

CHAPTER THREE

The Chinese Diaspora in Torres Strait

Cross-cultural connections and
contentions on Thursday Island

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The Chinese have maintained a long historical presence in Australia. Their mainland experience, driven by opportunity and fortune yet encumbered by racial prejudice and exclusion, has received a great deal of scholarly attention in the past three decades.¹ This narration of the Chinese diaspora in Australia has until recently focused on a racial binary of White settler versus minority group. In colonial Australia and beyond, the Chinese were seen as intruders, the 'other'. A State-constructed discourse of 'threat' nourished and legitimated dominant society's fears of the Chinese presence. This resonated clearly in dominant perceptions of competition for economic resources, such as gold and retail commerce; drug trafficking in opium and alcohol; sexual competition and anti-miscegenetic sentiment in regard to Chinese 'bachelor societies'; post-World War II fears of communist expansion; and, more recently, illegal immigrants and boat arrivals.

A new generation of Australian historical studies, however, has extended discussion of the Chinese diaspora beyond this White-minority binary.² Recent studies of mainland communities have decentred the racial narrative to incorporate a third space of Chinese-Indigenous connections. Normative racial boundaries have been successfully inverted by placing the oppressed at centre

stage and the oppressor at the sidelines, revealing a more complex and nuanced experience of triangulated group relations (Chinese–Aboriginal–White).³ This study extends such work beyond the context of mainland Australia to examine the Chinese diasporic experience within an even more complex site of cultural pluralism — Thursday Island, in Australia’s north-east. This story of a diasporic Chinese community sustaining and crossing boundaries within a prevailing multicultural milieu elaborates the connections, contentions and intersections that were experienced among politically subjugated but numerically dominant ‘minorities’: Chinese, Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal, Japanese, Indonesian, Filipino and Sri Lankan. A hitherto undocumented but distinctive racial narrative emerges in this chapter, that of the presence on Thursday Island of a longstanding Chinese community, which, while ostensibly subject to the hegemony of White colonial society, subtly undermined the latter’s cultural dominance through connections and contentions with an array of other Asian and Indigenous cultures.

Navigating a Presence

The Chinese presence in Torres Strait predates the establishment of a government settlement on Thursday Island in 1877. Oral tradition tells of Chinese junks visiting islands in search of *bêche-de-mer*.⁴ Chinese men were often employed as engineers, sailors, stewards and cooks on steamers and fishing vessels that plied the strait before and after settlement of Thursday Island.⁵ Within the strait, however, Thursday Island became the principal site of Chinese migration during the late 19th century. Here, the Chinese were to establish over time a significant presence numerically, economically and, to a limited extent, politically. Yet scholarship on the multicultural island community to date has failed to examine this experience in any detail.⁶ This chapter aims to address this oversight.

In fact, the Chinese, as Chester, Thursday Island’s first Resident Police Magistrate, reported in 1877, were the first of the Asian nationalities to arrive on the island:

I have this day taken charge of the settlement at Thursday Island [on 25 September, 1877]. The population comprised only the Police Magistrate and Mrs Chester and their son Neville, Pilot Allan Wilkie (a married man) and the crew of the government cutter *Lizzie Jardine*, Coxswain William Richard Scott and four water police constables [one of whom was James Simpson], Edmonds Lechmere Brown (who was dividing his time between Thursday Island, Somerset and the fishery), a Chinese gardener and sixteen or seventeen South Sea Islander prisoners serving sentences for striking work.⁷

While the Chinese market gardens on Thursday Island — like those on the Australian mainland — produced a welcomed supply of fresh vegetables, before long, the aforementioned Chinese gardener had become a target of contention. Chester complained in 1879 that:

A number of valuable pearls are obtained during each season's fishing; these are invariably secreted by the men employed, and sold either in Sydney, or on board the mail steamers, the loss to the owners representing a considerable sum yearly. As the pearls never come into possession of the owners it is impossible to identify them or to convict any one of stealing them. A Chinaman living here, whose ostensible means of support is a garden, is the principal buyer, or agent in effecting a sale on board the mail boats, and has carried on this traffic with impunity for the last twelve months. I would suggest:

1st That it should be made unlawful for any Polynesian, Asiatic, or other person employed in the fisheries, not being the manager or owner of a fishing station, to have pearls in his possession, or to traffic in them under a penalty of six months with hard labour, and forfeiture of the pearls to his employer.

2nd That if pearls are found on any person not employed in the fisheries, the onus of proof that he is lawfully possessed of the same should be thrown on such person, with a like penalty in default, and forfeiture of the pearls.

3rd That any person buying or receiving pearls from any person employed in the fishery should be punished in like manner; with power to search suspected persons. All proceedings to be summary as it would be ruinous for owners to leave their stations to prosecute offenders.⁸

Within a decade, the number of Chinese on Thursday Island was climbing. On a visit to Torres Strait in September 1885, Mackellar, a travel author, recorded that:

A very large number of Chinese arrives, and learnt at Thursday Island that a new law had been passed in Australia, and that they could not land there without paying a certain sum and having a sort of passport with their photograph attached. Here was a dilemma. They would all have had the great expense of returning to Normanton [in Queensland's Gulf country], or perhaps China; but a man in the store who had a camera saw his chance and offered to do their portraits at £5 a head! They jumped at it, and he reaped a harvest. As his photographic work is of the poorest description, and as every Chinaman to our eyes — especially in a portrait — looks much like every other one, the results cannot be of much use, but it is complying with this ridiculous law.⁹

As the pearling industry expanded, so did the Chinese presence on Thursday Island. Early census data show a rapid growth in Chinese numbers on Thursday Island from 1890 (see Table 3.1). This was driven by economic migration, particularly from the far north coastal and Gulf regions after Queensland's gold rush and the completion in 1889 of the Pine Creek railway, which had employed more than 3,000 Chinese.¹⁰ In addition, the introduction of restrictive anti-Chinese immigration legislation in the Northern Territory during 1888 saw an exodus of 1,690 Chinese — numbers dropped from 6,122 in 1888 to 4,432 in 1889 — with many heading eastward to far north Queensland.¹¹

