ANTI-CHINESE PREJUDICE IN AUSTRALIA, 1850 – 1919: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the history of anti-Chinese prejudice in Australia between the mid-nineteenth century and the early-twentieth century through analysis of news items. Trove, an online database aggregator created by the National Library of Australia, allows for a comprehensive survey of slurs and negative stereotypes characteristic of white Australia's image of the Chinese, their world, and their perceived shortcomings. In particular, jargon, slang and their context reveal the shifting scale, chronology and place-specific dimensions of prejudice between 1850 and 1919. References to fines imposed were especially common. Australia's five principal cities were quite similar in their overall incidence of negative references; small towns were even more prejudiced. Anti-Chinese sentiment in print peaked between 1860 and 1889 in a period of fierce economic competition and perceived 'otherness' of the Chinese. Negative sentiment had substantially diminished by the second decade of the twentieth century. An element of Australia's rich and complex history, a revealed narrative of anti-Chinese bias surfaces that sheds light on the circumstances of a mostly impoverished and uneducated minority looking to establish itself in a land of opportunity.*

Keywords: Chinese-Australian, Australia, prejudice, racism, newspaper

INTRODUCTION

By the mid-nineteenth century, Australia had surpassed its early colonial stage and was progressing as a land of economic opportunity and promise. Originally just a convict settlement created by the British Empire, Australia began to remove this antiquated façade in favor of a more lucrative one, where prosperity was more readily attainable[1]. In fact, a local newspaper in New South Wales predicted "a complete social revolution[2]" after Edward Hargraves unearthed gold in Australia. Similar to the allure of the California Gold Rush between 1848 and 1855, future discoveries in the 1850s and 1860s attracted peoples of various nations stretching from Western Europe to Eastern Asia, including China. Leaving a population exceeding four-hundred million, a significant minority of China's inhabitants sought out opportunities beyond the country's borders, many a long voyage away. In the ensuing decades, thousands of Chinese set sail for Australia and its beckoning gold mines[3]. But soon after their arrival, many Chinese immigrants realized the mines were not as promising as they had envisioned. And so Chinese immigrants relocated, the majority to Australia's coastal cities, some to small towns[4], and, the more daring, westwards[5], holding out for another horizon of opportunity.

Despite their initial disappointment, the Chinese quickly found success by undertaking an assortment of menial but vital occupations.[6] Their enduring resilience was soon met with resistance from the white Australian population who saw their own opportunities being stolen away. By 1888, 70% of Australia's population had been born within the country; a sense of nationalism had taken root and anti-Chinese prejudice grew[7]. This sentiment evolved into explicit displays and acts of racism and discrimination at both the societal and governmental level.

Content analysis of news items in Australia between the mid-nineteenth century and the early-twentieth century reveals the disparaging portrayal of the Chinese by the majority white Australian population. In particular, jargon, slang, and their context are examined and enumerated to highlight the racial tension between white and Chinese Australians. This paper focuses on the era between 1850 and 1919.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The National Library of Australia has digitized the content of hundreds of Australian newspapers from the beginning of the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. I exploited the fact that the terms "Chinaman" and "Chinamen" were universal slurs used to describe the Chinese in a derogatory fashion in the late nineteenth century[8].

