



# The Early Chinese Community in Bundaberg

The first Chinese workers to arrive in Queensland in the 1840s-1850s were used as contracted labour on properties. Ironically, their arrival was welcomed due to the severe labour shortage after the end of convict transportation by Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> This welcoming attitude did not last very long though.

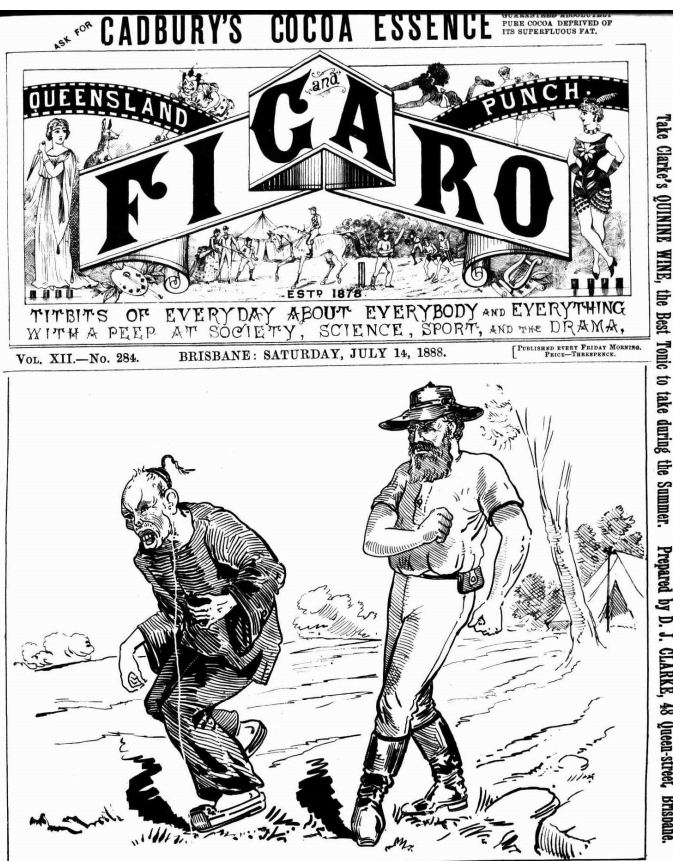
The earlier goldfields of NSW and Victoria had seen numerous conflicts between miners and the Chinese for a number of reasons— they were originally perceived as harmless oddities, then as they set up mining and commercial enterprises, became rivals, and then were considered a threat to white Australia.<sup>2</sup> Many of these earlier prejudices were brought to the first Queensland goldfields by veterans, especially when the Chinese migration to the Palmer River goldfield commenced in great numbers in 1875.<sup>3</sup>

By 1877 there were over 17,000 Chinese working in Queensland on the goldfields. Anti-Chinese sentiment was found in many areas in the colony, and

the 'Chinese Question' became political. Legislation introduced over the next decade ensured that Chinese immigrants were prohibited from taking out mining leases, or owning land. For many Chinese, the only way to earn a living was by leasing allotments from European residents for market gardening<sup>4</sup>, or by working as cheap labour.

## Mount Perry

As early as June 1874, *The Mount Perry Mail* published an account of a ring meeting at Moonta which discussed the Government's intention to allow free immigration. Mr Dixon commented that "...the vote for immigration was only a dodge to reduce wages ...and with regard to coolie labour, the Coolie would get about 14d a day, and could live upon a little rice. ("And a sheep's head." Laughter.) Let that meeting set their faces dead against the introduction of Coolie, or any other kind of labour at the cost of the working man..."<sup>5</sup>



Take Cadbury's GUMMIE WINE, the Best Tonic to take during the Summer. Prepared by J. J. CLARKE, 48 Queen-street, Brisbane.

garden to Mah Hing for £32. Other Chinese mentioned as living in Mount Perry included Yow Gin, Oy Hong, Jin King, Ah Dey, Low Tchee and Ah Pooey.

