “it was such fun to go down there and belt the chows.” *Sue Dickson* encountered a similar tale when she was touring through the Mackay area in the early 1970s. Reclining on the sunny verandah of The Leap, a ramshackle bush pub, she inquired about the area. Pointing to a massive rock, the publican said, “You see that cliff, that’s where they used to get rid of the Chinamen. They’d take the Chinamen up there and throw them off.” There were significant numbers of Chinese living in this part of Queensland from the late nineteenth century. Although there is documented

<sup>11</sup> R. Park, *The harp in the south* (1948; reprint ed., Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988), pp.10, 79, 119.

<sup>12</sup> R. Park, *Poor man’s orange* (1949; reprint ed., Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1977), p.294.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in “The China syndrome,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1990.

<sup>14</sup> *Australian*, 20 August 1988.

<sup>15</sup> *Age* (Melbourne), 4 December 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Jupp, *Australian people*, p.313; and A. Markus, *Fear and hatred: purifying Australia and California 1850-1901* (Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1979), p.130.

<sup>17</sup> E.V. Timms, *The fury* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1954), p.172.

evidence of anti-Chinese hostility in Mackay in the 1880s, it is not possible to determine from available material whether murders did take place at 'the Leap'.<sup>16</sup> Fact or fable, these lynchings became part of local legend.

A conviction that Chinese were made of different stuff was maintained by sayings about the 'Chinaman's trot', a slow but steady jogging pace or a shuffling gait. Lick Jimmy is always 'trotting' or 'padding' around Surry Hills. In *The Fury* (1954), a romance set in the Victorian gold-fields, the popular novelist E.V. Timms sketched a series of ethnic stereotypes: 'thick-lipped negroes' and 'ragged Australian black-fellows' rubbed shoulders with 'natives' from the South Seas and 'jig-jogging Chinese'. Tellingly, the various Caucasian miners—Americans, Portuguese, English, Germans—were not given typical identifying physical features.<sup>17</sup> 'Chinamen' were customarily imagined as running after one another in a line. A person who needed to urinate frequently was said to have a 'Chinese (or Japanese) bladder'. It was routinely said that Chinese 'all looked the same'. The physical 'alienness' of local Chinese was emphasized by their clothes—slippers, half-mast pants, 'coolie hats' and skull-caps. The travel writer Frank Clune said: "When I was a nipper every Chinese in Sydney had a 'pigtail' . . . . We used to laugh at the 'Chinaman's pigtail', as we rudely called it, but it was a badge of their

#### Figure 1

Australians frequently transliterated Chinese names in ways that made them seem comical or grotesque. The left-wing artist Noel Counihan lampoons here the old Australian rendering of Chinese pidgin English and the Australian government's policy of non-recognition of the People's Republic of China. The caption beneath the title "Realism" read: "One of the bases of co-existence," said Mr Casey in New York, "was that people in each country should have a realistic idea of the state of affairs in the other countries." (Guardian, 29 September 1955; courtesy of Pat Counihan)



"REALISM"

nation.”<sup>18</sup> Australians saw the Chinese language as gibberish, yet another sign of ineradicable strangeness. Chinese ‘yabbered’ rather than talked. Like their script, their language seemed topsy-turvy. All ‘funny-sounding’ foreign names are liable to be mocked but the staccato, monosyllabic sound of Chinese names was especially open to ridicule.

‘Chinese’ could become a negative qualifier, a sign of things confused, disorganized, badly executed. In the First World War, an inept aviator was known as a ‘Chinese ace’—hence ‘flying Chinese’. In the same vein, a ‘Chinese landing’ was a bad landing, characteristically with one wing lower than it should be. Apparently, this phrase, first used by Canadians, involved a pun on the mock-Chinese name *Wun Wing Lo*. It was also believed that Asians could not see properly because of their ‘slanty’ eyes. A ‘Chinese three-point landing’ was a crash. Extreme clumsiness was said to be ‘as awkward as a chow on a bicycle’.<sup>19</sup> Chinese were deemed to be incapable of coping with even the most basic mechanical device and ‘Chinese’ could become a synonym for inferior. The cheap labour of the ‘coolie’ trade encouraged white Australians to regard Chinese with scorn or hostility. A hammer was often called a ‘Chinese screw-driver’ because of the folk-belief that Chinese used a hammer to drive and extract screws.<sup>20</sup> Generations of Australians grew up with furniture stamped ‘European Labour Only’. Chinese-made furniture was, however, affordable and thus popular in working-class homes. More generally, a ‘Chinaman’s copy’ was a slavishly exact copy, including mistakes.

Not all references to Chinese were, however, negative. Many European Australians praised Chinese hawkers and fishmongers as hard-working, honest merchants who always provided excellent produce. Housewives remarked, “You always get good fruit from John—and there’s one thing about the Old Chinaman: he’ll never cheat you.”<sup>21</sup> Cyril Pearl wrote, “On remote stations, in arid country towns, and in the waste places of the city, he created oases of fertility.”<sup>22</sup> Every morning on his way to school in the 1930s, *Robert Longford* watched, from the tram, Chinese with their old-fashioned wooden yokes and conical peasant hats patiently tending their gardens on the mud flats of the Yarra river in Melbourne. Indeed, patience became a defining trait of Chinese in the popular mind. *Jack Simpson* recalls the beautiful blue and white jars of stemmed ginger in the local ‘Chinaman’s’ shop. This positive image of Chinese was preserved in the phrase ‘as fat as a Chinaman’s horse’, indicating that Chinese were well-known for looking after their beasts. *William Franklin* remembers the Chinese hawker with affection:

When I was a small boy living with my grandparents in Kew, Victoria, round 1925, a Chinese market-gardener used to come around once a week with baskets of fresh vegetables. I particularly recall his face on the day he arrived to find my grandfather had painted the gate posts. He, the Chinese, was in some sort of mental agony and it took my grandparents some time to find out that he’d kept our accounts in Chinese on the gatepost and grandfather had destroyed his record.

<sup>18</sup> F. Clune, *Asbes of Hiroshima: a post-war trip to Japan and China* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1952), p.261. As a child, Henry Handel Richardson saw “Chinamen” as “fear-some bodies,” resembling the “swart-faced, white-eyed chimneysweeps of the English nursery.” (Cited A. Broinowski, *The yellow lady: Australian impressions of Asia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.29.

<sup>19</sup> S. J. Baker, *The Australian language*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Currawong Publications, 1966), p.89.

<sup>20</sup> Partridge, *Dictionary of slang*, p.88. Partridge dates this phrase from c.1950.

<sup>21</sup> M. Brand, *The Chinese* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1978), p.89.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Hornadge, *Yellow peril*, p.48.

## Figure 2

“Velly good lettucee.”  
Chinese hawkers were still a familiar sight on the streets of many Australian towns and cities in the 1930s. (Engraving from a photograph, Centennial Magazine, 1889)



<sup>23</sup> In the story "Ah Soon," published in the *Lone hand* (1911), Henry Lawson said: "I never knew or heard of a Chinaman who neglected to pay his debts, who did a dishonest action, or who forgot a kindness to him or his, or was not charitable, when he had the opportunity." Quoted in Wilde, *Oxford Companion*, p.54.

<sup>24</sup> I. Tumer, J. Factor and W. Lowenstein, *Cinderella dressed in yella* (Richmond, Vic.: Heinemann, 1978), p.87.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Ramson, *Australian national dictionary*, p.143.

<sup>26</sup> Mrs Aeneas Gunn, *We of the never never* (1908; reprint ed., Melbourne: Hutchinson, 1983), pp.91–3, 96, 208, 213, 230.

<sup>27</sup> See also James Brunton Stephen's "My Chinese cook" (1902) and "My other Chinese cook," and Normal Lindsay's 'cookee' in the children's classic, *The Magic Pudding* (1918).