Other slurs, for example "celestials," or "pigtails" were much less common. The National Library records encompass a total of 380,310 news items referencing both slurs. The methodology utilized in this research was an enumeration of all occurrences of those two slurs in news items used in Australian newspapers between 1850 and 1919. All occurrences were then sorted by location, specifically five of the country's principal cities, including Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney, and five small towns within the state of New South Wales, including Cobar, Byron Bay, Cooma, Walgett, and Mudgee (Figure 1). The results were counted by decade and encoded as well by the contexts in which the word was used. Examples of context used included "fines", "gambling", "opium", and even "savage". Through this, a reflection and timeline of Australian prejudice toward the Chinese can be traced.
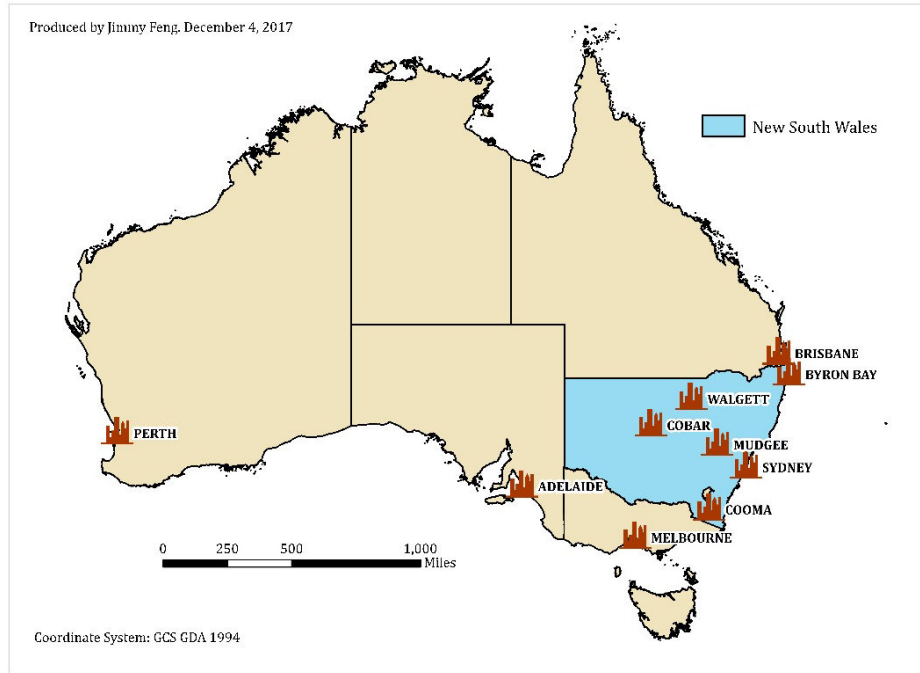

Figure 1. Australian Cities and Six Towns in New South Wales

THE CHRONOLOGY OF SLURS

Search results on Trove, an online database aggregator from the National Library of Australia strongly suggest that the greatest span of anti-Chinese prejudice occurred in the late nineteenth century during a period which coincides with the Australian Gold Rush and the ensuing dispersal of the Chinese to different cities within the country. The progression and timeline of anti-Chinese prejudice coincides with the immigration of the Chinese to Australia and their ensuing migration and settlement patterns. Ethnic or racial groups that posed as a perceived threat which undermined the Australian population were seen as enemies and ridiculed[9]. Upon their arrival, the Chinese were often quarantined because of their race[10]. This is exemplified via slurs and the usage of "Chinaman" and "Chinamen." The overall occurrence of the two slurs in news items was divided by the historical population of Australia in that particular decade (Figure 2). Peak usage of slurs per 100,000 Australians occurred in the 1850s, with the first waves of Chinese migration, and the 1880s, with a white Australian nationalistic pride on the rise across the country[11]. The 1850s were marked with 2,900 slurs per 100,000 Australians and tapered off slightly in the 1860s and 1870s, at 2,600 and 2,500, but regained a peak of 3,000 slurs per 100,000 Australians in the 1880s. Anti-Chinese sentiment still lingered even after the Australian Gold Rush and the Lambing Flat riots of 1860 and 1861 and escalated in the late 1870s and 1880s as a result of increased migration[12]. In 1878, the Australian Steam Navigation Company fostered even greater resentment and xenophobia by replacing Australian crew workers in New South Wales with Chinese workers willing to be paid less than half the standard wage[13]. However, in the following decades the number of slurs per 100,000 Australians dipped markedly, falling below 2,000 by the 1890s and continuing to decline in ensuing decades. The average Australian press use of the derogatory terms "Chinaman" and "Chinamen" declined by more than half, to less than 1,000 by 1910.
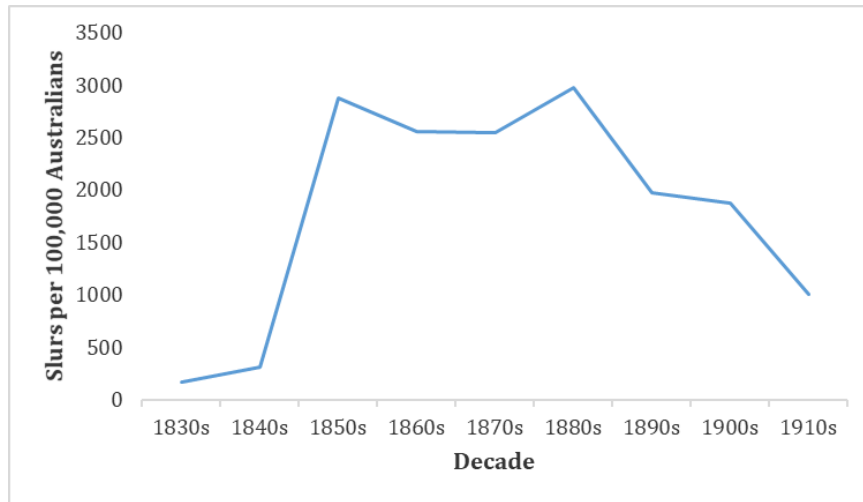
Figure 2. Number of Slurs ("Chinaman" and "Chinamen") per 100,000 Australians (For each decade, the total number of the slurs found in news items is divided by the historical Australian population of that decade).