## Bundaberg

Neville Rackemann, in his book *The Growing Harvest*, mentions that George Buss (Senior) worked at Gin Gin Station, and many years later recalled that whenever station hands needed to visit Barolin Station they would swim across the Burnett River -

“... across the river from a Chinaman’s garden situated at a spot on the opposite side of the river to where the General Hospital is now erected.”<sup>8</sup>

Neville Rackemann believes these market gardens would have been part of the river flats between Hanbury Street and the Burnett.<sup>9</sup>

One of the first recorded mention of any Chinese immigrants in the Bundaberg area is in the *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*. In 1878 the first Horticultural and Agricultural Exhibition was held in Bundaberg, and in Section vii—Vegetables—Local

**Anti-Chinese sentiment was encouraged by illustrations in *Figaro* and *Punch* magazines.**

Articles in the *Mount Perry Mail* from 1874 indicate that there was a reasonable Chinese community living on the outskirts of the town. Market Gardens on Drummer’s Creek and “horses, spring cart, saddles, harness, tools, book debts, crops, trees and cash”<sup>6</sup> changed hands from Ah Chew and Ah Qui to Oy Ong for £50 in July 1874. At the same time, a dispute kicked off in the *Mount Perry Mail* with the following announcement on 16 July:

“MRS BAH GOON, who got married in Victoria about two years ago, and who is now staying near the big Chinaman’s Garden, next to Martin’s Sawmill, is hereby requested to leave off Smoking Opium and Drinking, and to keep out of our Garden, and stop making use of Bad Language. AH SOY”<sup>7</sup>

Several articles refuting the malicious assertions appeared in the next few weeks, and Ah Soy eventually sold his right, title and interest in his



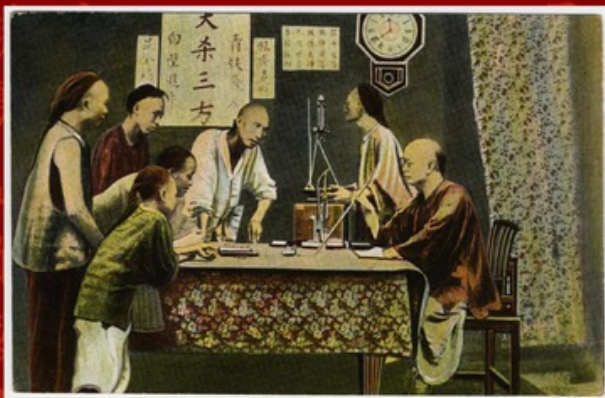
**Chinese market gardener - Atherton**

Production is the notation : 'Chinese exhibit recommended'.<sup>10</sup>

In November 11, 1881 in the *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, the Police Court noted that "John Kingsford sued one Mah for wages. After the trouble had been stated, and the defendant pleaded that he did not owe the amount as alleged, the Bench found a verdict for the plaintiff for 10 shillings, without costs."<sup>11</sup>

### Conflict

On 13 March 1883, the *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail* recorded that 'two kanakas on Saturday night made a raid upon the Mongolian tenement in Bourbon Street' and on 21 August 1883 "...for the third time a serious Saturday night disturbance occurred at the Chinese hell in Bourbon Street...the Chinese supply the boys with grog and opium, and thus maddened they become almost irresponsible



China: Canton: Chinese Fantan Game, 1910s

Fantan was a popular game at the eastern end of Bourbon Street.

creatures."<sup>13</sup>

Three days later it appears action was taken by the township to prevent this continual disturbance, and the newspaper reported that "It is gratifying to know that early steps have been taken by the agent for the owner of the shops at the east end of Bourbon-street to suppress the evils of the Chinese

