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Testimonies from White Australia:

oral history interviews with Chinese immigrants and their descendants

ITEM MS 14434 in the Australian Manuscripts Collection of the State Library of Victoria comprises interviews with twenty people speaking about the experiences of Chinese immigrants and their descendants in Australia. I recorded the interviews between 1976 and 1983, a time when many immigrants of non-English speaking backgrounds were taking stock of their places in Australian society and asking that their lives in and contributions to the country be regarded with the same respect as those of British and European Australians. As part of a Chinese-Australian family, I wanted to explore something of the experiences of participants in the Chinese diaspora and the State Library of Victoria was happy to act as the host for an oral history project. An Australia-China Council grant covered expenses, my informants and I donated our time and MS 14434 was born. The testimonies it contains, together with related written and printed documents, provide detailed accounts of daily life over more than eighty years from the 1890s. They tell of work practices and of family and gender relations, of recreational pursuits and living in Chinese communities, country towns and suburbs. They describe life in China for residents and visitors and discuss war, civil breakdown and revolution, rejection and acceptance and Chinese-Australian contributions to Australia and to China.

The nineteen informants of Chinese descent were a varied group. The oldest, Samuel Tongway, a retired school principal, was born in 1894 to naturalised immigrant parents. His mother, a housewife, had been raised in a Lutheran orphanage in Hong Kong; his father, a Christian minister based in Ballarat, was a missionary to Victoria's Chinese population.[1] Tom Leung, born in Guangdong's Hock Shan district, came to Melbourne with his mother Rose in 1940, aged five, and met for the first time his father Allan, a tea merchant and importer. They stayed and Tom became a surgeon.[2] Kevin Wong Hoy, a fourth generation Queenslander and social worker and, at 34 the youngest informant, was keenly exploring his family's histories and the meaning of identity for himself and his young son.[3] John Bromell, a British-Australian, who had worked alongside Chinese immigrant vegetable growers in Victoria's Western District for many years, offered interesting observations about their cultivation methods and lifestyles.[4]

Although all informants were resident in Victoria, thirteen had lived elsewhere: China, Hong Kong, Singapore, England, the Northern Territory, Queensland and Tasmania. Their employment experiences were also diverse, most having worked at more than one job. Frank Chinn had been a fruit and vegetable wholesaler, an interpreter, cook and theatrical agent; Allan Leung had worked as a writer, merchant, waiter and

restaurateur; Stanley Kim gave up market gardening to become a bookmaker.[5]

What the nineteen informants of Chinese descent had in common was the experience of being an obvious minority during the long period from the 1850s to the 1970s when most Europeans in Australia identified themselves as British and believed that Britons, with their vast empire, were superior to other people and most certainly to non-Europeans. Chinese immigrants, simply by going about their business with competence, challenged that assumption of superiority, first on the goldfields as miners and later in other places and occupations. The impact of their presence and the alarm which ensued have been discussed extensively elsewhere.[6] These sources remind us however that before Federation fear was a powerful factor in forming public attitudes towards Chinese: fear of being swamped by an alien people, and fear of Chinese as cheap labour, as equals and as superiors. By 1900, when Samuel Tongway was six years old, British Australians had decided, as politician Alfred Deakin noted, that they wanted to be one people 'without an admixture of other races'.[7]

After Federation, British Australians resolved their discomfort with Chinese by legislating to gradually remove them from the country and from occupations where they might compete. The 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, passed when Chinese were 0.78% of the population, was the first measure designed to end Chinese immigration. It stipulated that a prospective immigrant who failed a dictation test of 50 words in a European language would not be admitted. The 1903 Nationality Act prevented non-Europeans from becoming citizens and, forty years later, informant Dennis O'Hoy was initially denied borrowing rights at his municipal library because, although his family had been Bendigo residents and businessmen since the 1860s, his father was not naturalised. From 1905, non-European immigrants could not bring their wives and children to live with them in Australia although exceptions were made for the wives of established merchants (like the O'Hoy and Leung families) who might be allowed short stays. Workers needed for specifically Chinese businesses, such as importing, were granted only short term entry permits. These measures contributed to the decline of Australia's Chinese population from 29,627 in 1901 to 9,144 by 1947. John Bromell observed this decline from Illira Station near Cavendish where Chinese were employed from the 1920s through the 1940s.[8]