The culture of hatred found its way into a social structure and political arena that was exacerbated by the newspapers of the time[14]. Initially, in the 1830s and 1840s, there was little concern about the Chinese as the native Australians had little to no exposure to them. But the discovery of gold in the 1850s, especially in New South Wales, found many Australians in contact with competing Chinese laborers. This can be seen in the rise in occurrences of "Chinaman" and "Chinamen" in news items per 1000 and the trend persists up until the late nineteenth century. Sydney and Melbourne peak early, in the 1860s as a result of the immediate contact between Chinese gold miners and white Australians[15]. Perth and Adelaide peak two decades later in the 1880s, most likely as a result of domestic westward migration. By the turn of the century, incidence of the two slurs diminished dramatically with a changing Australian attitude and weakening of the established prejudice against the Chinese and other minorities. The shift in occupation from gold miners to menial but vital jobs that white Australians were reluctant to take on, such as market gardeners, cooks, bakers, laundrymen, storekeepers, etcetera, helped ease tensions as native-born and immigrant groups were mostly not in direct competition for the same jobs[16]. Chinese market gardeners in Sydney and New South Wales provided the majority of the regional population with fresh produce[17]. These small-growers increasingly came to know the families that bought their fruits and vegetables, gradually contributing to mutual respect.

Overall, cities with a larger population had the most absolute and relative occurrences of "Chinaman" and "Chinamen" in news items: Sydney and Melbourne elicited the most cases: 121,000 and 101,000, respectively (Figure 3). Comparatively smaller cities like Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth had less than half of those values, with respectively 50,000, 51,000, and 18,000. In relative terms as well Sydney and Melbourne led other major cities, with respectively 30 and 29 stigmatic hits per thousand news items compared to 27, 15, and 19 hits for their smaller counterparts. However, throughout the period examined, small Australian towns exceeded the big city values, peaking at 92 hits per thousand in the 1860s coinciding with the Gold Rush Era. Indeed, some of these towns, notably Mudgee and Byron Bay, were mining centers.

Brisbane was an exception, peaking much earlier in the 1850s at 37 hits per thousand news items possibly because the city would have been the first port-of-call for vessels inbound from East Asia. The relative usage of slurs in the Brisbane press diminished for a while during the Gold Rush Era, perhaps because the lion's share of Chinese immigrants were passing over Brisbane in favor of Victoria's goldfields. But use of slurs picked up once again during the 1870s, with 35 hits per thousand.

SLUR INCIDENCE

In the early decades prior to 1880 the geographical incidence of slurs was much more frequent on the eastern coast of Australia than on its western counterpart. There was no discernible regional difference in ensuing decades as a result of an increasingly homogeneous Australia. The migration of Australians from the eastern half of the country