**" A serious disturbance occurred at East Bundaberg on Sunday between some Celestials and British labourers. It appears the latter bid the Chinkies the time of day when the response one received was a hit on the head with a piece of batten. A hue and cry raised and the belligerent parties gaining strength *en route*, made their way towards Kirby's. One of the Britishers—a farm labourer of Mr W. Adams—was severely maltreated, and only for the timely assistance of Mr R. Johnstone, our Ruling Magistrate, would possibly have been killed."<sup>15</sup>  
*Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*,  
9 September 1884.**

**"The Police Court Case in reference to the Hibernian-Chinese *fraca* alluded to in our last issue came off Friday. The evidence showed that the white men were the aggressors, and the Bench fined John Long £1, 42/6 costs, or 14 days—A cross summons by John Long against Wah Chong was dismissed without costs."<sup>16</sup>  
*Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*,  
16 September 1884.**

tenantry. These undesirable individuals, who already have carried on their nefarious trade too long, have been shunted from the premises referred to, and one of the firewater dispensaries is thus abolished."<sup>14</sup>

Over the next 12 months there are references to occasional clashes between Chinese and others,

and mention of businesses such as ‘fantan, gambling and immorality’. It is also noted that the Chinese community in Bundaberg are referred to in the local papers in a number of ways—Celestials, Chinese, almond-eyed, longtails, Chinkies —sometimes in the same paragraph.

### Ah Keet

There are numerous reports of Chinese individuals appearing before the Police Court on a range of charges—most predominantly sly grog selling. One person in particular seemed to make a habit of getting caught for pretty crimes—Ah Keet.

Ah Keet makes an appearance for the first time in the *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail* in November 1886, for ‘larceny of a cheque valued £2, the property of Ah Foo’.<sup>17</sup> Two days later he was back to be charged for sly grog selling, and received a fine of £30. According to the papers, he pleaded poverty and elected to take out the three months in gaol.

Further investigation by the Court discovered a day or two before his arrest, Ah Keet had withdrawn all his money from the Savings Bank to prevent paying a fine. In the words of the Court report, “...we understand the Attorney-General has given orders to impound Ah Keet’s treasure, very much, no doubt, to that designing individual’s disgust...”<sup>18</sup> A week later Ah Keet was back in the Court for a second sly-grog selling offence, then makes a return appearance in the papers—this time *The Brisbane Courier*, 14 April 1887.

### An Enterprising Caterer

A reporter from *The Bundaberg Star* visited the Chinese quarter in Bundaberg at night, and mentions that:

*“Ah Keet is one of the most enterprising of caterers for the requirements and pleasures of a kanaka constituency. He will supply his...customers with anything they may require—providing that they can pay for it— from a bottle of snake juice downwards.*



An Opium Den in Chinatown, San Francisco, ca1868-1900.

*three tumbledown outhouses—Justice herself could call them nothing else—Ah Keet pays a wealthy citizen £3 per week rent. How do you imagine he earns the money to pay for this? He does no work. And has no lawful wares to offer for sale.*

*The scenes which were enacted at his premises last Saturday night reveal his many and devious modes of life.”<sup>19</sup> The paper went on to describe the sight of hundreds of drunken kanakas entering and leaving Ah Keet’s premises that night, and then the interior of the premises.*

**“We entered the room, which was probably about 12ft. square. It was furnished with one bed, a few seats, and was lit by a kerosene lamp. A woman half-rose from the bed and displayed some fear at the suddenness of our entry. As, however, it was an ‘off’ night, and no business was being transacted, we left and proceeded to another common lodging-house nearer the river bank. This is kept by a Cingalee—Dan Appo—who pays £2 per month for a house of four rooms and a kitchen. There were fourteen Cingalese on the premises, which was licensed for four.”<sup>20</sup>**

***The Brisbane Courier 14 April, 1887***

## Outcry

After some weeks of agitation, local residents had had enough, and when several hundred kanakas almost caused riot one Saturday night, 'boosed and stupefied with opium'<sup>20</sup>, Bundaberg citizens took action.