Federal laws also denied rights and opportunities to citizens of Chinese descent, those naturalised before 1903 and the native born. From 1909, Australians not substantially of European origin or descent could not participate in military training, implying that their loyalty was suspect.[9] Teenagers, Samuel Tongway and Frank Chinn, rejected as cadets, felt ostracised. In 1916, when men were being urged to serve, Samuel, anxious to fulfil his wartime duty, was distressed when refused enlistment in the army. He was relieved to be accepted against regulations in 1917, when recruitment still lagged.[10] The 1912 Baby Bonus went only to mothers with babies of European stock.[11]

Victorian law prevented anyone with a Chinese parent from holding a gold-buying licence or a liquor permit. The O'Hoys, unable to run directly the hotel they owned, were

forced to seek a tenant licensee. Mining companies were prohibited from employing Chinese; the government would not contract with Chinese firms; and, from 1896, while four Europeans could work together unregulated, a single Chinese furniture maker or laundryman was deemed a factory, his working hours legally defined and policed by inspectors.[12]

Samuel Tongway and Frank Chinn were children at the White Australia Policy's inception. They lived to see its final dismantling with gradual change from the late 1940s leading to a non-discriminatory immigration policy in 1973. In 1975, the Nationality Act ended preference for Britons.[13]

This article will present examples of the detailed information the testimonies provide and, drawing on them, will look at how some Chinese immigrants and their descendants made their way in a society where the concept of a fair go was prized, the rule of law was respected and racism was institutionalised. Of the many issues discussed in the interviews, it will focus on aspects of just five, though all are connected: work, family, women's lives, racism and identity.

Work

Initially most Chinese did not emigrate to settle but to work and then return home. In 1901, of Australia's 29,627 Chinese, only 474 were female.[14] Men aimed first to provide for themselves and their families, then to make enough money to return to China and live comfortably. Merchants were best placed to achieve these goals. They were literate, comparatively affluent and, as importers, had dealings with authorities and so often became community spokesmen. For example, Dennis O'Hoy's grandfather, Duk Hoy, as a community representative, helped organise the Chinese contribution to Bendigo's Easter Fairs in the 1870s.[15]

Chinese businesses involved male family members, fathers, sons and brothers. It was based on mutual trust and obligation, which enabled staffing flexibility and continuity of governance, so that when Duk Hoy retired to China his son Que replaced him. Management was usually consultative but with a hierarchical structure that gave older men the last word. Allan Leung's father worked for fourteen years in North America, enabling his son to go to university in Guangzhou and obtain a well-paid job as a writer. But in the 1930s, when family business interests in Hong Kong needed a manager, Allan was called there and later reluctantly agreed to run the firm's Melbourne office. The business, selling tea, groceries and baskets, served the whole Australian community and was, by Allan's reckoning, substantial.[16]

Merchants' premises were often part of Chinese community mutual help networks, serving as social and welfare centres for the overwhelmingly male population. Whoever shopped exclusively at Mee Chun & Co, 117 Russell St Melbourne, for foodstuffs, tools and implements, could enjoy a free meal there on Sundays and meet compatriots. Allan Leung transmitted their money to China, collected and passed on mail and translated and explained business notices. In Bendigo, the O'Hoys displayed articles from Chinese

newspapers and acted as money lenders and pawn brokers. Allan believed that many poorly educated Chinese would not have coped without the services rendered by merchants in return for custom. Samuel Tongway observed that his father's religious services were attended for companionship and out of gratitude for his letter writing and translation skills rather than from interest in Christianity.[17]