*Franklin* was taught by his family to respect Chinese as honest and diligent. In 1939 he got a job at a branch of the State Bank near the Victoria Market, Melbourne: "When Chinese customers came in to deposit their takings, the teller would always say, 'How much, Charlie?', then enter the amount in the passbook and put the bag aside to count later. 'Never known one of them to be a penny out', he said."<sup>23</sup> Chinese were perceived as kindly folk. 'As good as a Chinaman's word' was a common phrase in America, and possibly found its way to Australia. *Peter Lawson* recalls his life in Stanthorpe, the setting of those fabled bashings: "Like many country towns in those days, the 1940s and 1950s, it boasted a Chinese grocery-cum-haberdashery. Ours was called Hong Sing and was much respected for giving value for money." Thus, in the one district Chinese entered the collective memory in sharply different ways: as the victims of cruel horseplay and the respected providers of essential services.

The Chinese hawker also became the victim of jokes, pranks and even stone-throwing. A market-gardener called at *Joyce Robertson's* home once a week in the 1930s. Her grandfather dubbed him 'Ah Fat' because he was so skinny. One rhyme went: "Misse Lee, Want two pea, Turnee-up, and Lettu-see."<sup>24</sup> *Frank Valley* grew up in Albury before the war and used to swim across the Murray river to 'raid' the Chinese market-gardens in Victoria; watermelons were floated back to Albury. 'Raiding' was a matter of fun, spiced with the added sense of adventure, sneaking into the forbidden territory of the alien Chinese. Local kids taunted Mr King, the Chinese grocer: "No collee, Ni cabie, Sicky pen." One writer in the late 1920s affirmed: "The peanuts of Willy Ah Foo were not only remarkably tasty in themselves, but they were grown by a Chinaman, a Chink, a Chow, a Pong, and they were most legitimate plunder for little white boys."<sup>25</sup>

Other 'typical' Chinese had an ambivalent reputation. Chinese cooks on cattle stations were a longstanding part of the cultural landscape. They were seen variously as dependable, comical or treacherous. Mrs Aeneas Gunn's *We of the Never Never*, a factual account of her experiences on a remote homestead in the Northern Territory, was an influential source of images of Chinese, selling thousands of copies since its first publication in 1908. She describes two Chinese cooks, Sam Lee and Cheon, 'the jolliest old josser' (the last term derived, presumably, from josshouse). Cheon is portrayed throughout in clichéd terms. 'Rotund', 'jovial' and 'superstitious', he is forever 'chuckling', though prone to great anger when roused. He 'waddles' rather than walks. The 'fat, perspiring Chinaman' certainly does not inspire fear but remains amusing and lovable, his 'queer pidgin-English' ever a source of mirth. Motivated by simple, honest values, Cheon is the consummate faithful servant: "Cook and gardener forsooth. Cheon was Cheon, and only Cheon: and there is no word in the English language to define Cheon or the position he filled, simply because there was never another like Cheon."<sup>26</sup> Cheon remains a type, albeit a more positive one than other 'typical' Chinese. Gunn's characterization is sympathetic if patronising.<sup>27</sup> The alternative, negative

image remained with cartoons depicting a 'Chinaman' wielding a meat-cleaver. One afternoon *Frank Valley* watched Mr King, Albury's most famous Chinese grocer, chasing his son down the side of the shop with a fearsome meat-cleaver. The matter at dispute never became apparent. Watching from the sidelines, *Valley* and his friends were bemused and excited by this exotic squabble.

Many areas had reliable 'chow laundrymen', much respected for their skill with pressing fancy clothes. *Bruce Dobson* wrote: "I look back on my father who was a great Freemason and who always insisted that his dress shirt be laundered by the Chinese laundrymen at the Kew junction." Like market gardeners, laundrymen were immortalized in rhymes: "The wages of sin are death but the wages of Ah Sin the Chinese laundryman are four pence a shirt." The laundryman also became a figure shrouded in fear and mystery. *Eric Rosenberg*, who grew up in Malvern in the 1920s, recalls:

Down nearby Glenferrie Road was a Chinese laundry, and sometimes I was sent there with a small ticket with strange marks on it to pick up a table-cloth or some other item. In the dingy shop was a Chinese man with a thin hanging black moustache, skull cap and long black cloak. It was scary, as racist stories were common—about kidnapping and 'the white slave trade' (whatever that was).

*Robert Longford* can still sniff the pungent smell that seemed to emanate from the local Chinese laundry. He ventured inside on the errands as a boy in the mid-1930s, knocking on the shutter of a small window which shot up to reveal a wizened little 'Chinaman'. A messy room, especially one cluttered with washing, was likened to 'a Chinese laundry!' The tone of this expression was neutral, though it perpetuated the stereotype that 'Chinamen' were either market-gardeners or laundrymen.

Another common Chinese figure in Australian culture was the herbalist. For some people 'Chinese herbs' were considered a boon and their dispensers masters of a strange, but efficacious art of healing, tapping secrets closed to Europeans. Kylie Tennant presented a positive image of the traditional Chinese doctor in *Foveaux*, first published in 1939 and set in Sydney. "Well I fixed the sneezin'," Florrie responded, "Went to a herbulist . . . . He give me something that took it away. Wonderful them chinks are."<sup>28</sup> Like Park, Tennant went to great lengths to invoke the texture of pre-war urban life, living in slums and taking to the road during the depression. In *Poor Man's Orange*, Dolour Darcy visits the local Chinese herbalist, Sam Gooley (another humorous Chinese name), to cure her acne:

Sam Gooley had a shop in Coronation Street. In its windows were two jars, each containing a tapeworm of unprecedented length and adhesive power, four bottles with swollen bellies full of emerald liquid and very many tiny pottery trays containing powdered herbs. Every time she passed Sam Gooley's doorway a gush of hot pungent air whiffed out. It bore the fumes of concoctions that Sam Gooley was cooking over the charcoal stove in his cellar . . . .

The herbalist was enveloped in a fug of exotic smells, his shop adorned with a hundred jars "inscribed in red and black sabre characters." Despite this

<sup>28</sup> K. Tennant, *Foveaux* (Sydney: Sirius Publishing Co., 1946), p.63.

<sup>29</sup> Park, *Poor man's orange*, pp.74–81.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Hornadge, *Yellow peril*, p.48.

<sup>31</sup> Jupp, *Australian people*, pp.305–6, 309, 319.

somewhat disconcerting ambience, Gooley was credited by locals with curing indigestion, 'rheumatics' and cancer. He provides Dolour with "a pot of waxy black ointment" which clears her pimples.<sup>29</sup> Like Lick Jimmy, the herbalist is a positive character, woven into the humour and pathos of life in Surry Hills. However, all of Park's Chinese figures remain somewhat like cardboard cutouts, deployed in the background of the story to add a dash of intriguing other-worldliness. Lick and Gooley are not rounded personalities but stock, slightly comic, bit pieces. Other Australians rated herbalists quacks or necromancers; their profession was a sign either of primitive heathenism or of evil, unearthly powers. The second image clearly drew upon the Dr Fu Manchu model. Negative and positive reactions both tended to cast Chinese naturopaths as queer.

Chinese were frozen in the Australian imagination in timeless, set roles. Ron Saw, a Sydney journalist, spoke for many of his compatriots when he said: "I, for one, was brought up to think of Chinese as the ching-chong Chinaman who worked the vegetable gardens; comic coolies."<sup>30</sup> Folk sayings failed to reflect changes in the occupational structure of the Chinese community. Chinese employment in laundries and furniture-making peaked in Victoria in 1912–13; in New South Wales between 1900 and 1920 less than five per cent of laundry workers were Chinese. In 1901 fifty per cent of Chinese in Victoria and New South Wales were involved in the production and sale of fruit and vegetables; by 1966 this figure had dropped to only four per cent. In the post-war period, pressure from new European immigrants pushed many Chinese out of market-gardening while more highly organized capital moved into furniture-making. Some Chinese returned to China while others turned to running cafes and restaurants, a trend which accelerated in the 1950s and 1960s as the economy boomed.<sup>31</sup> Although Chinese were dispersed in a wide variety of occupations, the stereotypes were so embedded that Italian market-gardeners in Werribee in the 1950s were known as 'chows' because they were 'foreigners'.

