

Kwok Chun Hang, Swimmer: Researching Chinese Australian Sport History Through Digitised Newspapers

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Abstract: This article explores the little-known visit to Australia in 1935 by a Chinese swimmer, Kwok Chun Hang (郭鎮恆), primarily through internet searches of digitised newspapers. These sources facilitate a reconstruction of Kwok's visit, open an investigation into racial constructions of the swimmer, and present some local Chinese community reactions. Through an examination of Kwok's visit, this article also aims to explore some of the opportunities and limitations offered by digitisation and augment a growing account of Chinese athletic involvement in Australia.

Keywords: sport; swimming; Kwok Chun Hang; newspapers; digitisation; internet

Introduction

In January 1935, a visiting Chinese swimmer named Kwok Chun Hang won two breaststroke championships at the Australian national and Victorian Centenary Championships in Melbourne.¹ Co-sponsored by the Victorian Chinese community and the Victorian Amateur Swimming Association (VASA), Kwok's tour understandably focussed on Victoria but also included brief appearances in Queensland and New South Wales. His was the first official visit by a Chinese swimmer to Australia, and it generated great media and public interest in Australia for several months. In Hong Kong he was hailed as the "Best Chinese Ambassador ever to visit Australia".² Despite the pioneering significance of this visit, it is now all but forgotten. In some ways, this is not surprising. After all, sport has not been a focus of Chinese Australian historians, nor have Chinese athletes preoccupied Australian sport historians. In theory this should not be the case: researchers of Chinese Australian history are interested in social histories, including recreational pursuits, while the sporting experiences and contributions of various ethnic groups in Australia have captured the attention of sport historians.³ In practice, however, Chinese Australian sport history has largely eluded historians, with some noteworthy exceptions.⁴ In no small part, this lacuna has been due to the unavailability of readily accessible traces of the Chinese Australian sporting past.

Newspapers have long been an important research source; however, until very recently they posed a Herculean task for historians who endured the often eye-straining, stomach-churning and wrist-tiring task of trawling through reels of microfilm or stacks of old newspapers in search of stories.⁵ Specific sport history topics, especially single case

¹ Kwok's Mandarin name was Guo Zhenheng (郭鎮恆), but he will be identified in this article as Kwok Chun Hang as this is how he was named in the English-language press. Names of other Chinese individuals will also be spelled as they appeared in the original source.

² *China Mail*, 6 March 1935, p. 5.

³ See, for example, Philip A. Mosely, Richard Cashman, John O'Hara and Hilary Weatherburn, eds, *Sporting Immigrants: Sport and Ethnicity in Australia* (Sydney: Walla Walla Press, 1997).

⁴ Nick Guoth, "A New China: Using Sport to Expose a Multi-Class Race through the 1923 Chinese Soccer Tour of Australia," *Sport in Society*, 15.4 (May 2012): 462–78; Rob Hess, "'A Death Blow to the White Australia Policy': Australian Rules Football and Chinese Communities in Victoria, 1892–1908," in *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation and Chinese Communities in Australia, 1860–1940*, ed. Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (Melbourne: Otherland Literary Journal, 2004), pp. 89–106; Rob Hess, "Chinese Footballers and Female Players: Discontinuous and Marginalized Histories," in *Football Fever: Grassroots*, ed. Bob Stewart, Rob Hess and Matthew Nicholson (Melbourne: Maribyrnong Press, 2004), pp. 31–49; Rob Hess, "Sport and the Chinese: Case Studies from Australian Rules Football in Victoria, 1882–1938," *Sporting Traditions*, 26.2 (November 2009): 31–48; Paul Jones, "Gordon Lum Bo Wah, Tennis Ace," paper presented at Dragon Tails: Re-Interpreting Chinese-Australian Heritage conference, Ballarat, Victoria, 11 October 2009; Matthew Stephen, *Contact Zones: Sport and Race in the Northern Territory 1869–1953* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2010). Dragon Tails conferences have provided a forum for the dissemination of much of this research.

⁵ For an insightful discussion of newspapers and sport history, see Jeffrey Hill, "Anecdotal Evidence: Sport, the Newspaper Press, and History," in *Deconstructing Sport History: A Postmodern Analysis*, ed. Murray G. Phillips

studies like Kwok Chun Hang's 1935 Australian tour, rarely attracted interest either because of a lack of knowledge and memory of these incidents in the first place or because perceptions of their overall significance made such research-intensive projects unattractive. My own research on the Kong Sing brothers – Ophir, Otto and George – in Sydney is a case in point. Marie-Louise McDermott and I had, coincidentally and independently, gathered material on the Kong Sings while researching much larger sport history projects for our Ph.D. theses. A serendipitous encounter at a sport history conference led to our mutual realisation of this shared interest, to “shaking out” our dusty miscellaneous files and to collaborating on a journal article.⁶ For a single case study, neither of us was prepared to meticulously scan the microfilmed Sydney and sporting press covering two decades in what would have been essentially a needle-and-haystack approach, and neither of us did. Fortunately in that case, we were able to work jointly with the not-inconsiderable research that we had assembled separately to write the article, but we were constrained in our approach by the materials available to us.