Thursday Island was an important stop-off for boats travelling between Australia and Asia. As boats journeyed to and from China and the coastal ports of Queensland, Chinese seamen and labourers would therefore come and go.¹² It was as convenient to travel to the state capital, Brisbane, as to return to Singapore or southern China. This is demonstrated in incidents such as that in January 1895 when a man named Ah Bow was deemed by the Thursday Island court to be 'of unsound mind' and, within a month, was sent off 'home' on board a vessel bound for Hong Kong.¹³

The continued importance of Thursday Island to maritime navigation between Asia and Australia early last century, and the significance of this to the Chinese residing on the island, are illustrated by two visits by important people almost exactly 30 years apart. The first was the arrival there of Mei Quong Tart, a prominent member of Sydney's Chinese community, an outspoken opponent of opium smoking and 'an old friend' of the Government Resident, Hon. John Douglas, while on a journey to China with his family.¹⁴ The second was the brief stopover by Chan On Yan in June 1923.¹⁵ Chan was the representative of Dr Sun Yat Sen, patriarch of the ruling Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) in China. Recalled to China 'on business' — at the time of the rise of the Chinese Communist Party after its founding in Shanghai by Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao in 1921 — he had been placed under police protection during his voyage home on the S.S. *Victoria*.¹⁶ Police intelligence had uncovered a planned assassination attempt by members of the Chinese Masonic Society.¹⁷ Despite the threat to his life by known 'enemies of his government in China', Chan On Yan disembarked from the steamer and was reported to have 'visited the town on two occasions during his stay here, interviewing several leading Chinese of the island at their respective residence'.¹⁸

Table 3.1: Chinese population, Thursday Island 1877–1913¹⁹

<i>Year</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Total Chinese</i>	<i>Total Thursday Is</i>
1877	1			1	c.32
c.1885	3			3	307
1886	4			4	c.500
1890	37	1	0	38	526
1892	50	2	0	52	1067
1893	61	0	0	61	1441
1894	94	3	4	101	1409
1896	71	3	10	84	1354
1897	56	4	13	73	1344
1898	51	3	4	58	1702
1899	62	3	6	71	1515
1900	67	2	5	74	1431
1901	61	3	8	72	1437
1902	78	3	8	89	1645
1903	77	4	10	91	1515
1904	102	6	18	126	1619
1906	73	5	21	99	1432
1907	75	5	17	97	1353
1909	58	4	18	80	1281
1910	58	4	19	81	1371
1911	81	4	21	106	1318
1912	71	3	22	96	1321
1913	64	5	16	85	1365

Thursday Island's strategic maritime importance and the 'Chinese connection' are also demonstrated by the Federal Government's expressed concern over illegal Chinese arrivals through the port post-Federation. Reports in 1905, 1909, 1918 and 1920 reveal prime ministerial fears of an 'influx' of Chinese 'New Chums' via Thursday Island and other northern ports.²⁰ Although related police investigations in 1905 asserted that there was 'hardly an opportunity ... for Chinamen to arrive by overseas boats', a 1918 report subsequently claimed:

Henry Suzuki, Petrie Terrace [Brisbane], a Japanese, informed the Police that he had been told by some of his countrymen that both Japanese and Chinese had been in the habit of gaining illicit admittance into the Commonwealth by the following means. When ships anchor outside Port Darwin, Thursday Island ... and other Northern ports, they disembark into small portable boats and then land upon some unfrequented part of the coast.²¹

While opportunities for arrival by sea on to Thursday Island abounded, travelling through Cape York to White mainland settlements would have proved quite hazardous!

Dominant Discourses of Exclusion

Given the itinerancy inherent in maritime settlements and the growth of strong anti-Chinese sentiment across the colony, it is remarkable that a community of Chinese market gardeners, merchants and tradesmen prospered for so long on Thursday Island. Part of the community's success derived from the fact that the Chinese created businesses and provided skills that were essential to the long-term viability of the island settlement. A small number even successfully applied for naturalisation. These included probably the earliest arrival, Jimmy Ah Sue, born in Canton, and naturalised in August 1887 at the age of 30; another early arrival, Ah Sang, was naturalised in April 1893 at the age of 31; Tai Yit Hing, a 28-year-old storekeeper, was naturalised in July 1902; and 42-year-old George Sing, born in Canton, who, in September 1900, married Ah Bow, was naturalised in October 1902.²² At the time, Sing had already resided on the island for 10 years and had five children, 'all brought up in the English Church': Lilly (born 1897), Poy Lun (1898), Ah Chun (1899), Celia (1900) and Chilli (1902).²³

The number of naturalisations is, however, rather low when compared with that of other non-White 'aliens' during the same period, especially given the large number of Chinese on the island and their significant input into the local economy. The reason may be that few Chinese were married and the Alien's Act of 1867 clearly stipulated that:

No Asiatic ... shall be entitled to be naturalised as a British subject [in Australia] unless such alien shall be married and shall have resided in the colony for a period of three years. Provided that the wife of the said alien shall, at the time of his being so naturalised, reside with him in the colony.²⁴

Moreover, prevailing racial discourses of the time placed Chinese — along with Indigenous people — at the lowest rungs of the Darwinist order. The *Queensland Figaro* in October 1883 'predicted that some day the menial work of the universe will be all done by Chinamen and negroes, whilst the Caucasian race is to fill the high places of the earth, and the other races are to be squeezed out of existence altogether'.²⁵ A *Bulletin* article from August 1886, entitled 'The Chinese in Australia', was similarly outspoken:

Disease, defilement, depravity, misery and crime — these are the indispensable adjuncts which make the Chinese camps and quarters

loathsome to the senses and faculties of civilised nations. Whatever neighbourhood the Chinese choose for the curse of their presence forthwith begins to reek with the abominations which are forever associated with their vile habitations. Wherever the pig-tailed pagan herds on Australian soil, they introduce and practice vices the most detestable and damnable — vices that attack everything sacred in the system of European civilisation.²⁶