Chinese resourcefulness was far from universally appreciated. Their capacity for hard work reaffirmed old conceptions of Chinese as 'coolies' and scabs who were prepared to work for low wages and undercut native Australian workers. It was often said, with a mixture of admiration and contempt, that somebody could 'work like a Chinaman'. Some Europeans denounced Chinese as Sabbath-breakers because they worked on Sundays. As a child in the 1930s, *Mary O'Neill* eagerly awaited the old Chinese hawker who tilled a small plot in Abbotsford and called at her family home on Saturday afternoons, giving fresh peas in the pod to children. Although her mother liked Chinese, other locals resented the 'chows', saying that they could sell their fruit and vegetables so cheaply because "they paid people nothing, and worked their families all day long." Given that most Chinese were single, this charge would seem to have been based upon prejudice and envy.

Food was a key source of popular images. Chinese cafes spread throughout Australia during the 1940s and 1950s, serving a Westernized

**Figure 3**

*The well-known cartoonist Paul Rigby sketched this scene of mass work in China in the late 1950s. Australians had been conditioned for many years to perceive Chinese as 'coolies' capable of almost inhuman amounts of work. This traditional theme here acquires a more overtly political dimension. (Kirwan Ward and Paul Rigby, Willow pattern walkabout [Perth: Daily News, 1959], p.61)*

form of Chinese food such as 'short soup, duck and fowl', fried rice, chop suey and chow mein, enriching the often bland Australian diet. Hot spices and unusual oils were left out and knives and forks replaced chopsticks. One source claims that Australian familiarity with Chinese food increased during the Second World War.<sup>32</sup> The writer Dymphna Cusack learnt to use chopsticks and appreciate Chinese food at a Campbell Street restaurant in Sydney.<sup>33</sup> *Alice Drakeford* found the Chinese take-away in the shopping centre in Rosanna, Melbourne, exciting. Next door to the Blue Hills milk-bar, a Chinese cafe was a welcome break in the post-war routine, with its bold, unfamiliar ideographs on the shop-front. *Jack Simpson* eagerly awaited a Chinese hawker selling dim-sims in St Kilda in the 1950s.

Chinese eating habits, real and alleged, were often regarded with suspicion, however. Anecdotes have long abounded concerning Chinese barbecuing dogs and eating rats. They have been called 'rat-eaters'. Sam Gooley, the herbalist in *Poor Man's Orange*, made a famous stew, "the chief ingredient of which was, according to neighbourhood gossip, the humble puppy." Dolour speculates that his potions are composed of "slugs and snails and puppy-dog tails."<sup>34</sup> Australians in the 1940s called Chinese food 'chow miaow', a pun which referred to the widespread belief that Chinese ate cats.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.306.

<sup>33</sup> D. Cusack, *Chinese women speak* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1958), p.3.

<sup>34</sup> Park, *Poor man's orange*, pp.74-8.



**Figure 4**

*Contrasting attitudes towards food reinforce a sense of cultural difference, even incompatibility. The real and alleged Chinese cravings for 'odd' types of food often formed the basis for Australian humour, as in this cartoon by Paul Rigby. The caption read: "You like more hundred-year-old egg and toasted cockroach, Comrade?" (Ward and Rigby, Willow pattern walkabout, p.52)*



People were urged to watch their pets lest they be kidnapped by the 'chows' for their weird food. A nineteenth-century bush story told of a 'Johnny' who used a litter of puppies to make a delicious pie; from this yarn came the expression, "No more puppy, no more pie."<sup>35</sup> Curiously, a certain breed of Chinese dog is called the chow. Though in some parts of China dog has long been considered a delicacy, even an aphrodisiac, conceptions of what is 'edible' vary from one culture to another, and Australians perceived dog-eating as barbaric. *Fred Reynolds* remembers that a famous Chinese restaurant in Melbourne was prosecuted in the 1940s for using cats instead of rabbits and poultry. Despite this, he liked Chinese food, but mates would often say, "Jesus, you must like eating cats." Some people would say that a meal "looks like a Chinese breakfast," messy, strange or inadequate, like a 'dog's breakfast'. Much like the smell of a particular place, eating

habits affect people at a very basic level.

For many Australians, 'chows' were filthy and riddled with disease. Chinese were blamed in the nineteenth century for spreading leprosy, smallpox and bubonic plague. *The Bulletin* decried Chinese in 1888 as "a slant-eyed race of lepers."<sup>36</sup> In the 1890s, public alarm about the spread of leprosy peaked. "Whites were wary," the historian Kathryn Cronin writes, "of living near the Chinese quarter or eating Chinese-grown vegetables for fear of infection."<sup>37</sup> The *Australian Republican* warned people of "the leprous breeding bread" of Chinese bakers.<sup>38</sup> The leprosy scare left enduring scars. Well into our period cabbages were commonly called 'chow' or 'leprosy'.<sup>39</sup> Peter Curson, a leading commentator on the history of disease, maintains that Chinese

**Figure 5**

*Chinese were blamed for spreading various vices and diseases through the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century. They became a scapegoat for various social calamities (Bulletin, 16 July 1881)*





residents were not responsible for smallpox and plague epidemics.<sup>40</sup> Although leprosy was most probably introduced to Australia by unwitting Chinese immigrants,<sup>41</sup> popular fear outpaced and transformed epidemiological fact. Disease was seen as an inherent Chinese trait and fear of contagion brought various generalized anxieties about foreigners to the surface. Mothers admonished children before eating food: “You must wash that extra well because you don’t know if a Chinaman’s touched it.”

Parents warned: “Take that coin out of your mouth—you don’t know if it’s been in a dirty Chinaman’s ear.” Perhaps this phrase arose because people during the gold rush believed that Chinese concealed gold about their person. This saying was very common but varies slightly; sometimes it is a ‘Chinaman’s pocket’ rather than an ear. *George Hooton* eagerly awaited the shiny penny that appeared each year in his Christmas stocking in the 1940s. He wondered if a ‘Chinaman’ had been sucking the coin. *Mark Jensen* was told in the 1930s by his grandfather, who had lived in Clunes, New South Wales, “Don’t lick that coin, it was in a dead Chinaman’s mouth.” It was commonly believed that Chinese were buried with money in between their teeth. This version of the admonition may have some basis in fact, for in some parts of China the placing of coins in the mouth of a corpse was a common funeral practice. However, any grounding in actuality had been distorted; the phrase had merely become another rendering of the widespread belief that the ‘chows’ were ‘dirty coolies’. It also implied that money was removed from corpses, even graves, and put back into circulation. *Mary Campbell* was admonished by her mother in the 1950s not to lick coins because they might have been “pissed on by a Chinaman.” She still uses the same expression to warn her own daughter.

Perhaps it is at the gut level that the most instinctive boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is felt and enforced. Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, argues that the most basic symbols of self are based on bodily functions.<sup>42</sup> In the playground youngsters claimed that chewing-gum was made from the “toenails of Chinamen.” It was said that certain drunks were so desperate for grog that they would “drink out of a Chinaman’s boot.” Such sayings were based on the most basic sense of physical repulsion. As a young boy in the 1940s *James Howard* burnt leaves at the bottom of his family’s garden. As thick black smoke belched out of the incinerator, a neighbour lent over the back fence and said, “God, what are you burning in there, a Chinaman?”