The Municipal Council appointed a Committee to investigate the liquor selling, and after a mass meeting at Victoria Hall, called for two licenses held by Cingalese lodging-houses to be cancelled. In coverage by *Queensland Figaro and Punch*, a reporter points out that workers come into Bundaberg after 4pm on Saturdays to buy supplies to last until Monday, when they return to work.

The article also notes that *"The boarding houses at which white men stay are barred against them, and no publican would risk his license even to give them grub and bread. The Chinese and Cingalese cater especially for them—theirs are the only places at which they can obtain sustenance, and the unfortunate fact remains that they are led into ways that are dark by their entertainers...the whole difficulty is assuming unpleasant proportions in Bundaberg, but I fail to see how it can be surmounted."*<sup>21</sup>

### LARRIKINISM ON THE INCREASE.

To the Editor of the Bundaberg and M. P. Mail.  
 SIR,—About midnight on Friday night last a gang of six or seven of the larrikin type paraded Bourbon-street, doing more or less damage. They attacked a store of mine which is at present let to Jack Hing, a Chinaman; the implements of war used in the attack were pieces of blue metal stone from off the street, which entered the shop with considerable force, completely shattering the top panes of glass which are unprotected by shutters. Taking into consideration the fact that this being the third attack during the past twelve months, and that it necessitates a considerable expenditure for repairs, I think it high time to complain, or at least to endeavor to find out the offenders, and in order to be more successful in that respect I offer a reward of ten pounds to anyone giving such information as will lead to a conviction of the offenders. Should I be successful in my endeavor to find out the offenders, and when placed before our worthy P.M. I have no doubt they will receive their just reward. Yours, &c.,  
 D. McCONVILLE.

The problems occurring in Bundaberg with Chinese businesses were also mentioned in the *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miner's Advocate*—not renowned for their pro-Chinese attitude—*"...something like half of the western side of the leading thoroughfare of Bundaberg is allotted to Chinese merchants of high and low degree—and particularly the latter—does not say much either for our progress or patriotism as a community.*

*We reckon that now especially, when the anti-Chinese cry is to be a watchword of the forthcoming political struggle, communities should bestir themselves at least a little to remove these plagues from their midst."*<sup>22</sup>

## The Bundaberg Anti—Chinese League

Shortly after this, the *Bundaberg Reporter* ran a story by a member of the Bundaberg Anti-Chinese League that the day of the Chinese was almost over. The League produced a petition which circulated in Bundaberg demanding the Chinese leave town.<sup>23</sup> It was not resoundingly successful—



bun01949 Are Sol delivering vegetables at Fairymead ca1880s.

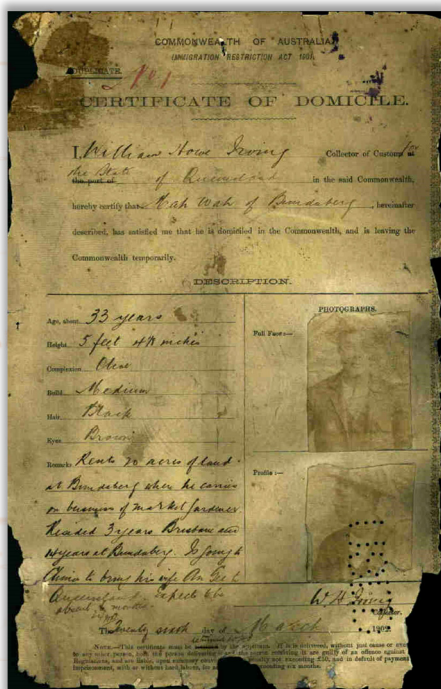
indeed by now many residents were very favourably disposed toward the hard working market gardeners and merchants from the Chinese community.