As mining declined, especially from the 1880s, many Chinese, looking for other occupations, turned to market gardening, work not popular with British Australians and familiar to Guangdong villagers. By 1901, a third of Victoria's Chinese were gardeners. We know of one of them, Kim Gin Meng, because his sons Stanley and Albert and Albert's wife Esme were interviewed. Kim left Tasmania's tin mines in 1883 to grow and hawk vegetables in the Western District, thrived, and in 1910 established himself in Casterton. The careful industry of such men delivered fine produce for more than fifty years. John Bromell of Illira, watching Chinese gardeners in the 1940s, noted, 'They seemed to be able to get things growing when we couldn't'. He described the men practising shallow tilling, using only a hoe to break up the soil and work in manure. Near Bendigo, in the 1930s, tomatoes grown by informant George Nan Tie, started life in timber framed 'hot boxes' containing specially prepared soil layered over horse manure. As they grew they were protected from frost by bags and boards placed and removed by hand. Pumpkin seeds were sown in condensed milk tins and set in the warmth of a manure heap to sprout. To informant Arthur Moy, born to part Chinese parents, Dimboola's market garden in the 1920s looked as if each plant had received individual attention. Young George Nan Tie scrubbed individual carrots and parsnips before tying them in bunches with flax for good presentation.[18]

Chinese gardens grew a wide range of vegetables. Gardeners who traded door to door or with local retailers delivered a variety of fresh produce, sold on the day it was harvested, a practice which makes farmers' markets popular today. A comparison of work practices described in the interviews with those of modern organic producers would make an interesting study.

Gardeners worked long hours, often from dawn to dusk, sustained by a basic diet of varied vegetables with rice. At the Nan Tie garden. salt fish, preserved bean curd, eggs and 'butcher's meat' provided protein; at Dimboola, pigs and poultry supplied meat and manure; and at Illira gardeners ate wild birds. Meals described in the interviews mostly comprised fresh produce. Such fare, combined with day long unhurried exercise, perhaps explains why informants so rarely mentioned illness.[19]

By the 1920s. Chinese laundrymen were fewer and fear of competition had declined. Two women whose parents ran a well patronised laundry in a country town in that time, and who wished to testify anonymously, described intensive, often physically demanding work, with hours ranging from sunrise to sunset five days a week with a half day on Saturday. Tasks included sorting and labelling items of clothing and manchester, soaking them all, boiling some, hand washing others, hand rinsing and hand mangling everything, drying and ironing. The father took on the most intricate tasks, those final

stages of the eight part process involved in producing a perfectly finished collar.[20] In a city, this laundry, deemed a factory, might well have been fined by an inspector for working overlong hours.

Family and Work

Where gardeners and laundrymen were citizens and had families here, wives and children often worked in the business. George Nan Tie and his sister sowed, transplanted, weeded, harvested and cleaned vegetables before and after school and at weekends until 4pm. George and his mother regularly forked manure from a truck to the garden. Mrs Kim harvested vegetables and Mrs Nan Tie often packed them. The daughters at the family laundry started ironing from the age of ten and thereafter had little spare time.

The children of gardening families, however, were often reluctant to inherit such arduous work. Kim Gin Meng advised his sons against it, partly because unremitting effort could be so easily undone by unfavourable weather. They heeded him and became businessmen in Hamilton and Casterton. Between 1935 and 1941, when he turned thirteen, George Nan Tie lived through two droughts and a grasshopper infestation. He remembered, 'There was no recourse'. He became a fitter and turner and toolmaker.[21]

Until the 1930s when their numbers declined markedly, Chinese were our major growers and distributors of vegetables and market gardeners were probably the Chinese most familiar to Victorians. Their work was an important part of the mainstream economy, yet without their families or a long term future here and with often rudimentary English, most lived on the margins of society. In Dimboola, Arthur Moy assimilated the community view of single gardeners as 'funny people' and 'not regular human beings'. Informant Kelvin Bew testified that in Warrnambool gardeners visited his father George, a herbalist, who insisted that Kelvin address them in Chinese with the politeness due to elders. Kelvin therefore felt he was 'the same kind of person as the gardeners'. He considered that they were accepted but not respected in the town where they delivered door-to-door. When he passed them on the street he made a point of acknowledging them with a wave or a greeting in Chinese.