to western cities like Perth altered the population dynamic amongst the regions; a growing population simply could not be supported and confined on a limited stretch of the eastern and southeastern seaboard. Coupled with the discovery of gold and other mines out west which offered a promise of new opportunities for wealth and success, many of these eastern Australians settled in the country's western half[18]. They brought with them their ill-conceived notions of the Chinese that seem to have permeated throughout the flourishing western cities.
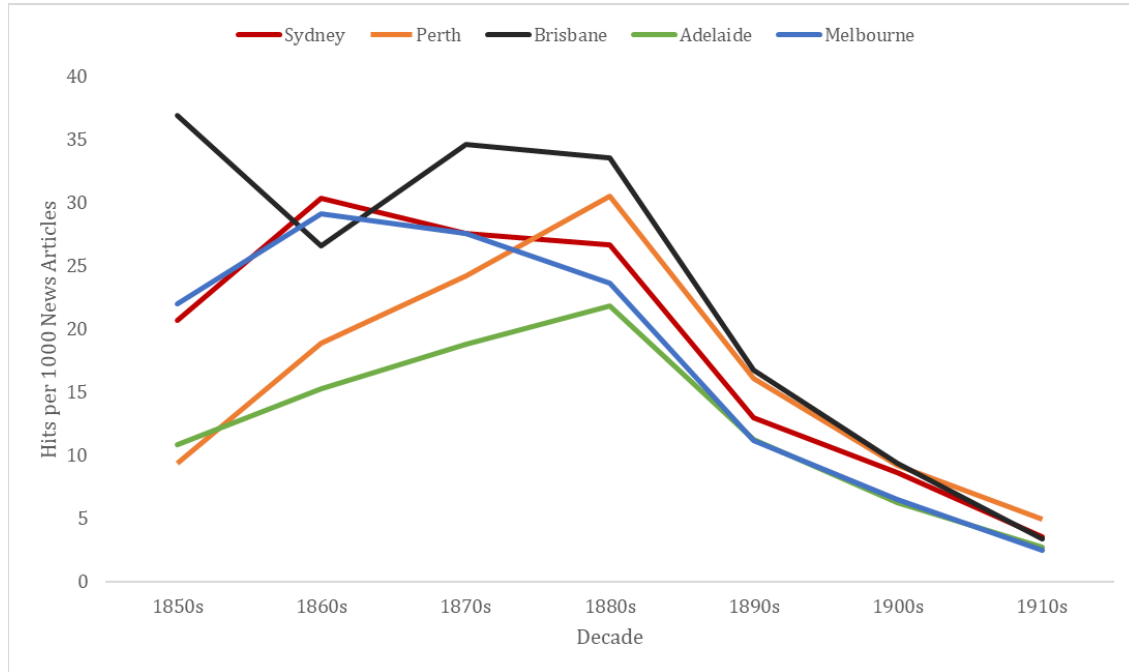

Figure 3. Occurrences of "Chinaman" and "Chinamen" in News Items of Major Cities in Australia

SLUR CONTEXT

Strikingly, of the 380,310 news items with the slurs "Chinaman" and "Chinamen", no fewer than 123,000 were related to the imposition of fines on Chinese Australians. Additionally, 24,000 were related in some way to the stereotype of the Chinese' propensity for opium. Similarly, 17,000 detailed the Chinese people and their perceived immoral behavior through their participation in gambling. The anti-Chinese sentiment extended beyond petty vices and indulgences; the Chinese were attached to the notion of "savagery" in 13,000 news items. Similar to the ascent and peak in the 1880s and subsequent decline of slurs used in newspapers, negative associations of the Chinese followed the same trend over time and began to decline at the turn of the century. Nonetheless, usage of slurs within the context of negative stereotypes remained rampant even in the early twentieth century. The perception of Chinese as lesser beings persisted and lingered into the future with the Anti-Immigration Act of 1901.

More often than not, the press record of fines against the overwhelmingly male Chinese population was a reflection of petty crimes like assault, theft, and disorderly conduct. The gender imbalance among the Chinese likely fueled reckless behavior and firm police action. These men primarily lived in confined quarters with little obligation beyond sending money home. They were similarly criticized because of their perceived alien customs and culture, lack of women, and labor competition[19]. Without bounds and limits, the Chinese men had access to a number of indulgences in their social lives which fostered and bred a culture of behavior that often landed them in trouble with a white Australian police force actively seeking to discipline and penalize them.

Impositions of fines to the Chinese accounted for nearly a third of all news items containing the slurs "Chinaman" and "Chinamen" (Table 1). A significant portion of these reported offences occurred in the country's two most populous cities, Sydney and Melbourne. Despite the disparities in population, sentiment towards the Chinese by native white Australians was mostly invariant amongst the cities. Overall, the context of fines and the Chinese accounted for 42.3% of all news items for both Sydney, the country's most populous city, and Perth, a growing western

city. The markedly high incidence of imposition of fines noted in Australian news items indicates that the Chinese were being profiled by the mostly white Australian police force. The big immigrant cities like Sydney were no different in this respect than other cities.