## Chinatown

Local historian Neville Rackemann mentions the area of Bourbong Street that was popularly known as Chinatown. The land between Tantitha Street and Saltwater Creek was predominantly market gardens and shops selling Chinese delicacies. Rackemann mentions 'ginger, teas, sauces, spices, dried shark fins etc.'<sup>24</sup> Another area that was used for market gardens was on the north side of the river, between Hinkler Avenue, Fairymead and Waterview Roads. Crops grown included peanuts, bananas, plantains, water-melons and vegetables and fruit. In *The Growing Harvest*, Rackemann reports that market gardens were also along the flats by Paddy's Creek, and deep holes known as Chinaman's Holes were dug into the creekbed to have a water supply in case of drought.

## Mah Wah

One of the most respected Chinese gardeners was Mah Wah, who had cultivated gardens in North Bundaberg off Hinkler Avenue since 1887. His horse and cart was a familiar sight around Bundaberg streets.

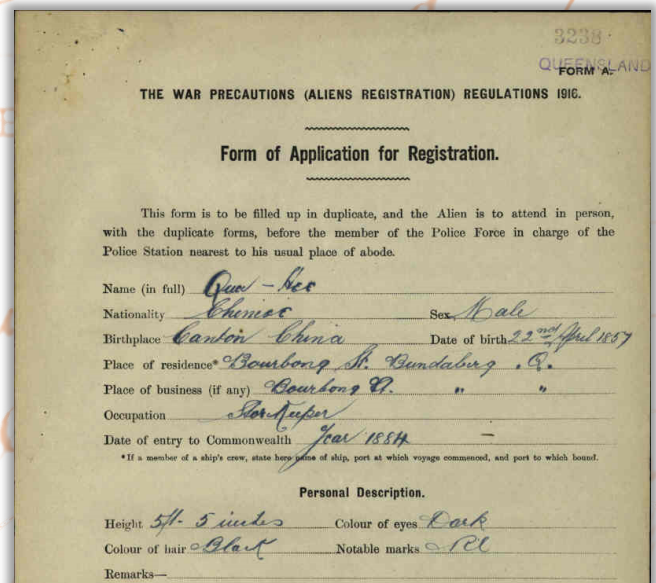


**Certificate of domicile for Mah Wah— lists his occupation as a market gardener from Bundaberg. National Archives of Australia**

In July 1894 *The Western Champion* reported grudgingly that "...there are Chinamen and Chinamen, and Mah Wah of Bundaberg, evidently belongs to the class at the opposite pole from that of some of his countrymen. Mah Wah won £3 6s. in prizes for vegetables at the Bundaberg Show, and not only gave the whole of his exhibits to the hospital, but offered a guinea also on receiving his prize money."<sup>25</sup>

## Businesses

Long time resident Austen Whitaker can still remember many of the Chinese shopkeepers at the eastern end of Bourbong Street. The Que Hee brothers owned a fruit and vegetable shop on the corner of Bourbong and Walla Streets. Austen recalls that their speciality was the sale of



fireworks leading up to Guy Fawkes night. The brothers would organise a large fireworks display on a vacant lot opposite their shop, which proved to be very popular with locals.<sup>26</sup>

Y.S. Que Hee had a market garden on Branyan Road, and in later years with G.Y. Que Hee, was also a sugar cane producer. The Que Hee name is still remembered in Bundaberg with a local street named after the Brothers, and the grave of Yen See Que Hee (1868-1927), at the Bundaberg General Cemetery.

Other successful Chinese businesses in Bourbong Street included the fruit and vegetable shop of Charlie Lee King, who lived at the rear of the store situated on the corner of Bourbong and Tantitha Streets. Austen Whitaker also remembers Billy Quin Ton who had a fruit and vegetable shop in Bourbong Street across from the current site of J&R McCracken.

Chinese names mentioned in early Bundaberg history include Kwong Fat, Peter Mew, Willy Yick, Tommy Ping, Yip Gee, Billy Lee King, Davie See Chin, Chan Bun Yung, Ah Why and Ah Gong.