From the late nineteenth century, the second generation of Chinese descent, having been educated here, had greater occupational choice. Samuel Tongway (teaching), the Kim brothers (bookmaking, retailing, and transport), George Nan Tie (various trades), Tom Leung (medicine) and Arthur Moy's father (shoemaking) moved into mainstream occupations. Arthur's three brothers became successful businessmen in the footwear and poultry industries. Arthur completed his teaching career in the 1970s as Assistant Director of Secondary Education in Victoria.[22]

Family loyalty and remittances bound Chinese at home and abroad. A letter written in 1892 by Maa Ch'oy Yick to his brother Ch'oy Gam in Australia indicates both the pressure such ties could impose and the contributions made by emigrants to economic development in China. Ch'oy Yick details how money sent back has been spent on family expenses and pawn broking, dealing in farm land. He lists who is buying land and

Women and children of the Lee family, Darwin, 1918, with Selina Lee (later Hassan) on the right. The Lees cared for Henry Madigan, the European child in the photograph while his unmarried mother worked. When he was eleven and his mother tried to reclaim him, the Lee family were given custody at this request and the family later adopted him. Copy in Building A Country Archive, Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

building houses, gives prices of commodities, warns against hiring outsiders, considers which family members could join Ch'oy Gam and exhorts him to send more money and to save more, so that he won't be shamed by returning with insufficient retirement funds. He declares the family is unhappy because clansmen from San Francisco are bringing back 'thousands of silver taels' while 'the money that you sent to us would be not even a few hundred'. Ch'oy Gam is urged to 'be better than the others'.

Informant Frank Chinn strongly criticised such competitive, demanding attitudes, believing emigrants worked harder than their dependants in China. In 1921, when a shed hand's annual wage was 234 Australian pounds, the country town laundryman sent 100 pounds to China each year. Allan Leung observed that See Yup villagers in the 1930s much preferred the Nationalist Party to the Communist Party. Was this in part because their economy was reliably underpinned by money from overseas and they saw no need for change?[23]

Family

Most of the world's people in the first half of the twentieth century probably looked to relatives for help in troubled times and several informants testified that among Chinese, familial obligation was strong. S. Y. Ting's family was supported by his uncle after his father died. In Ballarat, Esme Kim's paternal uncle helped care for her and her brother

after their father's death and later assumed responsibility for raising her brother. He was their only relative, Esme's mother's European family having disowned her after she married a Chinese. When Frank Chinn's sister died leaving seven children aged between one and thirteen, her four brothers, supported by their mother and sister, unhesitatingly took them all in.[24]

Without such family help, George Nan Tie would have found life hard. His father, a good gardener with a disastrous gambling addiction, was declared bankrupt when George was eleven. As the oldest son and the only family member who could read English well, George had the heavy responsibility of summarising legal and business documents. Until he was thirteen, when his father died, he was anxious about his capabilities and stressed by the stigma of bankruptcy. He recounted that it took him years to recover his confidence. His life improved when a maternal uncle in Melbourne took him in and he began an apprenticeship.[25]

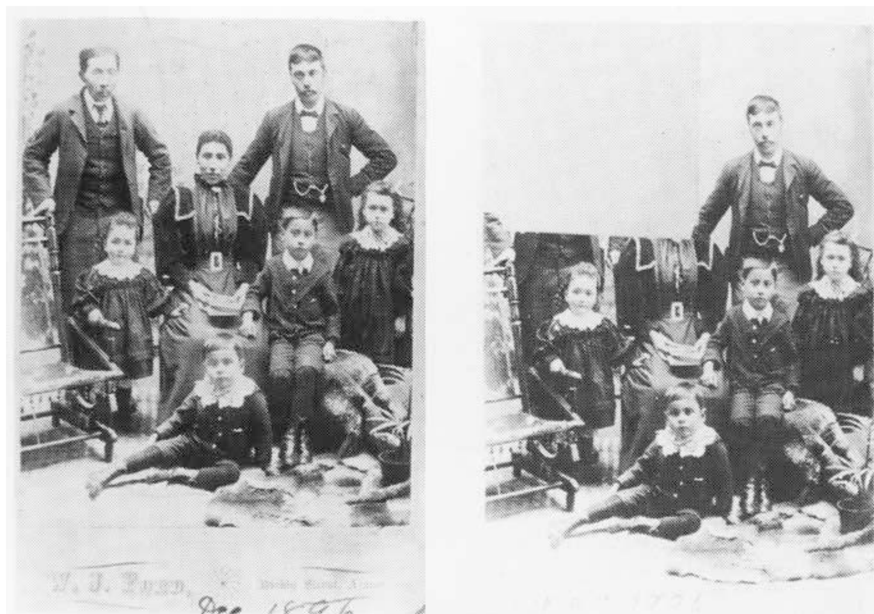
Elderly Chinese here alone wanted to return to China to die. Those who could not afford to go often ended their days in city-based Chinese community institutions. John Bromell recalled a steadily declining number of aging gardeners in the Hamilton area in the 1930s and 1940s and mentioned the kindness of the Boyds, a couple who invited them home as a Christian duty, offering friendship before they left for China or the city. Mrs Robertson of 'Skene' near Hamilton managed to ensure that the property's gardener, Poon Chee, after fifty years in Australia, received an old age pension. He would not leave Australia, however, fearing he would be a burden to his family. Mrs Robertson recorded that before he died in the 1960s, he had enjoyed buying icy poles for her children 'who he loved and always wanted to give to'. At this time, Poon had in Hong Kong a son he had never seen.