Chinese were acceptable so long as physical separateness was maintained. *Susan Reynolds* ventured into the forbidden zone of Melbourne’s Chinatown as a teenager in the early 1940s, visiting a ‘notorious’ Chinese cafe in Celestial Lane. Her parents were shocked when they found out where she had been: “It was no place for a girl of sixteen to be in a Chinese restaurant in Little Bourke Street.” Chopsticks and communal eating habits seemed bizarre and unhealthy. Chinese picked their noses, spat a lot and carried, she had been told, diseases such as tuberculosis. Indeed, the possession of only one effective lung was called ‘Chinese consumption’, a pun on the supposed

<sup>35</sup> Homadge, *Yellow peril*, p.36.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in the *Age*, 3 September 1988.

<sup>37</sup> R. Evans, K. Saunders, and K. Cronin, *Exclusion, exploitation and extermination: race relations in colonial Queensland* (Sydney: ANZ Book Company, 1975), p.303.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.336.

<sup>39</sup> Baker, *Australian language*, 2nd ed., p.84.

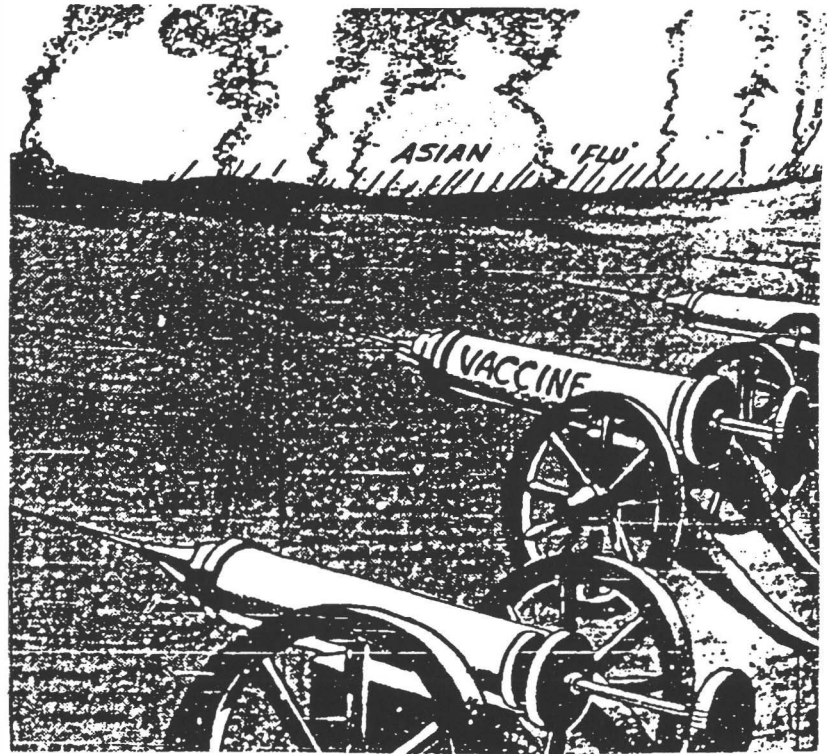
<sup>40</sup> P.H. Curson, *Times of crisis: epidemics in Sydney 1788–1900* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1985).

<sup>41</sup> J. Goldsmid, *The deadly legacy: Australian history and transmissible disease* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1988), p.43.

<sup>42</sup> M. Douglas, *Natural symbols: explorations in cosmology* (New York, Pantheon, 1982), p.vii.

**Figure 6**

Although it was a mild condition which caused very few deaths in Australia, many people feared the 'Asian flu' epidemic in 1957 would swamp the community. Also known as the 'Chinese', 'Singapore' or 'Hong Kong' flu, the influenza outbreak exposed deeply embedded ways of seeing Asians and disease in Australia. (Melbourne Sun, 11 July 1957; courtesy of the Herald-Sun)



<sup>43</sup> Partridge, *Dictionary of slang*, p.88.

<sup>44</sup> F. Clune, *Flight to Formosa* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1958), p.24.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Beale contends that 'Ab Shit' could just be a rendering of a Cantonese name, but *Hoo Flung Dung* has always been impossible: no native speaker of Chinese could manage the combined consonants *fl-*. Partridge, *Catch phrases*, p.163.

Chinese name, *Wun Bung Lung*. The link between pestilence and aliens was preserved in Australia by the unique double meaning of 'wog' for both foreigners and germs or illness. In the Second World War, soldiers in the East called a particular foot complaint 'chinky toe-rot'.<sup>43</sup> Germophobic idiom was part of the cultural baggage which Australian travellers took to Asia. During a visit to Hong Kong in 1958, Clune was besieged by Chinese shoe-shine boys; they got to work on his shoes before he could say, "You dirty little cows," a none too subtle play on a host of popular sayings about Chinese.<sup>44</sup> Writing in a deliberately ocker style, Clune was one of Australia's best-selling writers for decades.

Chinese were associated with excrement. Pollution and defilement beliefs play a fundamental part in ordering a sense of the world. When the night-can needed to be emptied, Australians exclaimed that it was time to 'bury the Chinaman'. Chinese hawkers were taunted with names like 'Hoo Flung Dung' and 'Ah Shit'.<sup>45</sup> Schoolyard rhymes revealed a fascination with both excreta and Chinese:

Ching-chong Chinaman went to milk a cow,  
Ching-chong Chinaman didn't know how,  
Ching-chong Chinaman pulled the wrong tit,  
Ching-chong Chinaman was covered in shit.

The writer Tom Hungerford lived in Perth before the war. His short story "Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox" evokes the mixture of affectionate, whimsical familiarity and fear which surrounded the local Chinese. Like Park, he has a keen eye for the rhythms of everyday dialogue. "When we were kids we used to tell each other: 'Don't eat the cabbages from Wong Chu's. They piddle on them to make them grow!'"<sup>46</sup> *Jane Patterson*, who grew up in Western Australia, was told never to eat the 'Chinamen's vegies' because they had been covered in shit. Some insisted, "Never eat chow take-away, you'll catch typhoid." Medical common-sense became the basis for perpetuating bigotry. Chinese market-gardeners did use human faeces as a fertilizer, but the incidence of water-borne diseases such as typhoid in the nineteenth century was due to pervasive faecal contamination and generally poor sanitary conditions such as open drains and cess-pits. Public health improved with the installation of good sewage and drainage systems. Typhoid thrives in nutrient-rich meat and milk rather than vegetables. Nevertheless, decades later, Chinese were still stigmatized as the source of typhoid. As James Jupp emphasizes, Chinese, on the contrary, helped to advance the health of Australians by providing fresh vegetables.<sup>47</sup>

Life was 'cheap' for China's 'teeming millions'. Sermons and special collections at church reminded Australians of the terrible plight of China. Recalcitrant children were threatened with banishment to China; unfinished dinners met with the refrain: "Think of the starving millions in China." It was commonly said that Asians could live off 'the smell of an oil-rag'. Although not applied solely to Chinese, this expression assumed a particularly strong note of disgust and fear when it was used for 'Asiatics'. On the eve of his retirement from Parliament in 1972 and at a time when Asian immigration was being debated, Arthur Calwell insisted that Asians "lived on the smell of an oily rag and bred like flies."<sup>48</sup>

Chinese were immortalized as a pest in the popular names of plants such as 'Chinese burrs' and 'Chinese scrub'. By virtue of their vigorous seeding and growth, these plants were often regarded as weeds. In 1900 *The Bulletin* remarked: "The Chinese burr in Cairns district (North Queensland) is densely thick . . . . The Chow always leaves this legacy behind him when he quits leased land. It is supposed to have been brought from China in packing." Some writers claim that 'Chinese scrub' was derived from the fact that Chinese gold-miners used the leaves of the plant to brew a kind of tea. Others assert that it originated in the Chinese practice of using the weed to thatch the rooves of dwellings. China grass is a strong fibre used in the making of grass cloth. Chinese burr, according to botanical authorities, is not a native of China and Chinese were in no way responsible for its introduction or dissemination.<sup>49</sup>

While some clichés upheld notions of the 'pestilential Chinks', others preserved the stereotype of the 'mad Chinaman'. Irrational, crazed anger could be identified with Asians. Suddenly, quite inexplicably, the visage of almost unearthly Oriental calm was shattered by frightening fury. So ran the

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in A. Broinowski, "Passage to Asia: sketching in the background," in *Asian influences in Australian literature*, symposium held at the State Library of NSW, 1988, p.12.