## Archive records

A search of the records at the National Archives turns up many references to workers, farm labourers and gardeners here in Bundaberg from the 1880s onwards. Many returned to China in the early 1900s, and still more were repatriated after death. *The Bundaberg Mail* recorded in February 1911 that "The secretary of the trustees of the Bundaberg Cemetery received £10 from a local Chinaman, being the fees for the disinterment of five bodies of fellow countrymen buried in the local cemetery. The bodies are to be packed in a lead lined casket and sent to China."<sup>27</sup>

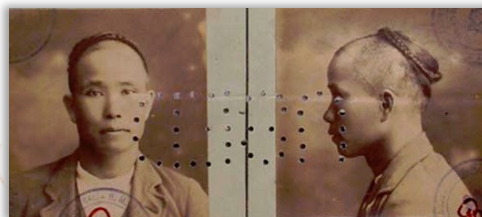
In the early days of the Bundaberg Cemetery burials of Chinese, South Sea Islanders and other denominations were situated in the far part of the cemetery, in a section called PSA (Portion Set Aside). The people who are buried here have no headstones, just a listing on the Cemetery records of a name and a date.

One of the most respected of our early Chinese identities, Mah Wah, is listed as being buried here in 1934, as well as hundreds of other Chinese names.

Some may have been repatriated back to their homeland, but there are no records of which names.

Sue Gammon  
Bundaberg Regional Libraries

## National Archives images of Bundaberg Chinese



Ah Bue



Charlie Foo



Yee Yow



Sing Lee



Tommy Goong Seng



War Hing



War Loo



War Quay



Wing Chin



Yee Gee

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Rains, Kevin, *The Chinese Question*, <http://www.qhatlas.com.au/content/chinese-question>.
- <sup>2</sup> Australia's Migration History, <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/>.
- <sup>3</sup> *op cit.* Rains.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Mount Perry Mail*, Thu 4 June 1874.
- <sup>6</sup> *Mount Perry Mail*, Thu 16 July 1874.
- <sup>7</sup> *Mount Perry Mail*, Thu 16 July 1874.
- <sup>8</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, 11 November 1881.
- <sup>9</sup> Rackemann, N., *The Growing Harvest*, Bundaberg & District Fruit & Vegetable Growers' Association, 1987. p8.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p5.
- <sup>11</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, November 11, 1881.

- <sup>12</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Tue 13 March 1883.
- <sup>13</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, 21 August 1883.
- <sup>14</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, 24 August 1883.
- <sup>15</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, 9 September 1884.
- <sup>16</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, 16 September 1884.
- <sup>17</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, 17 September 1886.
- <sup>18</sup> *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, 24 November 1886.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 14 April 1887.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> *Queensland Figaro and Punch*, Saturday 30 April 1887, p17.
- <sup>22</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate*, Tuesday 17 April 1888, p5.
- <sup>24</sup> *op cit.* Rackemann, p.9.
- <sup>23</sup> Rackemann, p8.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Western Champion and General Advertiser for the Central-Western Districts*, Tuesday 10 July 1894.
- <sup>26</sup> Whitaker, Austen, Letter, 28 January, 2014.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, Tuesday 28 February 1911, p4.

## Images

- Illustration— *Qld Punch & Figaro*, Sat Jan 21, 1888, National Library of Australia.
- Chinese Marker Gardener, Atherton*, National Trust of Qld, Hou Wang Temple.
- Chinese Fantan Game 1910s*, Special Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries.
- An Opium Den in Chinatown, San Francisco, CA., ca1868-1900.*, Robert N. Dennis Collection, New York Public Library.
- bun01949—*Are Sol Delivering Vegetables to Fairymead, ca 1880s.*, Picture Bundaberg, Bundaberg Regional Libraries.
- Certificate of Domicile*—Mah Wah, National Archives.
- Form of Application for registration*— Que Hee, National Archives.
- Images of Bundaberg Chinese—Certificates of Domicile*, #5049015, 5059665, 5059687, 5059745, 5059774, 5059775, 5059787, 5059857, 5059878, 5059879, 5059917, 5058001, 5062778, 5062843, National Archives.

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