Informant Liou Yea Sen spent most of his adult life in Victoria and remitted 100 pounds twice yearly to China for much of that time. After the Communist government took over his family's property, he paid for his son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren to go first to Hong Kong and then to the USA. Interviewed in 1982, he was choosing to stay on his garden in Donald.

Perhaps it was easier for Poon and Liou to end their lives in a place they knew than in a strange town or city, among unfamiliar relatives. Stranded by a China in turmoil and a fearful Australia, they were unable to enjoy the results of their toil. Hard working, steadfastly loyal to their families and contributors to the economies of two lands, men like Poon and Liou are perhaps among the tragic, unacknowledged heroes of Australian and Chinese history.[26]

Family and Women's Lives

Informant Selina Hassan was born in Darwin in 1901 to a mobile family. Her grandfather, Lee Han Gong, who came to Ballarat in the 1850s, was a naturalised storekeeper in Creswick in 1871 and later owned a tin mine near Darwin. His wife, Londoner Sarah Bowman, a midwife, had an identity and income independent of her husband. At a time



The Taylor family, 1896. The pressure of racism was so intense that Mrs Taylor cut herself and her father out of the photograph of his Chinese-Malay family so that future generations, unaware of their Asian background, could pass as southern Europeans. Reproduced in *Photofile*, Summer 1986 edition, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 23

when most Chinese marriages were arranged, Selina's father, in Hong Kong on business, chose his own wife, Emily Louey. Yet when the family lived in Hong Kong, this freely chosen spouse found him a younger second wife and, after he died in 1906, returned to Darwin leaving her youngest children for two years in Guangzhou with 'our second mother' whom they liked.

In Darwin, Emily was at first supported by her late husband's brother, then went into business selling snacks and soft drinks. When she became financially independent, she assumed the role of family head and arranged a marriage for eighteen year old Selina with Ali Hassan. Ali, born in Shanghai to a Chinese mother and Indian father, had business interests and, when he died ten years later, Selina managed them. She felt there was not much difference in status between men and women in her family.

Mixed race marriages were not uncommon in Darwin. Selina's uncles married women from Japan and the Philippines and the wife of Ali's European employer was Japanese. The Lee family even adopted a British Australian boy, highly unusual in White Australia. The Darwin of Selina's testimony, 1901-1940, was flexible, multi-cultural and pragmatic and women could achieve a degree of independence there.[27] Was other people's Darwin as relaxed? If so, was Darwin Australia's most easy-going, tolerant town?

Rose Leung's history was very different. Married in the mid 1930s by arrangement at the age of twenty-two, she remembered her Hock Shan birthplace for its amiable people and ample food. On rising she had a cup of tea and a biscuit; at 10am came the

day's first meal of rice with vegetables, fish and meat; the early afternoon brought a light meal of sweet potatoes or noodles; and at 6pm there was a second, substantial repast. The villagers, however, were subsistence farmers with no surplus to purchase education or property, so Rose's marriage into a village where most men worked abroad and had funds to invest was strategically sound. She could then perhaps help her kin in hard times.