Indeed, the Sydney newspaper, *The Telegraph*, on Wednesday 8 May, 1899, reported the tracing of a local leprosy outbreak to the Thursday Island Chinese community:

Statements are current to the effect that a family, certain members of which had developed symptoms of leprosy, had reached one of the Sydney suburbs from Queensland. It is now ascertained that the family formerly resided at Thursday Island, and had a boy afflicted with the disease in the Dunwich lazaret. The family recently took up their residence at Ashfield, and a neighbour a few days ago informed the local police that the condition of the face of a little girl who accompanied the new residents warranted the presumption that the unfortunate child was leprous ... So far as can be ascertained, the leprosy is traceable to a Chinese boy who acted as nurse to the children and who, it is stated, frequently sucked their feeding bottles to see if they worked properly. This man afterwards developed the dread disease.²⁷

On 1 January, 1901, the Queensland colony became a state in the Commonwealth of Australia. The Commonwealth soon enacted the Immigration Restriction Act, which served to legitimate the discourses of fear and bigotry marginalising the Australian Chinese community. There were no naturalisations for Chinese residing on Thursday Island between 1902 and World War II. Naturalisation of Chinese and the immigration of their families were prohibited by the Commonwealth Nationality Act of 1903.²⁸

Chinese contributions to the Thursday Island community and the remoteness of the place from the seats of government, however, allowed a more inclusive sentiment to prevail. After the end of conscription during World War I, a recruiting drive for volunteers led the Bishop of Carpentaria to request that locally born men of Chinese descent be included:

I should be very glad to know if there is any possibility of half castes being accepted as recruits for the Army. There are several of them in these parts who were very anxious to enlist a year ago, and who might be got now if it were quite certain they would be accepted. They are a fine stamp of men — Some half caste Chinese with white women as mothers. They have

really been very badly treated as they answered the call of the Prime Minister some 16 months or more ago. Papers were sent to them and they answered yes, and then were turned down. The confidential committee tried hard to have the embargo taken off them and failed.

As the conditions have changed so much during the last few months, and as the Referendum means that volunteers have to be got to make up the Reinforcements it seems possible you might be willing to accept these as volunteers now, who were rejected before Universal Service was definitely rejected. If anything can be done will you write to the Secretary of the War Committee in Thursday Island.²⁹

Chinese — but not Indigenous, ‘Malay’ or Filipino — children were welcome at the local school.³⁰ A memorandum from Albert Edward Kelly, acting head teacher of the Thursday Island State School, to the Director of Education in March 1942, however, reveals that approval did not extend to children of Chinese-Islander heritage. His reasons reveal some of the workings of the caste system then in operation on the island:

Chinese and caste [sic] Chinese-White ... live as white people and are accepted in white society ... Chinese-Islanders are not accepted probably because they attended the ‘Coloured School’ ... The admission of Chinese, Japanese and Chinese-White has been accepted because they reach a high standard mentally and morally and are always clean and tidy and provide healthy competition for the white children and live as white people. Other coloured children fail to reach a very high standard probably because of their wretched living conditions and are classed as undesirable pupils in the State School ... At present, I suggest that those to be admitted be: those accepted as white or predominantly white, Chinese, Japanese and half-caste Chinese-Whites ... but public opinion desires as white a school as possible.³¹

Despite the general policy, one schoolmaster did remove all the Chinese children from the school and sent them to the ‘Coloured school’. When he left, they returned to the state school.³²

Connections and Contributions

We have seen already how the Thursday Island Chinese managed in part to subvert the State-sponsored racist discourses that sought to disempower them. This was due mainly to their small numbers and their contribution to the local economy, which provided access to White domains generally denied their mainland countrymen.³³



Thursday Island picture theatre and Chee Quee's store on Douglas Street, 1923.
Courtesy of John Oxley Library, Brisbane (Item No. 698444).

Until World War II, the Chinese on Thursday Island worked in a number of occupations, predominantly service-oriented (see Table 3.2). The occupations broadly mirror those traditionally undertaken by Chinese residing on the Australian mainland.³⁴ Of course, many Chinese had moved to Thursday Island after economic opportunities on the mainland had disappeared after the gold rush and, despite the economic fluctuations of the region's maritime economy, many eventually established prosperous, long-term business enterprises, catering to countrymen and other resident communities alike. Ah Sang, for example, was the local baker for more than a decade before and well after Federation. Tommy Ah Sue, too, ran a bakery for more than 16 years after Federation. Joseph Chin Soon was a tailor for nearly 20 years. King Woh ran a store and a lodging house and was a signwriter for a similar period of time. George Sing, Wing Sing Wah, Sam Hop, See Kee and Lai Foo all conducted longstanding retail businesses, of which the latter two still remain today. Their enterprises were often extensions of their experiences in other thriving Chinese centres of coastal far north Queensland: King Woh had a merchant firm in Port Douglas, near Cairns, during the 1880s and 1890s; George Sing was a general merchant for 10 years in Cooktown and four years in Cairns before coming to Thursday Island in 1892; and Ah Hing, Ah Foo, Ah San, Lai Foo and See Kee were all from Cooktown, the port of entry for the 1870s gold rush.³⁵

As key contributors to the local economy, Chinese businessmen played a significant role in supporting the broader Thursday Island community.³⁶ Until the evacuation of the island in 1942, they supplied the inhabitants with commodities from Asia, as exemplified in the following 1936 advertisement:

‘Just arrived by SS. Taiping. Fresh and Best Chinese Rice, 11s. per mat, or 3 1/4 lb for 1s.’ Salt eggs, sweet prawn, Chinese sausage, Chinese peanut toffee, bean sauce, bean curd, salt olives, ginger, etc. ‘All the above goods are for cash only. Ring up your order early, and I will deliver it right to your door. Buying from me, not only are you saving pounds, but you are also getting the Best Goods. A. See Kee, Cash Store.’³⁷