<sup>47</sup> J. Jupp, "Two hundred years of immigration," in *The health of immigrant Australia: a social perspective*, ed. J. Reid and P. Trompf (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), p.7.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in the *Age*, 3 May 1972.

<sup>49</sup> Ramson, *Australian national dictionary*, p.143.

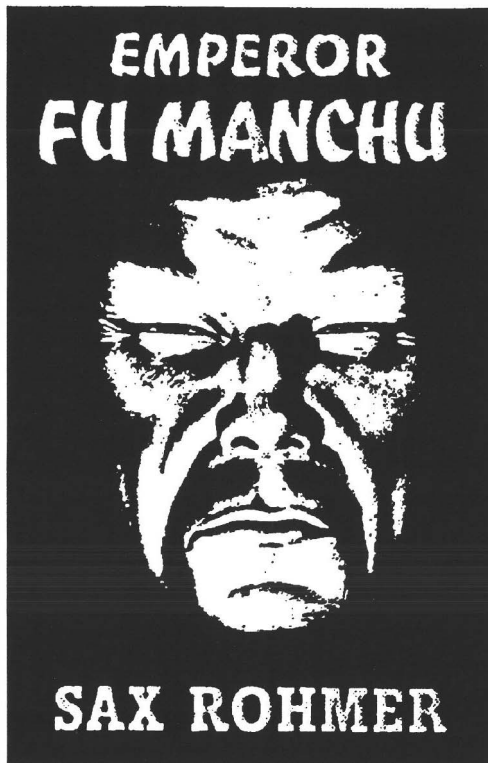
<sup>50</sup> Quoted in R. Evans, "Keeping Australia clean white," in *A most valuable acquisition: a people's history of Australia since 1788*, ed. V. Burgmann and J. Lee (Fitzroy, Vic.: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988), p.170.

<sup>51</sup> H. Isaacs, *Scratches on our minds: American images of China and India* (New York: John Day, 1958), p.102.

<sup>52</sup> A. Vickers, "Kipling goes south: Australian novels and South East Asia 1895–1945," *Australian perceptions of Asia, Australian cultural history* 9 (1990), p.68.

### Figure 7

*Doctor Fu Manchu represented the archetypal Chinese super-criminal, a figure of fiendish plots and diabolical tortures. His drooping moustache was a stereotypical Chinese trait and apparently revealed his evil intentions. (Cover of the book published by Herbert Jenkins Ltd reproduced in Raymond Dawson, The Chinese chameleon: an analysis of European conceptions of Chinese civilisation [London: Oxford University Press, 1967], facing p.153)*



myth. Derived from Malayan, 'running amuck' was used to describe a 'native' who had burst into a vicious, frenzied fit of blood-lust. In Australian idiom, an extremely angry, frenzied person was said to be 'as mad as a Chinaman'. This image was reiterated in numerous forms. In 1919 the press reported that a young Chinese 'ran amok' in Surry Hills with a firearm, wounding seventeen bystanders before being slain by a fearless European. The historian Raymond Evans argues that no attempt was made to understand the motives and actions of the perpetrator. Rather, the episode sated the public appetite for sensational tales of blood and 'foreigners'. Explanation was unnecessary for the tale spoke to widespread perceptions; everyone knew that Orientals were prone to such outbursts, it was part of their nature. As one reporter put it, "death laid a restraining hand on the mad Chinaman."<sup>50</sup> Popular medical jargon sometimes reinforced these myths. Certain retarded children have long been called 'Mongoloid', a term adopted by a doctor in 1866 because he saw 'Oriental' characteristics in their faces.<sup>51</sup>

A widespread belief in the 'cruel' nature of Chinese was perpetuated by numerous sayings. In the school playground children would be threatened with 'Chinese burns'. Chinese were immortalized as masters of exquisite forms of pain—the 'Chinese water torture', the death of a thousand cuts ('slicing execution'), and inserting bamboo-shoots under fingernails. They were also portrayed as practitioners of strange, oriental martial arts, killing people with a single blow, leaving not a bruise. Doctor Fu Manchu, the creation of Sax Rohmer, an Englishman, haunted whites in a string of popular novels and movies, sustaining this vision of the nefarious, callous 'Chinaman'. Guy Boothby (1867–1905), an Australian novelist, created in a series of detective yarns an Asian supervillain, Dr Nikola, the prototype of Rohmer's Dr Fu Manchu.<sup>52</sup> Charlie Chan, the Chinese Hollywood detective, was a much more positive Chinese character. The Chinese writer Lu Xun was a devotee of the Charlie Chan films and once contended that Chan (played by a Swede) was "more Chinese than the Chinese."<sup>53</sup> Fu Manchu found his feminine counterpart in Empress Wu or the Dragon Lady. The writer George Johnston was a correspondent in China during the Second World War. Living in Chongqing, the Nationalists' wartime capital in Sichuan, he remembered "curious childhood phobias":

When I was a child in Melbourne I was terrified of Chinese. They were evil, sinister figures slinking down dark alleys in Hollywood films with long knives concealed beneath their baggy sleeves. They were debauched assassins enticing innocent and beautiful white girls into horrible opium dens. They were silent black shadows moving through the eerie moonlight on errands as black as the eyeless caverns of the doorways. On the few occasions when I had to go down Little Bourke Street ... I would run with thumping heart and terror in my eyes.<sup>54</sup>

Johnston's account, told with colour and verve, tapped archetypal symbols. Despite their lurid reputation as inveterate criminals, Chinese in Australia during the nineteenth century had a lower conviction rate for serious crimes than Europeans.<sup>55</sup> The widespread association of Chinese with drugs has been preserved in names of heroin—'Chinese H', 'Chinese rocks', 'Chinese number three' and 'Chinese white'.

Popular mythology constructed Chinese as malevolent outsiders; they haunted the worlds of many children. Naughty children were threatened with being 'fed (or given) to the Chinaman'. *Debbie Edwards*, who lived in Paddington, Sydney, in the late 1940s, was warned constantly by her mother that "the Chinaman will get you if you don't behave." At this time Chinese hawkers still plied their wares in the Paddington area. In a short story published in 1962 under the pseudonym 'Rocky Mick', a Chinese market-gardener sets a trap for a young thief. Planting a decoy in the middle of his field, Wing Lee, 'the cunning Chinaman', ambushes the culprit. A chase ensues with Wing Lee brandishing 'a huge knife', and the boy is only saved by the 'fearless' Mrs Millar. Armed with a broom, she declares, "Go back to your garden, Wing, or else I'll call my husband from the slaughter yard."<sup>56</sup> *Anne Fitzpatrick*, who grew up in Sydney in the 1950s, was told by her father, "don't go outside the gate or Mr Fu will get you." The evil Chinese doctor epitomized the lurid representation of the Chinese criminal. He became a useful weapon in a parent's armoury in the battle to exact good behaviour from their children. One can imagine that these admonitions had a rather unnerving impact, accentuating the child's fear of strangers. Dolour Darcy found Sam Gooley's house creepy: "It was the sort of place where Fu Manchu might have lived." Once inside, her fears are dispelled by the ordinariness and kindness of Gooley and his family.<sup>57</sup> The 'Chinaman' may simply have been a colourful substitute for the bogeyman. The exotic nature of Chinese, with their distinctive appearance, odd clothes and unfamiliar customs, made them seem scary. However, the cruel 'Chinaman' was a stock character in popular folklore, constantly revived by various sayings.