The sons in her husband's family had white collar jobs but Rose received nothing from her husband's earnings. A dominating mother-in-law prescribed a long, unvarying daily routine, punctuated by meal breaks. Rose got up at dawn, brought water from the well, washed bowls and chopsticks, fed the pigs, heated water for her mother-in law to bathe, prepared the main morning meal, washed the family's clothes and watched carefully to ensure they dried soft and pliable. She then mended for the family, went to the hills to cut grass for fuel and, if there was time, helped in the vegetable fields which, with so many men abroad, had become the women's responsibility.

Interviewed with her husband Allan and son Tom, Rose wept while recollecting her powerlessness and declared that she would never have married from choice. However, she accepted that she lived in a society where 'young people had no opinions'. She considered herself fairly well treated. She had enough to eat; was not beaten; when her first baby was born, a frail boy, she was not berated for producing a sickly child and her mother-in-law readily called in doctors. She noted that a girl baby would not have received such care. During her interview, Rose alluded to her mother-in-law's needs and frustrations and to their, at times, interdependent relationship. She also spoke about the situation of women whose husbands died or absconded overseas.

Rose's strong feelings were not unusual. In various parts of China, village based secret societies favoured rights for women and from the early nineteenth century in the Guangzhou delta, women sericulture (silktrade) workers had sufficient economic independence to refuse to marry. Rose was not literate but had heard of these women. Her interpretation was that they refused to live with their mothers-in-law and the government wanted to imprison them. Allan and Tom were sympathetic to her views. Allan certainly ensured that his daughters had the same opportunities for a university education as their brothers.

When the Japanese pushed into south China, Rose's father-in-law called the family to join him in Hong Kong. Then Allan, after an unsuccessful application, finally obtained permission for Rose and Tom to visit him in Melbourne. When the Japanese took Hong Kong in 1941, they were allowed to stay.

Melbourne offered freedom. Rose considered it easier to have eleven children there than to bear one in the village. She knew that having children was dangerous; Allan's first two wives had died in childbirth. She had delivered Tom unaided, squatting and when he fell to the floor two older women cut the umbilical cord and left Rose to clear away the afterbirth. She spoke no English but was appreciative of the help she received in Melbourne hospitals.

In a dwelling off Little Bourke Street, in charge of her household and able to ask her husband directly for whatever she needed, Rose felt at ease. Tom described her as 'the family powerhouse' because Allan often worked into the evening and she brought up twelve children virtually alone. She also contributed to the family income by making the rattan baskets that so many Australians liked to buy. In the 1960s, when the family opened a restaurant, she worked there to achieve economic security and claimed old age was her happiest time because her children, all tertiary educated professionals, were by then self-sufficient.[28]

Mrs Nan Tie helped in the garden while caring for seven children and cooked every night for her family and the six to ten men her husband employed. Similarly the working mother at the country laundry was responsible for her children and the housework. Like Rose, these women contributed to family income and rarely had time to go out to socialise. They were highly motivated but their husbands controlled the family finances. They were co-workers rather than equal partners.[29]

Mrs Tong Way, Mrs Chinn and Mrs O'Hoy lived conservatively. They were free to go out but mainly stayed at home, attended to housework and children, cooked from supplies brought to the house and were visited by friends. However, the O'Hoy and Chinn families had rebel daughters. In 1910, one of Frank's sisters refused an arranged marriage, leaving home to live in a guest house to avoid family pressure. Frank recalled, 'It created a ruckus'. In the 1940s, an O'Hoy daughter went dancing regardless of her father's wishes and her parents' disapproval of her Australian boyfriends. She later married a man of her choice.[30]

In some informant families men happily assumed domestic roles. The Chinn brothers usually prepared the main (evening) meal; in the Kim Gin Meng, Tong Way and laundry families, fathers cooked regularly; George Bew did so occasionally. Were women given special consideration because they were so few? Or did the men simply like to cook and were able to do so freely here? No interview reported women hankering after village life. Most seemed content in Australia. In second and third generation families like the Moys, younger Kims and Wong Hoys or where immigrant men like George Bew were active in the wider community, the position of women resembled the Australian norm. Wives sometimes worked outside the home but were usually housewives and husband and wife both participated in community activities.[31]

Racism

Almost all informants, when children, were called names, hit or shunned. This occurred even when their families seemed accepted in the community. In Dimboola, the Moys had a business, Mr Moy was active in sporting and church activities and Mrs Moy had a circle of friends. British Australians willingly helped Kim Gin Meng get established as an independent gardener and, when he bought land at Casterton in 1908, the *Hamilton Spectator* wished him well. So why were their children abused?