Chinese businessmen were also key benefactors to local community organisations. The list of subscribers to the Jubilee Benevolent Fund in 1897 included Sun Loy Goon, George Sing, Quong Seng, On Cheong, Hop Woh, Tommy Ah Sue and Ah King.³⁸

Only Chinese leased and worked the market gardens that served the local community. As early as August 1887, Lady Annie Brassey, the wife of the First Lord of the British Admiralty, who visited the island on the *Sunbeam* in 1887, had commented on the vegetables grown on the islands opposite Thursday Island by the ‘invaluable Chinese’³⁹ — most probably the market gardens on Prince of Wales Island later tended by Ah Loong (1891–1907) and Wong King (1907–13).⁴⁰ Market gardens became the sole domain of the Chinese, who readily transferred leases from community member to community member. A garden located at the north-east of Thursday Island (present-day Rose Hill) changed hands from James Ah Sue (who had obtained the lease in 1890) to Tong Sing (1891), to George Bow (1891) and to Gee Woh (1901, written off in 1922).⁴¹ Tong Sing’s lease was invalidated ‘on account of his being an Asiatic Alien, not naturalised in Queensland’,⁴² yet many of similar status were ‘allowed to remain in informal occupation on a yearly tenure’ since the authorities deemed it ‘essential for the health of the Thursday Island residents that these gardens be carried on’.⁴³ A garden located in the north-west (present-day Tamwoy) changed hands from George Ah Gow (leased in 1900) to Ah Luk (1902), to Pang Bow (aka Ah Man, 1904), to Tseng See Kee (1918), to Francis Asange (1940);⁴⁴ another from Ah For (1900) to Ah Yet (1900), to Tseng See Kee (1915, written off in 1922).⁴⁵ To the west (near Green Hill) there were gardens leased by George Nicholson (1889), Ah Man (1900), Ah Sing (1902), Sue Shing (1910) and Hoo Ping (1930).⁴⁶ In many instances, leases changed hands when owners returned to China. There remained up to four market gardens on Thursday Island until the evacuation during World War II.⁴⁷

Table 3.2: Occupations of Chinese resident on Thursday Island (and nearby islands) pre-World War II

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Year cited</i> ⁴⁸
Baker	Ah Sang (aka Sun Tai Lee, Sun Ty Lee; later Asange)	1888–91, 1899, 1901, 1902, 1905
	Ah Mee	1890
	Tommy Ah Sue	1899, 1900, 1905, 1916
	George Lai Foo	1939
Carpenter	Kam Tai (aka Goon Dai)	1900
Cook	Sam Ah Chin	1884
	Ah Bow	1885
	Ah Loong	1895
	Chang How	1899
	Tommy Low Shung	1899
	Yuen Chow	1902
	Ah Gee	1904
Doctor (Chinese medicine)	Ching Kin Ting	1899
Fisherman	Ah Bow	1891
Fruit-seller	Ching Chong	1900
	Ah Gee	1903
	Chin Yuen	1904
Gardener (some may have just been market garden lessees)	Sam Ah Chin	1884
	On Lee	1888 (Prince of Wales Is.)
	Ah Kwong	1891
	Jimmy Sue	1891 (Hammond Is.)
	Lee Sat	1891
	Ah Loong	1891–1907 (Prince of Wales Is.)
	Ah Sing	1892
	Ah See	1894
	Law Luk Kee (aka Lu Lu Kee, Loo Look Kee)	1894
	Ah Man	1905 (Hammond Is.)
	Wong King	1907–13 (Prince of Wales Is.)
	Chin Jung	1937–39
	Chin Wong	1937–38
	Chong Sang	1937–40
	Pa Wa Co.	1937–42
	Ah Fat	1939–40
Francis Augustine Asange	1940	
Chong Yong Lem	1940	

continued over

Table 3.2: continued

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Year cited</i>
Importer-exporter	Chow Bow	1897, 1899
Jeweller	George Bow	1891
Lodging House Keeper	Jimmy Ah Sue King Woh (aka Wang Woh, Kwong Woh Leong, Ah Man)	1885, 1887 1901
Nightman (collector of human excreta)	Ah Gee Ah Loong	1891 1892
Pearl-sheller	Jimmy Ching James Foy Law Luk Kee (aka Lu Lu Kee, Loo Look Kee) Lai Fook	1894 1906 1907 1908, 1910–12
Seaman	Ah Sing Ah Sam	1877 1883
Shop Assistant	Ah Chu Hong Chop Son	1895 1901
Sign-writer	King Woh (aka Wang Woh, Kwong Woh Leong, Ah Man)	1900
Storekeeper	Sin On Lee Ah Sang (aka Sun Tai Lee, Sun Ty Lee; later Asange) Wong Fat Lai Foo Ah Foo Jimmy Ah Sue See Foo Tommy Lee Ah Hing King Woh (aka Wang Woh, Kwong Woh Leong, Ah Man) George Nicholson Yuck Wah Sun Loy Goon Low Shung Loo Look Kee (aka Law Luk Kee) Hong Wong Ling Ah Ling Pon Kew Tung Sung Woh Tommy Ah Sue	1888 1888, 1890 1888, 1890 1888, 1903–28 1890 1890 1890 1890 1891 1891, 1895, 1900, 1902, 1903 1891, 1899 1892 1894 1894 1895 1895 1895, 1900 1896–1900 1897, 1905 1897, 1899, 1900