Luck was another facet of popular images of the exotic 'Chinaman'. Chinese were enveloped in a cloud of mystery born of unfamiliarity. It was said that a person would have good luck if he could 'touch a Chinaman'. *Andrew Westwood* remembers playing a game as a child in the 1940s which involved running around the horse and cart of a Chinese hawker a certain number of times for good luck. In a gambling hall, sitting next to a 'Chinaman' was supposed to bring big winnings. Many people recall stories about Chinese laundrymen selling 'pakapoo' tickets, which resembled Tattsлото. Uncanny, infallible or habitual good fortune was frequently named 'a Chinaman's luck', perhaps indicating that the luck was in some way ill-earned or unnatural. Undoubtedly this expression derived from colonial times when Chinese miners were resented for their perseverance in finding gold in apparently worked-out diggings. Perhaps it also reflected European reactions to the apparent Chinese passion for gambling.

<sup>53</sup> G. Barné, "An icecream for the eyes, the sofa for the soul: Lu Xun and the movies," unpublished article.

<sup>54</sup> G. Johnston, *Journey through tomorrow* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1948), pp.111–12.

<sup>55</sup> E.M. Andrews, *Australia and China: the ambiguous relationship* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1985), p.21.

<sup>56</sup> Australian Meat Industry Employees Union, *Meat employees journal*, Sept.–Oct. 1962, p.43.

<sup>57</sup> Park, *Poor man's orange*, p.79.

<sup>58</sup> Homadge, *Yellow peril*, p.72.

<sup>59</sup> Baker, *Australian language*, 2nd ed., p.230.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Broinowski, *Yellow lady*, p.30.

Chinese success aroused jealousy, leading some to contend that Chinese were greedy or thieving. An old goldfields saying held that Chinese were “the cleverest gold thieves in the game.” The local scrooge was “meaner than a goldfield Chinaman and sharper than a sewer rat.”<sup>58</sup> This expression had some basis in actual practice. Especially before the Pacific War, most Chinese in Australia were temporary economic sojourners, saving every penny before returning to China. However, in the popular Australian lexicon, thrifty became mean and thieving. Unlike frugality, meanness suggests greed and attracts opprobrium. Well into the twentieth century, Chinese have been called ‘the Jews of the East’ on account of their apparent ability to create wealth and their alleged miserliness. Just like the stereotype of the rapacious Jew, the caricature of the mean ‘Chinaman’ generated rejection and hostility rather than acceptance and admiration. A ‘Chinaman’s shout’ in a pub was no shout at all. (Every time an Australian term is qualified by the name of a nationality it takes on invidious connotations compared to the Australian original.)<sup>59</sup> Tales concerning Chinese frugality were passed down through the generations. *Franklin* remembers:

My grandmother, who was born on the goldfields at Eaglehawk, had a yarn she used to tell about a Chinese who was gradually stowing his gold in the mud walls of his hut, and one night he returned tired from a gambling den to find that someone had destroyed the walls of his house and stolen all his gold.

This family anecdote could have been a rendition of Edward Dyson’s famous goldfields short story, “A Golden Shanty” (1890), in which Chinese pinch the gold-bearing bricks of a pub. Michael Doyle, an Irish-Australian publican, and his “strongly anti-Chinese” mongrel dog chase off the “thavin’ hathins.” Dyson was from Ballarat and perhaps based his story upon local gossip, and in turn, his literary work could have become part of local folklore; certainly “A Golden Shanty” is often reproduced in anthologies. *Joan Williams* recalls the rumour that circulated in Darwin in the 1950s and 1960s about a local Chinese grocer who burnt down his store every ten years to claim the insurance pay-out. Chinese good fortune was frequently linked to illicit or deceptive activities.

Conversely, bad luck was greeted with the exclamation: “I must have killed a Chinaman.” A run of rotten luck met with the cry: “God, I must have killed the whole bloody Chinese nation.” The writer Charmian Clift recalled the superstitious saying: “You must have crossed a Chinaman.”<sup>60</sup> Likewise, if a building were plagued with problems, one would lament: “You’d think this place was build on a Chinaman’s grave.” An old Chinese geomantic theory maintains that a harmonious relationship between human beings and their surroundings is determined by geomancy, or *fung-shui*—literally ‘wind and water’. Ill-fortune befalls anyone who builds on a grave. This Chinese superstition was possibly picked up by Europeans and then recast in the context of other derogatory expressions. Repeated through the years, the phrase would have lost any connection with Chinese belief. In line with the longstanding association of the Orient with the occult, Chinese were seen as

the source of bizarre curses and jinxes. Perhaps these expressions date back to gold-field lynchings when it was supposed, half seriously, that Chinese victims would wreak revenge from the grave. Australian children have long chanted, while walking along a footpath, "step on a crack, break a Chinaman's back." In another linguistic twist, if somebody was in dire trouble, it was declared that he "hadn't got a Chinaman's chance," a locution brought by American miners to Australia during the gold rushes. It may be argued that the phrase 'to kill a Chinaman' is similar to other superstitions such as cracking a mirror or walking under a ladder. However, there is a clear pattern of sayings which stress a central theme: the strangeness of the Chinese. It is the internal consistency of these sayings which leads one to conclude that 'to kill a Chinaman' is not just another quaint, superstitious expression. The penalty for failure would be 'a long walk to China'.

Aphorisms concerning Oriental inscrutability were legion. Pictured either as a scholarly mandarin with a long wispy beard, clad in flowing robes, or as an enigmatic Buddha, the figure of the Great Sage invested Chinese with a strange wisdom. Many proverbs were introduced with the phrase, "Confucius say . . ." Of course, this image of Confucius was lampooned as much as it was taken seriously. It was often said that you could not tell what a 'Chinaman' was thinking—a belief which reflected the difficulty of interpreting the gestures and facial expressions of those of another culture. Folk myths of this kind were at odds with the conviction that Chinese were an honest people. Sam Lee, the first cook in Gunn's *We of the Never Never*, is repeatedly described as "bland," "inscrutable," and "celestial"; his ever-present smile cloaks cryptic thoughts.<sup>61</sup> Locals could not read Lick Jimmy's "strange inscrutable expression"; his face was a "tranquil pale yellow mask." Dolour was bemused by Jimmy's abacus: "Then she realized that Jimmy thought in Chinese, and heaven alone knew what queer hieroglyphics the beads stood for."<sup>62</sup> This general ambience of exotica was implicit in the old expression: "I'd like to take a slow boat to China."<sup>63</sup> Old Cathay was a place shrouded in adventure and romanticism on the other side of the world which could be reached if you "dug straight down through the centre of the earth."

Australians sitting around a table played a game called 'Chinese whispers' in which one person whispered a story to his or her neighbour who in turn passed the tale to the next person, and so on, until the story returned to the original teller, almost invariably distorted. Thus, the supposed Chinese habit of spreading rumours lived on from generation to generation of Australians in a game. Chinese were associated with unintelligible ways of thinking. China was known as a land of great politeness but equally great hypocrisy; appearances were always deceptive. A 'Chinese compliment' was "a pretended deference to, and interest in, the opinion of another when actually one has fully made up one's mind."<sup>64</sup>

Probably derived from America, a 'Chinese deal' was a pretended deal or an agreement that never materialized. A 'Chinese parliament' was a cover-up or a form of collusion in which a group of people reach a decision with

<sup>61</sup> Gunn, *We of the never never*, pp.50–2, 56.

<sup>62</sup> Park, *Harp in the south*, pp.11–15.

