

Contentious Connections: Removals, Legislation and Indigenous-Chinese Contacts

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Introduction

¹ There has been a long history of contact between Indigenous and Chinese people in Australia. This is clearly evident within contemporary [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander](#) communities through the significant presence of individuals with Chinese ancestry. Early Indigenous-Chinese contact, however, was not sanctioned by White authorities: such contact was seen to contest White dominion and counter government anti-miscegenation policy. Through incorporating the voices of contemporary descendants of Indigenous-Chinese unions, this paper demonstrates how White authorities resorted to removal legislation to reassert their position within normative racial discourse.

Contact

² "In these perilous times (1996), when race in Australia has suddenly become a respectable topic and there flows forth a plethora of words on and about Aborigines and Asians - the most visible, it seems, of the minorities in this land - it is perhaps pertinent to remember that, once, the two came together during those times when being descended from the Indigenous peoples of Australia was seen as a liability." (Mudrooroo 259)

³ Contact between Indigenous and Chinese people in Australia has a history that dates back at least 150 years. Early Chinese immigration during the mid to late nineteenth century centred around regional Australia, away from areas highly populated by White colonists (Loh 3). Such regions had significant Indigenous populations, and the absence of White dominance allowed relatively frequent and free association between Indigenous people and the exclusively male Chinese immigrant (Anderson and Mitchell 32-33; Choi 13; Giese 39,46; Jack et al. 52; Keen 175; May 89; Trigger 216). Widespread hostility toward Chinese-White intercultural relationships and marriages throughout Australian society further facilitated more intimate Indigenous-Chinese relationships (May 209).

⁴ Across Australia, the Indigenous and the Chinese communities suffered the common indignities of segregation from and rejection by White society. Members of both communities endured the regular embarrassment of a White Australian's objections "to sitting amongst Chinese and aborigines watching manners which are certainly not attractive" (May 140). Newspapers of the time frequently scandalised "the many evils which were rampant among aboriginals and Chinese" ("Relief of Aborigines" 5). The two cultures were drawn together by their common experience of marginalisation from White society:

⁵ "The Chinese and the Aborigines sort of come together. You've only got to look at, read the history of Chinese and Aboriginal people, how they was, well, genocide too and they sort of come to live together as a people. He [Chinese neighbour] didn't know that we had Chinese in us or anything, he just treated us as, as any normal human being. It's just that the White people didn't like us that's all, so he was sort of struggling through the same sort of thing."

⁶ "It wasn't, wasn't strange to have a name like [Chinese family name]. But to be required to get passes because we were Aboriginal, we were treated as Aborigines I guess. In those early days it was like, in those developing towns, you found on the margins of those communities the Aboriginal community, the Chinese community."

⁷ In general, relations between the Chinese and Indigenous communities were relatively harmonious with mutual tolerance commonplace, although isolated incidences of violence have been recorded (Anderson and Mitchell 27,36; Evans et al. 257-58; Fisher 88; Giese 25,39,48; Hornadge 21-22; Jones 59; May 209; Reynolds 41; Rolls, *Sojourners: Flowers and the Wild Sea* 97,194,205,289-90,487; Rolls, *Citizens: Flowers and the Wild Sea* 34-35,87,100,106-08,188,426). In North Queensland, Aborigines with Chinese language skills even served as translators for the Chinese in their dealings with White Australians (Anderson and Mitchell 31-32). Tensions between Indigenous and Chinese people, it seems, were of less consequence than those between Indigenous and White Australians, who at the time were actively engaged in state-sponsored cultural genocide (Tatz 49-50).

⁸ Indigenous-Chinese contact led to an evolving social experience that entailed economic security and mutual benefit, including marriage and companionship, the exchange of commodities, opium and alcohol sales, and Indigenous labour for Chinese employers:

⁹ "Everything was just chaos, messed up, and so I think, on Nana's side, I can understand Nana, why she done it, because he probably had a future for her Chinese he just had a future for her. She knew that her family would be fed and back them days you only worried about a feed and a bed and how to survive. So I think it was a survival thing for her, because the Aboriginal nation was just chaotic and they just messed it right up, they took everybody away."

¹⁰ "I know stories from old men from Thursday Island, actually, who used to come through Darwin in the merchant, merchant navy. The Chinese and the Murriss used to knock around

together. They'd get a chicken or something from the cargo, you know, and go offer that as a bribe to some of the Aunties to sniff around the daughters. The young fellas would sniff around all the daughters, you know, so there was, you know, a very close-knit community, intermarriages all over the place."