continued over

Table 3.2: continued

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Year cited</i>
Storekeeper continued	George Sing	1897, 1901, 1902, 1904, 1905, 1916
	Ah Chang	1899
	Long Kee Jang	1899
	Chow Bow	1899, 1901, 1905
	Ah King (aka Ah Kim, Ah Kin)	1899, 1903
	On Cheong	1900
	See Kee	1900, 1903, 1905, 1909, 1913, 1916
	Kwong Seng (aka Quong Seng)	1901
	William Sam Hee	1901
	Ah Sing	1902
	Tai Yit Hing (aka Lai Yet Hing)	1902
	Lay King	1903
	Ah Kum	1903–13
	Lai Fook	1903–13
	Kum Hun Chong & Co.	1903–42
	Ming Lee	1904
	Ah Ken (aka Pong Keng)	1904 (Mabuiag Is.)
	Wing Sing Wah	1905, 1916
	Chong Quin Lem	1911
	Sam Hop	1911–42
	Chong Yong Lem	1912–19
	Lai Too Fook	1913–28
	Way Hop Chong & Co.	1913
	Wih Sung Tiy & Co.	1913
	Sun Chong	1916
	Hom Yuen	1916, 1931
	Sam Hop	1922, 1931, 1932, 1939
	James Chee Quee	pre-1927
	Chin On Laifoo	1928–37
	Moo Kim Kow Chee Quee (M. J. Chee Quee & Co.)	1928–39
	George Laifoo	1937
	George Ah Sang (Asange)	1939
	Store Manager	Chop Sun Heong (spelling unsure)
Tailor	Ah You	1891
	Ah Chong	1904
	Ah King (aka Ah Kim, Ah Kin)	1904
	Hop Woh Shing	1905
	Joseph Chin Soon	1910, 1911, 1928
	Chin Daw	1916
	Kwong Tai Cheong	1916, 1931
Washerman	Ah Man	1904

Contentions and Criminality

Chinese businesses and services provided venues for communal interaction and contention. While the retail businesses were clearly essential to all community groups on Thursday Island, racial discord often surfaced, as we see from these excerpts from Courthouse records of the time:

Sam Mitchell, an African American, states as plaintiff in a trial: 'I went to Mrs Jimmy Ah Sue's. I was outside the shop on the sidewalk and asked for Mrs Ah Sue's husband. She said, "He is in bed asleep. You got a very bad dog. He bit my husband[?]" ... She called me a black nigger, ["You rotten teeth, you black son of a bitch. How dare you come speak to me!"]' ⁴⁹

Mowen, a [Muslim] diver residing on Thursday Island gave evidence in a trial: 'I no got water at my house. I take two buckets. Yuck Wah say, ["come inside and I get key."] I go inside. Yuck Wah take piece of wood, hit my hand, he try hit my head. He no give key, he fight me. I go outside and ask, ["What for you make fool of me. The ground belong me where well is."] I no tell Yuck Wah I will put poison in well and kill Chinamen. I no tell him I cut tail off.'⁵⁰

William Burchell, another American-born 'coloured' labourer living on Thursday Island, explained to the court: 'About 6 o'clock I was standing in the door of my shop in Douglas St, T. I. Mrs Ah Sange came along the footpath and said, "Oh you dirty blackfellow you stink" and told her own children who were with her to call me a blackfellow — "smell him" — and a "binghie he stinks".'⁵¹

King Woh, a storekeeper, claimed in a trial: 'Another Japanese owes me 15/- and I asked him for the money. I saw the other Jap had money and asked him ... [The Japanese who owed me money] thought I wanted to fight the other Jap and so he assaulted me.'⁵²

Galassi also notes many attested attacks by Japanese on Chinese.⁵³

Chinese-run communal recreational spaces — highly stigmatised symbols of the Chinese diaspora across Australia — played a significant role in the Thursday Island cultural experience at the turn of the 20th century. Gambling houses and opium dens, in particular, as the more visible and documented of these spaces, served as social domains for the local Chinese community to meet and fraternise, and as sites of interaction with members of other cultural groups. Though popular, they were nevertheless illegal and subject to frequent raids by local police. The following extract from a police report on gambling at Fing Luck's house in Hargrave Street on 19 September, 1894, is typical:

I saw a number of men around a table with a lot of coins — Chinese ... Chinese cards and markers for fan tan ... The house in Hargrave Street has been used as a gaming house for [the] last month or six weeks ... There were at times 30 people there ... people of all colours. All foreigners. I saw them playing Fan Tan. I am acquainted with the nature of Fan Tan. It is a game played for money.⁵⁴

When the police raided William Sam Hee's house in October 1901, they found a predominantly Japanese and Chinese clientele,⁵⁵ but many other ethnicities, including Europeans, participated and the raids continued well into the 1930s.⁵⁶ The most common games were fan-tan, che fa and pak-a-poo.⁵⁷ Che fa and pak-a-poo are essentially lotteries. A Thursday Island police officer's evidence against Ah Bow on 6 May, 1901, states:

The ticket I produce is a [che fa] lottery ticket with animals on it ... The tickets bear the names of the animals to be backed. The numbers on this ticket produced correspond with a list of the animals. This ticket is written in Chinese and each character means an animal or an insect. When a person backs one of these animals the ticket is then passed in. Supposing a person backs an animal, it is marked on the list which one is backed and the amount put on, if you wish you tell the Chinaman which you want to back and he backs it for you. The ticket is then passed in to the banker who gives a receipt for the ticket. The stakes are passed in with it. After all the tickets are in, the envelope containing the winning number is taken down from over the door by the banker or conductor and opened ... The ticket is taken out from the envelope and what is the winning number is called out and those who have backed that ticket draw the money.⁵⁸

Fan-tan is more sophisticated. Rolls provides a vivid description of the game:

The croupier sits at the end of a long table. In front of him is a big pile of porcelain buttons, or any round counters ... In Australia they often used the worthless brass cash. A narrow ledge prevents any sliding off the end of the table. The croupier, always with his arms bare, spreads the counters with his fingers so that none overlap, bunches them together again in a flat-topped mound with the edges of his palms, then takes his zhong ... a small tin rice bowl in Australia ... inverts it over the counters, jiggles it till its rim touches the table all round, and pushes it away to a clear space. He lifts the cup, reaches out with a short polished ebony wand, divides the pile in two and rakes the counters quickly towards him four at a time from one pile, then the other. The betting is on how many will be left — one, two, three or four ... As well as on single numbers, bets can be laid on odds or evens, or on corners to bracket two numbers.⁵⁹