<sup>63</sup> This phrase was popularized by Frank Loesser's hit song of 1948. The first two lines were, "I'd like to get you on a slow boat to China, All to myself alone." Partridge, *Catch phrases*, p.150.

<sup>64</sup> E. Partridge, *The Penguin dictionary of historicalslang* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p.175.

<sup>65</sup> Johansen, *Aussie English*, p.65.

<sup>66</sup> Partridge, *Dictionary of slang*, p.87.

no single individual accepting responsibility. Perhaps this saying reflected the confusion, democratic irregularities and corruption of Chinese politics in the mid-twentieth century. *Fred Reynolds* claims that it was a common joke to mispronounce Chiang Kai-shek's name as Cash-My-Cheque, presumably referring to Nationalist graft. Chinese in Australia were tauntingly called this name. A 'Chinese attack' involved much noise and activity to delude the enemy into thinking that an assault was imminent in one spot, thus deflecting attention from the real site of the assault. More generally, a 'Chinese attack' became known as a fake attack. While apt commentaries on the state of China in the 1920s to 1940s, these phrases tended to become detached over time from any specific reference point. They were used in the vernacular without any awareness of their original application and tended to become statements concerning allegedly intrinsic Chinese qualities. In a similar vein, unseen, enigmatic barriers and rules were dubbed 'Chinese walls', invoking the supposed impenetrability of the Great Wall of China. This term is also used to describe the partitions, sometimes physical though usually conceptual, between the different departments of a financial organization.

A 'Chinese puzzle' is a very complicated puzzle, especially a series of boxes inside boxes. Sometimes it is taken to mean a puzzle without a solution. More generally, in the Australian lexicon a 'Chinese puzzle' is "anything difficult, tricky or complicated."<sup>65</sup> This particular phrase often returned to its source when the situation in China was cast as a 'Chinese puzzle'—a typically bizarre, inscrutable Chinese state of affairs beyond the understanding of Australians. China is like a maze. The image of sly Chinese even entered cricket terminology. A 'Chinaman' is a left-hand bowler's googly, spinning to a right-handed batsman from off to leg. This expression might be derived from the impression that the Chinese script seems back-to-front, moving from right to left; alternatively, it may be based upon the general perception that Chinese are, simply, devious. A snick through the slips is sometimes called a 'Chinese drive'.<sup>66</sup> Conceivably, it is seen as a sneaky, perverse way of scoring runs.

Other sayings constructed Chinese as sexually perverse or illicit. Perhaps the most persistent and ugly example of sexual language was the belief that the vaginas of Chinese women were lateral rather than vertical. This contention mixed racism with misogyny and frequently took the form of sayings such as: "You know what they say about Chinese women." It articulated the old notion that China was an upside-down land where all normality, including human anatomy, was reversed, even mutilated. Surely, Chinese women could perform outlandish erotic tricks. *William Franklin*, a veteran of the 8th Division, maintains that this reference was "widespread amongst Australian soldiers and certainly the greatest source of barrackroom humour in Malaya when men returned from leave." Most people did not, of course, actually believe that the labia of Chinese women were lateral. Rather, this folk myth articulated a general conviction that 'chinks' were weird and repellent. Various jokes have evolved around the



**Figure 8**

*Chinese women were the object of fascination for many Australian men, who found the cheongsam especially alluring. Paul Rigby believed that Western men in the 1950s faced a choice between two different types of Chinese women: petite, sophisticated Hong Kongese, or the lumpish, mannish comrades of People's China. (Ward and Rigby, Willow pattern walkabout, p.81)*

allegedly deviant make-up of Chinese women. A common witticism alleged that Chinese double beds were cross-shaped. Sexual intercourse 'Chinese fashion' was, purportedly, performed with the partners lying on their sides, and apparently became a widespread saying amongst troops in the Pacific War. Men teased each other about 'fancying a bit of sideways'. Though they have also been passed on by women, these expressions have a distinctly male ring. 'Foreign' women may have been seen as both alluring and off-putting; fear and resentment, mingled with repressed desire, were submerged in nasty gibes. Humour of this kind was a vital part of male bonding in barracks, pub and change-room. Perhaps smutty references to the 'sideways' anatomy of Chinese women were another echo of 'slanting' Asian eyes or the apparent back-to-front style of Chinese writing.<sup>67</sup> If a person had been extraordinarily lucky *or* unlucky it was said they had been "fucked by a Chinaman." The origin of this saying seems obscure though it is interesting to note the convergence of two common images of Chinese, uncanny luck and the exotic character of cross-cultural sexual encounters. Perhaps the very crossing of normally strict sexual prohibitions implied something unusual or fluky.

The themes of sexuality and dirt overlapped. A particularly smelly, dirty room was called a 'Chinese brothel', thus invoking connotations of illicit, unclean sex. Sometimes it was said that a filthy room looked like a 'Chinese josshouse'. This version invoked all those images of messy, strange Chinese religions, of temples with idols, incense and garish colours.<sup>68</sup> However, it was more common for people to say that a slovenly room "looks like a Chinese brothel on a Sunday morning." Presumably, the implication here was that a 'Chinese brothel' would be particularly chaotic and grubby after a busy Saturday night. Given the extremely small number of Chinese women in Australia until well into the twentieth century, this saying possibly alludes to brothels run by or frequented by Chinese men. More probably, it refers to bordellos visited by Australian troops in Malaya and Singapore in 1941. Using this phrase frequently met with the sniggering come-back: "How do you know what a Chinese brothel looks like?"

<sup>67</sup> Partridge, *Catch phrases*, p.340. Transverse engines were sometimes called 'Chinese engines'.

<sup>68</sup> About forty-five josshouses were built in Australia; few remain (Broinowski, *Yellow lady*, p.26). The word *joss* was derived from *deos*, Portuguese for 'God'. As a child in Queensland, the historian Russel Ward burnt 'joss sticks', made of horse-dung, to ward off mosquitoes (R. Ward, *A radical life* [Melbourne: Macmillan, 1988], p.4).

<sup>69</sup> Park, *Poor man's orange*, p.82.

### Figure 9

*The old image of Chinese men molesting white women persisted. Note the stereotypical Chinese clothes—cap, pants and slippers. The caption read: "I say, Blogsworthby, are they members?" (Sydney Sunday Mirror, 9 May 1971)*



Chinese men were often portrayed as the despoilers of virginal white girls. Hughie explodes when he finds out that Dolour went to see the Chinese herbalist: "Walking into a den of Chinks as though you owned the place. Wonder you didn't get raped, and serve you right if you were."<sup>69</sup> Stories were common concerning the dreadful 'white slave trade', where innocent European maidens were kidnapped to satisfy the sexual whims of Chinese men. White prostitutes allegedly frequented Chinatowns. Curiously, when compared with the presumed virility of Europeans, Chinese were said to have small, inadequate penises. Puns revealed this intrigue with the genitalia of Chinese: "What do you call a man with one ball?" "Wun Hung Lo." Just prior to the war *Frank Valley* slid down a wooden clothes-line prop at a children's party. For some years he sported a swollen right testicle and his mates in the change-room at the Albury baths would call him Wun Bung Lung. When the hernia was operated on after the war, the testicle would sag in hot weather. *Frank Valley* became Wun Hung Lo. Chinese were also charged with indulging in unnatural sex; sodomy was known as the 'Chinese vice'. A young source claims that kids currently cry: "Wongs are chicken-fuckers," thus associating Chinese with the perversion of bestiality. Maybe this expression was indirectly based on more general beliefs. Since the nineteenth century some Westerners have accused Chinese of committing buggery with fowl, possibly because the Chinese term for sodomy, *jijian* 雞姦, means literally 'chicken-intercourse'.