Arthur and Bill Moys' testimony identified a casual racism where adults persistently

used terms they knew were offensive. Bill had fair skin and could pass as a European and when he moved from Dimboola to Mildura, his background was unknown. Whenever acquaintances there spoke of 'bloody Chows' or 'the Chow shop', he felt compelled to tell them that he was half Chinese and embarrassment inevitably followed. This double standard of politeness to one's face and abuse behind one's back perhaps explains name calling by children whose parents were on ostensibly friendly terms with fellow citizens of Chinese descent.[32]

In Dimboola, 'Bloody Chow' and 'Ching Chong Chinaman' were frequent taunts. Esme Kim recalled regular name calling, hitting and hair pulling at primary school in Ballarat; at secondary school, the only classmates to speak to her were two fellow outcasts from an orphanage. The bullying stopped when she left school to work at a woollen mill. Kevin Wong Hoy was eight when he became convinced that he wasn't Australian but Chinese. 'It was,' he remembered, 'a shock'. He sometimes fought with abusers and, as he grew older, noted that the school curriculum colour coded race, with references to white men (Europeans), black men (Indians, Africans), yellow men (East Asians) and red men (Native Americans). People sometimes expressed surprise that he spoke good English.[33] After a happy childhood, teenaged George Nan Tie found his friendship with a Bendigo girl was discouraged by her mother and later, at dances, asked himself why he was sometimes rejected as a partner. Was he too short, too poor or too Chinese? Samuel Tongway met racism with stoicism: 'I was so keen on education and learning I just went straight ahead, that's all'.[34]

Bill Moy regretted that racism diminished his parents' confidence, making them feel 'coloured'. If visitors arrived unexpectedly, for instance, his mother hastened to hide all evidence of the Chinese food he so loved. Frank Chinn felt Chinese Australians were sometimes reluctant to speak out, fearing ridicule. More insidiously, George Nan Tie's maternal aunts rejected their brother's British Australian wife on the grounds that no-one who went out with a Chinese was any good. Frank and the Moy brothers knew that Italians and Greeks also met prejudice. Frank remembered, 'People spoke to them in such a condescending way'. He noted that Chinese too had abusive terms for foreigners. Like Bill, he pondered whether dislike of difference was perhaps a universal human trait.[35]

Identity

We define ourselves and are defined by others in many ways, by gender, family role and occupation, for instance, by what we are and what we are not. Most of the informants spent a part of their lives, some a significant part, being defined by others as at best different and often as not Australian. Their responses were varied.

Samuel Tongway, who had little in common with the aging Chinese population of Ballarat, chose to assimilate. An ardent student, in his teens he participated in and contributed to learning by joining working men in classes at the School of Mines and writing up the proceedings for the local paper. In his eighties, he recalled, 'I took as my stand that I was a citizen of the country. I was prepared to fight for the country and should

work for the country as well'. Always active in a wide range of community organisations wherever he lived and taught, his contributions were appreciated and he was honoured as a pioneer of children's library services in Victoria. As president of Bendigo Rotary in 1961-2, he organised the first visits to that city of students from Asia.[36]

George Nan Tie considered poverty a greater disadvantage than race. After a childhood of constant work, he decided to participate socially. He went out with his workmates, played sport for and held office in the YMCA, was active in the Young Chinese League (an organisation for people of Chinese descent and their spouses) and was a shop steward for the Amalgamated Engineering Union. Tom Leung found his large Chinese speaking family rather than his origins set him apart from his private school classmates. Both he and George, after contact with immigrants from Hong Kong and South-East Asia, became aware of the great diversity of the Chinese diaspora and found friends among those with common backgrounds and interests. George in the end favoured assimilation. Tom felt himself Chinese and Australian and made Chinese his children's first language.[37]