Although the Gaming Act of 1850 and the Suppression of Gambling Act of 1895 had rendered fan-tan, pak-a-poo and che fa illegal, 'these Acts were more of a nuisance to the Chinese [in north Queensland] than a severe restraint upon their activities'.⁶⁰

The Chinese gaming houses on Thursday Island were highly organised. The gamblers would group together in one room of the venue, with another room serving as the office for the manager. Two clerks stood outside this room and passed tickets on to the conductor in the gaming room.⁶¹ A 'cockatoo' would stand outside and watch for police.⁶² Some prominent businessmen were also gaming leaders. In January 1902, the police expressed concern about the existence of an organised gambling ring led by Ah Sang, Ah Sam, Sang Chong and Ah Sue, all respected within the wider community.⁶³

As sites of multicultural intersection, Chinese gaming sites, too, were at times the venues for disputes, usually fomented by aggrieved clients who suspected the Chinese of cheating. A disturbance during September 1900 between Chinese and Japanese men originated 'in the Chinese gambling house ... near Yokohama [the Asian quarter on Thursday Island]'.⁶⁴ In June 1902, police noted that Ah Sing — a gaming-house keeper and opium seller — 'has made several complaints ... about Japanese throwing stones at his house'.⁶⁵

When improper activities brought members of the Thursday Island Chinese community into contact with the local court, treatment was normally even-handed and equitable.⁶⁶ While trials were conducted in English — with a Chinese defendant 'sworn in accordance with the custom of his country' — interpreters were provided for those with a poor command of English.⁶⁷ Ah Que, Charlie Sam Yuen, George Sing, Lai Foo and Chee Quee all served as court interpreters between 1894 and 1921.⁶⁸

Cross-Cultural Contacts and 'the Act'

For centuries, opium smoking was also a common form of recreation for many Chinese. Some of them continued the practice after migration to Australia. As on the mainland, the opium problem on Thursday Island was attributed to the Asian presence, particularly the Chinese.⁶⁹ In January 1895, the local police reported that Ah Ling's shop in Victoria Parade was 'fitted with bunks all round, pipes, opium, and lamps and mats. It is an "opium den"'.⁷⁰ In July 1899, two years after passage of the Queensland Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act — which prohibited the selling of opium to Aboriginal people — Ah King, 'a Chinaman ... of unsound mind' who was known for 'lurking around opium dens', was put on trial for precisely that offence. At his trial, a police officer informed the magistrate that opium abuse was 'common

among the Malays and Chinese. Significant complaints have been made to me about the existence of opium dens. It is openly practised by the Malays and Chinese.⁷¹ The Northern Protector of Aboriginals, Walter E. Roth, was also present and condemned the prevalence of opium abuse among 'Blacks' and its connection with the Chinese community.⁷²

The selling and smoking of opium were eventually criminalised by Commonwealth legislation in January 1906, but opium abuse by Chinese and non-Chinese alike continued well beyond this date.⁷³ Before then, permits to sell opium were held by a number of Chinese on Thursday Island. At the aforementioned trial of Ah King, M. T. McCreery, Senior Sergeant of Police on Thursday Island, states:

I am informed by the Inspector of Police that there are a certain number of persons who have permission from the Collector of Customs, some being wholesale dealers and others retail dealers. The Customs Department furnishes me with a monthly return of the opium sold. The returns show the number and names of the purchasers of opium. The sale of opium is now almost uncontrolled in Thursday Island and there are several shops or dens where it is sold habitually. From the information I have there are about a dozen people who are authorised to sell opium on Thursday Island. The Defendant [Ah King] is not to my knowledge one of those who is authorised.⁷⁴

In 1902, there were 10 permit holders on Thursday Island; in 1904, there were 15. The Chief Protector of Aboriginals had lamented: 'It seems extraordinary to me that places like Cooktown [with 16 licences] and Thursday Island [with 10 licences] should have a greater number of "permits" in force than Brisbane which has only nine⁷⁵ — the clear implication being that this was because of a large Chinese presence in the two far northern townships. The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897 in theory had 'prohibited the sale of opium by any person not a legally qualified medical practitioner or pharmaceutical chemist ... [h]owever this provision was counteracted by the issue of special licences enabling reputable merchants to sell opium'.⁷⁶ Roth considered such permits not only illegal, but morally reprehensible, given the tragic outcomes arising from opiate addiction among Queensland's Indigenous population:

These so-called permits to sell opium (both wholesale and retail) are not issued for any stated periods, and not a few of the Protectors, the officers administering the very Act for the suppression of the illicit supply of the drug, are aware of the Europeans or Asiatics to whom they have been granted. Cases have even occurred where an individual has been charged

with illegally supplying opium, and has tried to defend his action by showing a permit.⁷⁷

Roth criticised the issuing of permits free of charge and pointedly recommended enforcement of the letter of the act against 'Chinamen'.⁷⁸

It is true that opium peddling had long been a problem on Thursday Island. The first recorded conviction after Douglas's arrival as Resident Magistrate occurred on 5 January, 1885, when Ah Bow, a ship's cook, was charged for smuggling opium allegedly brought from Cooktown.⁷⁹ Convictions continued at fairly regular intervals until 1928, when Ah Wah was fined for possession.⁸⁰

During the colonial period, Chinese cultural tolerance of opium consumption invariably came into conflict with mainstream repugnance towards its abuse. When Sun Loy Goon was tried in October 1894 for selling opium at his Victoria Parade store, he pleaded to no avail that 'it is customary for my countrymen to smoke opium'.⁸¹ According to Manderson, such attitudes prevailed across Australia.