Table 1. Context of *fines* in Australian news items with "Chinaman" and "Chinamen"						
	Sydney	**Perth**	**Brisbane**	**Adelaide**	**Melbourne**	**Small Towns in New South Wales**
1850s	43%	45%	52%	46%	41%	49%
1860s	49%	66%	51%	57%	52%	58%
1870s	52%	56%	49%	58%	54%	61%
1880s	46%	51%	47%	50%	49%	57%
1890s	42%	41%	47%	46%	48%	52%
1900s	38%	40%	42%	44%	41%	52%
1910s	34%	44%	41%	45%	40%	46%

Surprisingly, given China's record of opium use, the relative occurrence of the Chinese immigrants' use of the drug was a somewhat secondary issue in the Australian newspapers, comprising six % of news items concerning the Chinese. This meant that the imposition of fines was unlikely to be attributed to stereotypical behaviors like smoking opium. Likewise, Chinese gambling was also a secondary issue for the Australian press.

Statistical compilation and analysis suggest the principal cities of Australia followed the same cycle of prejudice against the Chinese throughout the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was not the case in sparsely-populated regions as the share of reports related to fining the Chinese was significantly higher for small towns than for big cities. In cities and towns alike, the incidence of fines items peaked during the 1860s and 1870s and tended to fall to a minimum by the 1900s. But the number of fine-related articles was much more frequent in the smaller towns, especially in Byron Bay[20], suggesting that de facto harassment of the Chinese was even more prominent in these settings. Tellingly, these two towns were home to several gold mines. The percentage of articles pertinent to the imposition of fines on the Chinese in the principal cities during the 1860s and 1870s was respectively, 52% and 54%. In contrast, the incidence for small towns at the same period was 67.5% and 71%. The force of law as it relates to the Chinese peaks during the Gold Rush, most likely due to the overwhelming number of males compared to females in the immigrant community in the Gold Rush Era.

Evidently, it was not so much Chinese culture and way of life that irked the native white Australians. Rather, the perceived inferiority of the Chinese was rooted in white Australians' assumed entitlement to jobs and resources.[21] As a result of the mass migration of young, able-bodied males from China for cheap labor, the opportunities available to the white Australians were seen to have dwindled during the Gold Rush era[22]. As the economic rationale for discrimination diminished by century's end, so did stigmatic items in the Australian press.

CONCLUSION

This paper has documented the progression of anti-Chinese prejudice between the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Analyzing news items of decades past admittedly offers only one perspective, but there was, without question, bias against the Chinese by the white Australian press. While xenophobia is no longer as explicit in today's Australia, fragments of the ideology stemming from white nationalist policies established in the past continue to linger. The ensuing abolition of racist policies like the Anti-Immigration Act of 1901 after World War II has largely helped eradicate derogatory sentiment towards the Chinese and other racial groups, but there still remains a lot of tension. Chinese- and other Asian-Australians have proliferated and found much success in modern Australia, sometimes to the chagrin of the white Australian population. The modern growing embeddedness of Australia's Asian population evokes a parallel to the Gold Rush of the 1850s and 1860s, when growing success was met with hostile and even violent reaction. In preserving the knowledge of events past and informing the general public of the injustices committed against the Chinese, this paper has sought to remember and recognize the importance of the Chinese pioneers who helped set the stage for Australia as a truly plural society on the western Pacific Rim.

ENDNOTES

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[16] See pg. 6 in Erickson, Rica, and Anne Atkinson, 1997, *Asian Immigrants to Western Australia 1829-1901*, in The Bicentennial dictionary of Western Australians, Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press; pg. 80 in Couchman, Sophie, 2011, Making the 'last Chinaman': Photography and Chinese as a 'vanishing' people in Australia's rural local histories, *Australian Historical Studies* 42 (1): 78-91, doi:10.1080/1031461X.2010.542764; and Australian Government, 2009, Chinatowns across Australia, http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/chinatowns-across-australia.

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[22] Ibid, see pg. 21.