

Sovereign Hill Education

The Chinese in Ballarat

Research Notes for Secondary Schools

Ships arriving in the British trading post of Hong Kong in 1853 brought news of a sunlit land where the hills shone with gold. This was Australia. They called Australia Hsin Chin Shan (New Gold Mountain). The news spread like wildfire through villages that had been suffering from civil war and famine. Who would want to stay poor when there were riches for the taking? It was known that some had already made their fortunes in California. Young men, tradesmen and farmers were determined to go to Australia. Yet few could afford to pay for the journey. Local traders offered a ticket credit system which meant that a man could take out a loan in return for regular repayments.

Arrangements for the Journey

A man's wife and children always stayed at home or the villages would have lost too many workers. They would become virtual slaves to the trader if a man was unable to pay off the loan. Men usually travelled in groups from one area, taking a herbalist, scribe and barber. Each individual often carried at least 62 kilos in two baskets slung at each end of a pole and carried on the shoulder. These were called ta'ams. Most wore loose blue jackets and black trousers, with hats of basket weave on their heads and strong rope sandals on their feet.

The early Chinese mostly came from the Kwangtung province around Hong Kong. The long sea journey to Australia took several months.

Chinese Societies

Most of the Chinese arriving had no idea of what to expect or how to behave in a "Western" country. Many Europeans were ignorant about Chinese culture and resented the Chinese presence in Australia. For a small membership fee, each Chinese immigrant could obtain advice and help from a Chinese Society eg., the Sze Yap Society. They passed laws which made members fit in with "English" laws and customs eg., that no man should go bareheaded or barefoot and that they should wear long trousers to cover their legs. Men were often fined by their society if they did not follow these rules. They wanted their members to fit in with European ideas or the Chinese would be attacked. The organisers also

decided where to send new arrivals. Groups travelled on foot at a half trot following the Society guide, camping each night, sharing communal meals.

Life for the Chinese on the Goldfields

When they arrived on the goldfields, the Chinese worked as teams. They would quickly build shelters and often chose to sleep crowded together as was usual at home in China. Teams were organised to mine, to cook and to tend vegetables. Their mining methods were different to the Europeans' in that they seldom tackled new ground and usually avoided deep mining as they feared that the mountain Gods would be offended. Instead they preferred to go over ground which had been abandoned by European miners. In their haste the Europeans were often careless as they went through the dirt. The Chinese were prepared to take more time, even sweeping the floors of abandoned huts, so they often found gold which earlier Europeans had missed. They soon learnt to keep quiet about this as it only made many Europeans angry.

European Complaints about the Chinese

Between 1851-1861, 43,657 Chinese entered the colony of Victoria. Such large numbers led to resentment and fear in the European population.

In 1855, as a result of the Eureka Stockade, a Royal Commission was appointed to look at the miners' complaints. The reports provide interesting evidence to show why so many Europeans objected to the Chinese on the goldfields.

1. Water was the worst problem. Many Chinese did not understand that water was scarce. As they washed the "tailings" from old mines rather than digging new shafts, they used far more water than other miners. There were many examples of their waste of a limited supply of water.
2. Witnesses complained about "thieving habits" and gambling. Opium addiction was also seen as a problem among the Chinese miners, though they drank far less alcohol than the Europeans!
3. Gold found by the Chinese was usually sent back

to China, instead of remaining in Victoria. One witness commented, "When the Queen gave up her right to gold in this country she never dreamt that she was giving it to the Emperor of China".

4. Miners complained of language difficulties. One witness said, "You can't talk or reason with them". Their unusual clothing and long pigtails (queues) made them seem more strange. Many objected to their practice of creating cess pits of human sewage to fertilise their vegetable gardens. Europeans who did not understand Chinese culture saw them as an inferior race and blamed them unfairly for many things. Outbreaks of disease were often blamed on the Chinese (eg., Ballarat in 1857).
5. There were complaints that the Chinese worked on Sundays. This was regarded as a Sabbath day of rest by European miners. In fact, about eighty percent of Chinese claimed they were Christians.
6. One witness praised them for their adaptability, dignity, hard work and honesty, but it is clear that, overall, they were resented as much for their hard work and success as their different culture. These accusations were based on the prejudiced and racist attitudes of the time.

(All the above quotes are from the Royal Commission Report, March 1855.)

Results of the Royal Commission

In the report, the Chinese were referred to as "this pagan and inferior race" which brought no benefits to Victoria as they would not stay to settle the land, they caused problems with European miners, and would "demoralise" the community with their superstitions and gambling habits.

1. The Victorian Act was passed in order to limit the numbers of Chinese. Any Chinese person entering Victoria had to pay 10 pounds (\$20) if they landed at a port. No other nationality had to pay this tax.
2. Chinese also had to pay a one pound (\$10) Protection Fee as well as a Miner's Right and a Residence Ticket. A Protector was appointed to ensure that Chinese miners lived in specified areas for their own protection and to sort out problems with other miners. In Ballarat, language difficulties quickly arose as there were at least six different Chinese dialects spoken in Ballarat alone. (To see a picture of the Golden Point Chinese Village in 1886 visit the *Students* section of the Sovereign Hill Education website)

The entry tax did not reduce numbers as most simply landed at Robe in South Australia and walked across the border to the goldfields, a journey of several hundred miles. A government report of 1857 said that there were some 40,000 Chinese miners on the goldfields, but less than a dozen females.

Violent Opposition

At times, European miners took matters into their own hands. In 1854, 1,000 diggers in Bendigo voted to drive out the Chinese. The riot was only stopped by the arrival of police reinforcements.

In 1857, a number of Chinese were killed when miners attacked their camp and drove them away from the Buckland River Diggings in the North East of Victoria. Some European miners helped a number to escape and were, themselves, attacked as a result.

By 1857, increasing numbers of Chinese returned to their homeland as the gold discoveries began to dwindle. A few chose to stay and run businesses, marry and settle permanently in Australia.

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