All of these sexual sayings were indicative of deep-seated anxieties. It was widely believed that intermarriage with Chinese led inevitably to miscegenation, a general decline in the racial stock of Europeans. Notions of purity of blood were mixed with sexual prejudices. Many Australians dreaded the formation of a 'mongrel' society. *Susan Reynolds* recounts a warning prevalent in the 1940s; it was said that if a white person had children with a Chinese, the genetic stain of the East would be present, like a curse, for six to eight generations. Even if subsequent unions in the family were solely with Europeans, a distant descendant could suddenly be visited with a 'strange, funny-looking' child. Chinese could be accepted as market-gardeners, laundrymen, restaurateurs, and even as successful businessmen. Intermarriage, however, was a boundary which most white Australians refused to cross; it entailed a degree of physical and social intimacy which most would have found threatening.

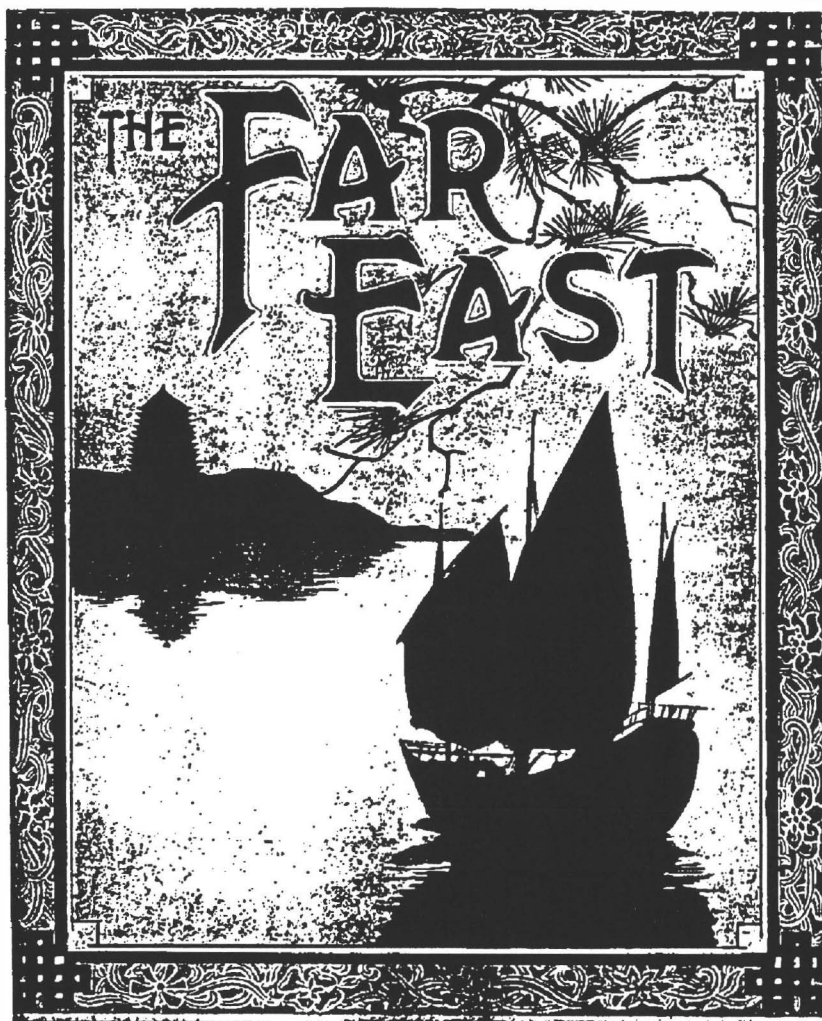
In contrast to this multi-layered hostile iconography, a more positive folk memory of Chinese was maintained by images of beauty, craftsmanship and delicacy. A certain type of Australian caterpillar was known as a 'Chinese junk' because of its resemblance to the famous, elegant boats of the East. Similarly, a type of fungi was popularly called 'Chinaman's hat'. The cult of Chinoiserie entailed collecting Chinese wares of various sorts. Chinese decor, clothes and make-up conjured up visions of a sophisticated people. Chinaware, especially translucent eggshell china, was highly sought after, promoting, as it did, an image of refinement. Chinese lace, silk and embroidery were prized objects and China-dolls adorned bedrooms. Many homes

contained various objects made in Old Cathay. Dymphna Cusack wrote:

<sup>70</sup> Cusack, *Chinese women*, p.3.

My earliest memories recall my mother's bamboo fan, the tea-chest with Chinese characters, the calendar from the Chinese drapers with the very mountains I had seen from the plane. Presents from sea-going friends who travelled up and down the Pacific—kingfisher-feather brooches, red-lacquer boxes, cloisonne vases with multi-coloured dragons, exquisitely embroidered silk underwear, all, for me, tainted by the tales of abysmal poverty and misery and human abasement.<sup>70</sup>

Chinese plants such as the azalea, hibiscus, wisteria and peony invoked the artful Chinese garden, a place of serenity and contemplation. Chinese gooseberries became a familiar part of the diet of many Australians. Chinese lanterns created the impression that Chinese were artistic, and Chinese festivals slowly became an annual event for curious white Australians.



**Figure 10**

*The land of eternal standstill. The Far East, journal of the St Columban Mission, captured China in a classical pose: harmonious old Cathay. Pagodas and junks were frozen in the Australian imagination as symbols of exotic China. (Courtesy of The Far East)*

<sup>71</sup> J. Murphy, "The voice of memory: history, autobiography and oral memory," *Historical Studies*, vol.22, no.87 (October 1986): 165–6.

All of these varied humdrum sayings were likely to find particularly potent expression in relation to one general image: that of 'Chinatown', a legendary place of baffling happenings. 'Chinatown' often stood as a summary of all these adages about the Chinese character. Dotted around the country, 'Little Cantons' were seen as ghettos where Chinese allegedly gambled and smoked opium. The fact that European hostility drove Chinese into these ghettos was usually overlooked. The mere utterance of the term 'Chinatown' tapped a reservoir of stereotypes. Over time, the scary image of 'Chinatown' softened as white Australians became more familiar with Chinese food, crafts and celebrations.

Many of these idiomatic expressions have a timeless quality in that Chinese have been frozen in unchanging representations. This imperviousness to fundamental change implies that the phrases tapped deeply rooted myths. Some of these sayings sprang from respect, fondness and admiration, and indicated a web of friendly and productive relationships between Chinese and Europeans in Australia. Most, however, maintained a distinctly negative perception of Chinese as a dirty, bizarre people, given to unnatural sex, devious plots and frightening curses. Acceptance and curiosity were mixed with rejection and fear. Anxieties were projected onto Chinese and then neatly expressed in catchy, easy-to-repeat phrases. Ranging from street-level abuse to folksy proverbs, these expressions were passed from one generation of white Australians to the next, becoming a part of the collective memory. Family and neighbourhood anecdotes about Chinese added to this racial iconography. A common feature of these aphorisms was the way in which they were routinely used to describe situations often far removed from Chinese themselves.

Catch-phrases encapsulated numerous assumptions. As John Murphy has argued, clichés have a dramatic precision and power for they condense general beliefs into simple epigrammatic images.<sup>71</sup> Colloquialisms defined and controlled Chinese in the Australian imagination. They often constituted small morality plays or social tableaux in which people were instructed in what Chinese were like and how they should be treated. Most people did not have one, undifferentiated view of Chinese, and negative and positive perceptions co-existed, sometimes in blatant contradiction. A likening for tall stories sustained myths about Chinese and some expressions persisted simply because they were picturesque. Humour often had, however, a nasty under-side which perpetuated stereotypes. Playfulness intermingled with mockery. Given the general ignorance, clichés acted as guides to action in countless situations, indicating that certain things, such as intermarriage, were considered taboo. Sayings policed the boundaries between Europeans and Chinese, reinforcing separateness. Such clichés were especially important because they were taken for granted as commonsense and beyond challenge. They claimed to represent the natural order of the world.

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