The Chinese smoked opium ... It was for them a recreational drug like alcohol or tobacco. Like any such drug, therefore, there were occasional users, regular users, abusers and addicts; there were houses in which the smoking of an opium pipe was regarded as a social courtesy, and others where it was a serious business.⁸²

While Sun's case was dismissed because the 'sale had not been completed', another storekeeper, Low Shung, was convicted of the same offence the next month.⁸³ Low had originally begun selling to his Muslim client, Omar, when they resided in Croydon some 1,000 kilometres away on the mainland.⁸⁴

Opium dens were generally to be found in, or adjoining, private residences. The home of storekeeper Ah See in Hastings Street came under the notice of the police in April 1890:

[T]he premises were in a very dirty condition, there was no closet [toilet]. There is a water-course running through the allotment occupied. The occupier has a large number of fowls, probably a couple of hundred. The fowl house was in a very filthy condition with a very nasty smell coming from it. I entered the tenement occupied by the defendant. It appeared to be used as a place for smoking opium. There was a lamp and opium pipes ... There was all sorts of rubbish lying about the place. The water [course] was defiled by the presence of human excreta ...⁸⁵

Although the Chinese dominated the selling of opium on Thursday Island, others, such as the Malay Ahmat family, also operated small smoking dens:

Papa had this little den at the back of our house and a few Chinese used to come there and ... at different times they used to go to their places to smoke opium and it wasn't illegal in those days or no one made any drama about it ... I ended up in there one day — Mama told me never to go near there ... There's these Chinese chaps lying on the bench with these long pipe things with a thin candle burning in the centre ... He just pointed to another pipe on the counter ... [Mama] came in ... and she just grabbed me and gave me the biggest hiding I ever got for being in there ... When Papa died that was the end of our den.⁸⁶

The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act not only proscribed opium selling to Aborigines — by inference by Chinese — but impacted heavily on other activities that brought Chinese and Indigenous residents of Thursday Island into contact. The recruiting of Indigenous pearl-shelling labour by Chinese, for example, was forbidden, in effect excluding Chinese from the fisheries industry.⁸⁷ Chinese-Indigenous liaisons were prohibited: Ah Young was fined in May 1910 for 'permitting [an] Aboriginal female to be upon premises in his occupation' and again two years later for supplying liquor;⁸⁸ Hom Yuen was fined in January 1918 and again in August 1929 for keeping the company of an Aboriginal woman and was refused permission to marry a 'half-caste' woman in 1916.⁸⁹

Rare exceptions were made. In December 1905, the local Protector, O'Brien,

went to Hammond Island [near Thursday Island] to investigate a rumour re supplying of opium. I found that a Chinaman, Ah Man, was living at a garden with a (lawfully married) aboriginal wife, and although I found a small quantity of opium, I could find nothing to justify the belief that his wife had taken to the habit. In fact, she expressed her disgust at the idea of her husband smoking. I have not prosecuted the husband for being in possession of opium, mainly on account of the difficulty of maintaining his wife during any term of imprisonment to which he might be subjected. She is a Burketown woman, and has no tribal friends here.⁹⁰

Generally, though, Chinese-Indigenous marriages were rarely sanctioned by the Protector, even when — as in Hom Yuen's case — supported by 'character references from the Mayor, the Town Clerk, a Justice of the Peace and six other Europeans'.⁹¹ Local Protector Lee-Bryce made it clear in a 1916 correspondence that he did 'not approve of our women marrying aliens, and the making of a precedent would result in numerous applications by Chinamen and others who merely desire the girls for their own purposes'.⁹² The act was ultimately successful in its anti-miscegenetic intent, since between its passage and 1914 no marriages between Chinese and local Indigenous people took place on Thursday Island.⁹³

Postwar: starting anew, under suspicion

A significant, yet, due to the White Australia Policy, ever-diminishing Chinese presence endured on Thursday Island until World War II. With the outbreak of the Pacific War, however, Chinese residents were evacuated south. On 28 January, 1942, 20 Chinese left on the *Zealandia* and *Ormiston*.⁹⁴ They remained on the mainland during the war, although the See Kees were trapped in occupied Hong Kong while on holiday and were unable to return until 1947. One local of Chinese ancestry, Joseph Chin Soon (Taylor), served alongside the Torres Strait Islander servicemen during the war. In 1944, he was redeployed south, however, when Islander servicemen objected to the fact that he, along with other Thursday Island 'Malays', were being paid full Australian Military Forces wages.⁹⁵

Only four families returned after peace was declared in 1945. Those who returned were the established merchant families, Lai Foo and See Kee, and those of Chinese-Indigenous heritage, Chin Soon and Asange.⁹⁶ The Lai Foes were the first to return soon after the war, with the See Kees coming later, in 1947. Arriving on Thursday Island, the families had to 'start all over again'.⁹⁷ Their shops and houses, along with the Joss house, had been looted or destroyed by members of the Australian forces during the occupation. The Lai Foes rebuilt, with the See Kees renting from them on their return. A market gardener also returned to the island early on and set up a plot near the current site of the high school.⁹⁸ He remained until 1950, when he moved to Cairns. The See Kees took over the plot but closed it down in 1952 — pearling brought in more money. Thereafter, fresh vegetables had to be shipped in. Individual Chinese also came: William Ah Loy, a storekeeper who married a local Japanese woman; Frederick James Yen Foo, Robert Lee Way, Wing Kong Lee and Charles Thomas Sue San, all storekeepers who later retired or left.⁹⁹

With time, businesses were re-established and the Chinese families, although numerically fewer compared with the prewar period, again came to dominate the local retail sector, 'owning one-half of the shops on the main business street, Douglas Street'.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, this drew the attention of Federal Government officers after the communist victory in China in 1949. A security report dated December 1949, two months after the communist victory, saw George Laifoo as

the most astute and the wealthiest ... business man on the Island ... own[ing] five (5) stores, two (2) Billiard saloons and three (3) taxis and is a power to be reckoned with ... Next in importance would probably be George Asange, also with a Chinese background. He is a member of the Town Council and conducts a store.¹⁰¹



View of former Chinese market garden site, 1997.
 Courtesy of Guy Ramsay.