Frank Chinn and Selina Hassan considered themselves Chinese from Australia. Having heard so often that Chinese spoke poor English and held menial jobs, Frank, from his teens, took care to speak well, kept himself familiar with current ideas and was determined to meet others 'on an equal footing'. He earned his living within or close to the Chinese community and, as an activist in the Young Chinese League, he helped organise its dances, picnics and sports functions and represented its members at public events. He was honoured by the Republic of China for his services to Chinese Australians like himself. Selina, who grew up Chinese in Darwin and Guangzhou, had travelled to China and Japan as a young woman and spent the Second World War in Singapore where, under Japanese occupation and with nourishing food in short supply, she feared for the safety and health of her children. She valued Australia's plenty, peace, personal freedoms and economic prospects.[38]

The Kim brothers had lived in China as children and experienced ready acceptance and great kindness but also kidnappings and robbery with violence. At school in Australia, they had felt Chinese; as adults they identified as Casterton people. Esme, perhaps because of her school experiences, identified as Chinese. When she and Albert visited China, she felt safer there than in Australia.[39] Bill Moy and Kevin Wong Hoy had no such certainties. They had believed themselves to be Australian but were so persistently identified as Chinese that they spent years exploring what being Chinese involved, in Australia and South-East and East Asia. Bill found that he could not be like any of the Chinese he met overseas and was his own kind of Australian. Kevin, accepting that he 'looked Chinese but could not be Chinese,' welcomed the concept of multiculturalism and ensured that his son had opportunities to meet other Chinese Australian children and learn Chinese.[40]

In the late 1940s, Allan Leung had considered relocating to Hong Kong to educate his children in Chinese as well as in English. Fortunately, relatives convinced

him to stay in Melbourne because the Chinese government appropriated the family business in Guangdong then destroyed the successful trading company he represented by undercutting overseas merchants in the tea trade and forcing them out of business. In the 1960s, Allan became a restaurateur. He was pleased to have Australian citizenship but felt Chinese. Rose, with very little English, was happy in Australia.[41]

Kelvin Bew felt he was an Australian close to things Chinese rather like Dennis O'Hoy who, conscious of his family's long connection with Bendigo, undertook to collect and preserve records of the Chinese presence there. Dennis noted that in the late 1960s, during discussion about revitalising Chinese cultural traditions, a number of families of Chinese descent in Bendigo felt they would be better off if their lineage was not known.[42]

The most recently arrived informant, S. Y. Ting, lived through war and revolution in China. In Australia he worked as an actor and factory hand before settling into jobs selling and processing Chinese products. His friends, who met at a neighbourhood cafe, were of mixed cultural backgrounds, and Ting unhesitatingly defined himself as international, declaring, 'The more they mix up the better people are'.[43]

Informants welcomed the more tolerant Australia that had developed since the 1950s due to changes in international alliances, trading partners and immigration sources; to internal social movements, including multiculturalism; and to a resurgent China.[44] Some were cautious, aware that minorities were often persecuted at times of change and that the arrival of Indo-Chinese immigrants had renewed racist abuse.[45] The heated debates round multiculturalism from 1984 and rhetoric about an 'Asian invasion' validated their concerns.

The most telling evidence of the impact of a century of racism, however, was the care informants took to ensure that they and their testimonies would be respected. The two women who discussed their parents' laundry business did so anonymously and would speak only of work practices so that no listener would be able to identify them. Most informants required that their interviews be treated rather like a rare book, to be studied in the State Library with notes made for scholarly research and publication. Their voices could not be broadcast nor used on stage and, after their deaths, their children were to be responsible for ensuring that these conditions were honoured.

The testimonies have been recently digitised for preservation and the informants' descendants have been asked to lift access conditions so that the valuable information the interviews contain about Australia and China, snatches of which have been presented here, can be placed on open access. Responses so far have been positive. Compared with thirty years ago, there is now an expectation of being able to contribute as equals and that is pleasing. However, the State Library of Victoria must keep those restrictive permission forms as artefacts in their own right as evidence of how some Chinese Australians viewed their situation in this country in earlier, less confident, less tolerant times.