¹¹ In [Queensland](#), contact between Indigenous and Chinese people was especially widespread across the northern regions of the state, where there was a demand for rural labour, the allure of the gold rush, maritime trade, agricultural endeavours, and a steady stream of folk from the nearby [Northern Territory](#). Chinese residents outnumbered White Australians by as much as seven to one during the late nineteenth century, as a large concentration of predominantly Chinese men was created in a region remote from the southern administrative centre and seat of government in Brisbane (Jones 56,59,69,72; Ling 19,21-22; Long 29).

Challenge

¹² White dominion, however, was threatened by the growing alliances between Indigenous and Chinese migrant. Indigenous-Chinese contact challenged the settler-colonised binary that had underpinned racial discourse to date, and White authorities sought to counter this threat through legislation.

¹³ In Queensland, the "[Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897](#)" rendered it illegal for Chinese men to cohabit with Aboriginal women, and forbade the employment of Indigenous people by Chinese (Evans et al. 310-11; May 293). Ganter (18) states that in the northern Burketown region, the association of resident Aborigines with local Chinese gardeners "was often a sufficient expression of immorality to warrant removal" to [Mornington Island](#) mission for the Aborigines involved.

¹⁴ The 1897 Act had conferred regional Protectors with peremptory powers over the lives of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders living in their jurisdiction (Blake, "A dumping ground" 1). The Protector had the authority to forcibly remove any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person if he deemed it to be in his or her, or the local Indigenous or non-Indigenous community's, best interest (Blake, "A dumping ground" 51, "Deported" 52-55, Guthrie 7).

¹⁵ This authority constituted an arbitrary and absolute mechanism of control over the lives of Queensland Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders: "the threat of removal...was a salutary reminder of the necessity to respect the codes of behaviour and norms of the dominant white society—the technique par excellence for maintaining and extending European hegemony" (Blake, "A dumping ground" 68, 83).

¹⁶ The behavioural codes and norms of White society precluded Aboriginal contact with the Chinese; a separation constantly enforced with recourse to the act. Up to 1929, [Queensland State Government](#) removal records regularly cite reasons such as "in the habit of frequenting Chinese dens", "acting as spies for Chinese", "living an immoral life harboured by a Chinaman", "hang round Chinese farms and gardens", "frequents Chinese habitations", "frequents Chinese quarters for opium and prostitution", and "assisting blacks to obtain drugs from Chinese" to vindicate a removal order (*Queensland State Archives* A/64785, A/69523).

¹⁷ A gamut of vices, ranging from espionage, immorality, and substance abuse to drug trafficking, thus became the official pretence for separation of the subjugated groups. Anti-miscegenationist sentiment, too, saw the removal of Chinese-Aboriginal children (Ganter 13; May 210). In 1901 the Queensland Police Commissioner held that in regard to cohabitation between Chinese and Aborigines, "offspring resulting from such intercourse are by no means a desirable addition to the population" (May 210).

Fear and Loss

¹⁸ White dominion was to ultimately reassert its position at the hub of normative racial discourse, with little space available for Indigenous reflection on Chinese connections:

¹⁹ "Dad never spoke about nothing. We're all born with all this long hair and Asian look about us, all of us in the family, and we're trying to figure where it came from. We all look at each other and think there's got to be some thing there. I don't know why he never spoke of it or told us about it. I couldn't question that either, 'cause I did ask my Grandmother but I suppose you're to be seen and not heard in some things. I probably'll have questions on my lips for the rest of my life until I find out."

²⁰ "We didn't sort of consciously grow up hearing a lot about anything Chinese, really. It's just that we all sort of had some aspect of the look—like really dark blue-black hair, slanty eyes and a couple of the family are very sort of small. The stories were always censored and you only got little bits and pieces. Like him being Chinese, well, I think that also you just didn't mention. We didn't grow up hearing a lot about anything Chinese."

²¹ Removal brought about disconnection and loss:

"I'm only just finding it lately, the things that I didn't know about, you know. Even me [Chinese] Granddad, I didn't know his name until this year, really! [The mission staff] told 'em forget about your tribe, your language, everything. Think about Jesus."

²² The historical backdrop presented above, in concert with the voices of contemporary descendants of Indigenous and Chinese unions, demonstrate how White authorities employed removal

legislation to counter the challenge presented by Indigenous-Chinese contacts. For the members of these communities, who had come together under a climate of shared subjugation, this reassertion of White dominion came at great cost.

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