In fact, at the time, officers bluntly asked Thursday Island Chinese, ‘Are you a communist?’¹⁰²

As before the war, the contributions of the Chinese community provided them with privileges despite their continuing ‘minority’ status. In the local cinema during the 1950s, for example, they sat upstairs with the Whites; ‘Malays’ and Islanders were downstairs in the front, with ‘half-castes’ at the back.¹⁰³ This saw Robert Lee Way create a disturbance one night when he and his Malay girlfriend were refused admission to the upstairs section.¹⁰⁴

Seafaring Chinese once again navigated a presence on Thursday Island during the late 1960s and 1970s with captured illegal Taiwanese fishing boats being detained there:

In late 1976 there were five Taiwanese vessels anchored under guard in Port Kennedy and because it frequently takes months to repatriate the seamen detained, there were anything up to one hundred Taiwanese roaming the streets of Thursday Island. Naturally they were patronised by the local Chinese community. Some obtained jobs with businessmen moving goods, labouring and painting, and by working for forty dollars a week they undercut local unskilled labour (mainly Islanders) ... The fishermen from the steel-hulled vessels tend to be more sophisticated than the clam gatherers. They drink at the hotels, frequently acquire Island

girlfriends and are accepted by the community with its usual hospitality. Some even moved into houses on the Tamwoy Reserve as the guests of sympathetic Islanders. Surprisingly there seems little resentment about the lost jobs, for as one Islander put it: 'They come from a very poor land and we are sorry for them.'¹⁰⁵

With 'the act' now a historical relic, the Chinese visitors were free to mix with Islanders. Thursday Island Chinese, too, married into the two cultural groups that had come to dominate the island postwar: Islander and White. Nevertheless, some still 'went back' to find Chinese marriage partners.

By the late 20th century, however, power dynamics in the region had shifted dramatically from the White to the Islander communities. The catalyst, the 1992 High Court Mabo decision, recognised Native Title for the strait's Mer Islanders and, by precedent, all Indigenous communities where connection with traditional lands had been maintained. Successful claims over Thursday Island by the Kaurareg people and a push for Torres Strait regional autonomy have thus altered the positions of 'minorities' on Thursday Island — the Chinese are no longer the 'significant power group in the town' that they became in the 1980s.¹⁰⁶ Some continue to see their future in the region — Liberty See Kee, for example, is a Torres Shire councillor — while others have or plan to leave. In conclusion, the Chinese diasporic presence on Thursday Island, though little known outside the island, has a long and rich history, evidence of the community's success in maintaining a cultural boundary within a prevailing multicultural milieu. The significant contribution of Chinese to Thursday Island set their 'birthright' there, in connection and contention with other cultural groups on the island. As power dynamics continue to shift in the region, the future position of the Thursday Island Chinese community or those residents with Chinese ancestry remains to be seen.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Joseph Ahmat, Judith Ramsay, Richard See Kee and Anna Shnukal.

Footnotes

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- 90 Queensland Office of the Chief Protector of Aborigines. 1905. *Annual Report*. p. 10. The Burketown region was a common site of Chinese-Indigenous contacts, due to its close proximity to the Northern Territory. It was from the Territory that a large population of Chinese migrated eastward into far north Queensland after legislative restrictions took effect in 1889.
- 91 Evans, R. et al., *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*, p. 312.
- 92 'Lee Bryce, Residency, Thursday Island, to R. A. C. Hockings Esq., Thursday Island, 26 September 1916.' A/69433, QSA.
- 93 Evans, G., 'Thursday Island 1878–1914', pp. 53, 81.
- 94 Nagata, Y. 1996. *Unwanted Aliens: Japanese internment in Australia during WWII*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. p. 89.
- 95 Conditions of service, native units Torres Strait Islanders enlisted in the forces, 1943–53, A1308/762/1/135, NAA. Draft 271/1/882, Conditions of service, natives of Papua New Guinea [and Torres Strait Islanders], Extract from 'Nine Thursday Island "Malayans" serving along side Torres Strait Islands to be withdrawn and reallocated', MP742/1/247/1/1290, NAA. See also See Kee, Vanessa. 2002. *Horn Island: in their steps on Horn Island 1939–45*. Horn Island: Vanessa and Arthur See Kee.
- 96 Richard See Kee, pers. comm., November 1999.
- 97 *Ibid.*
- 98 *Ibid.*

- ⁹⁹ *Register of Firms*. Thursday Island, 1903–61, QS744/1, QSA.
- ¹⁰⁰ Kehoe-Forutan, S., 'The effectiveness of Thursday Island as an urban centre in meeting the needs of its community', p. 98.
- ¹⁰¹ Communist Party of Australia. 11 December, 1949. *Activity and interest in Thursday Island*. pp. 12–13, A6122/40, Item 273, NAA.
- ¹⁰² Richard See Kee, pers. comm., July 2002.
- ¹⁰³ Richard See Kee, pers. comm., November 1999.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* Japanese were excluded from the local tennis club at some stage.
- ¹⁰⁵ Singe, J. 1989. *The Torres Strait: people and history*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. pp. 138–9.
- ¹⁰⁶ Kehoe-Forutan, S., 'The effectiveness of Thursday Island as an urban centre in meeting the needs of its community', p. 231.



Opening of the Horn Island Catholic Church, Ascension Thursday 1933.

F. J. Doyle, 'Thursday Island', *Annals of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*,
1 September, 1933, p. 569.

This text is taken from *Navigating Boundaries: The Asian diaspora in Torres Strait*, edited by Anna Shnukal, Guy Ramsay and Yuriko Nagata, published 2017 by ANU eView, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[dx.doi.org/10.22459/NB.11.2017.03](https://doi.org/10.22459/NB.11.2017.03)