The advent of the digital age, marked by the introduction of the internet, rapidly changed the situation we faced in researching the Kong Sings and has opened up new opportunities for historians. Historian Roy Rosenzweig remarked in 2004 that the internet represents “an extraordinary historical resource”.⁷ What makes the internet and its provision of digitised sources so extraordinary for historians is the scope of coverage available, the speed of access, and the accessibility from one's own computer without the need for travel to often-distant libraries and archives. Historian Steven Mintz cites four positive impacts of digital technology on his own historical research which will apply to many other scholars and researchers: the expanded range of sources available; an improved ability to retrieve and organise sources; the encouragement offered to broaden the historical imagination and engage with a wider variety of sources, including audio-visual sources; and increased dissemination of scholarly work and ability to interact with other researchers.⁸

Of the many digital tools now at our disposal, digitised newspapers are among the most trustworthy, avoiding through their documentary integrity accusations of unreliability and ephemerality commonly levelled at many other internet sources. For researchers of Australian history, be it sport or Chinese themes, the digitisation of many newspapers both in Australia and overseas has indeed provided a boon (albeit with some caveats) facilitating not only preliminary research but also the creation of well-rounded narrative histories.⁹ I could now write a very different and more richly coloured history of the Kong Sings, for example, drawing upon both the digitised Sydney and Hong Kong press.

Taking advantage of these digital sources, my primary aim in this article is to explore Kwok Chun Hang's visit to Australia in 1935. Various digitised resources, primarily newspapers, facilitate a partial reconstruction of Kwok's visit, open an investigation into racial constructions of the swimmer, and present some local Chinese community reactions. These resources include records contained in Trove, NewspaperSG and PapersPast, the online repositories of the National Library of Australia, the National

(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 117–29. For a broader discussion of the popular press as a historical source, see Adrian Bingham, “Reading Newspapers: Cultural Histories of the Popular Press in Modern Britain,” *History Compass*, 10.2 (2012): 140–50.

⁶ Gary Osmond and Marie-Louise McDermott, “Mixing Race: The Kong Sing Brothers and Australian Sport,” *Australian Historical Studies*, 39.3 (September 2008): 338–55.

⁷ Roy Rosenzweig, “Sport History on the Web: Towards a Critical Assessment,” *Journal of Sport History*, 31.3 (Fall 2004): 372.

⁸ “Interchange: The Promise of Digital History,” *Journal of American History*, 95.2 (September 2008): 483.

⁹ Two recent sessions offered in Australian Chinese history and Australian sport history forums have addressed opportunities for digitised newspaper research: Tim Sherratt, “Digital History: New Tools and Techniques”, presented at Dragon Tails 2011: Sources, Language, Approaches conference, Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne, 13 November 2011, available online at <http://www.slideshare.net/wragge/digital-history-new-tools-and-techniques>; Australian Society for Sports History public seminar, “Sport History and Digital Newspaper Archives”, 16 July 2012, Melbourne.

Library Board Singapore and the National Library of New Zealand, respectively.¹⁰ Trove is particularly useful. While it does not offer a complete record of all Australian newspapers – the *Melbourne Age* is not included, for example – it covers a number of prominent Victorian and other newspapers that comprehensively reported on Kwok's visit. This research also draws upon the <gwulo.com> "Old Hong Kong newspaper" site, the digitised *Tung Wah Times* index in Australia, and miscellaneous sources available via Google, including the Google News Archive. My secondary purpose is to reflect on opportunities and limitations of digital sources, especially newspapers, in understanding such events. Finally, through an examination of Kwok's visit, this article also augments a growing historical account of Chinese athletic involvement in Australia.

Identifying Kwok Chun Hang

Kwok Chun Hang (Figure 1) is now a largely forgotten figure, recalled vaguely in the annals of the South China Athletic Association (SCAA) as "Prince of the Breaststroke".¹¹ In 1934 the *China Mail* considered Kwok to be "China's most brilliant all-round swimming star" who had first come to prominence in 1930 when he placed second to the reigning SCAA champion in the association's harbour swim.¹² Leung Titsang, swimming coach and captain of China's Far Eastern Olympic swimming team, talent-spotted his athletic potential in unknown circumstances when Kwok was a teenager.¹³ The *China Mail* offers the most comprehensive of several summaries of his early swimming achievements in Hong Kong and other Southeast Asian newspapers, which included the Colony [Hong Kong] breaststroke championship and record (1932 and 1933), All-China 200-yards breaststroke championship and national record (1933), the British national 200-yards record in Hong Kong (1933), and a new interport record in Shanghai (1934).¹⁴ In 1934 Kwok was a member of the Chinese swimming team that participated in the Far Eastern Olympic Games held in Manila.¹⁵

While the digitised press is both detailed and consistent on Kwok's swimming record, it is neither on his personal life. This is not a function of digitisation but of press reporting itself. Digitisation, and digital search engines through their capacity to readily provide a range of articles, has the advantage of revealing inconsistencies and contradictions in reporting and can therefore allow for greater scrutiny of reported biographical data. Born circa 1913 in Hong Kong – his exact year of birth is unclear from the press reports and estimates of his age in 1935 vary from 15 to 22 – Kwok is identified as the son of Kwok Ching-cho, a Cantonese merchant, and his wife.¹⁶ Educated at Sai Nam (South West) College in Hong Kong, the young swimmer was said to be preparing for university entrance examinations before his journey to Australia: one report indicated he intended to study commerce at the University of Hong Kong, while another suggested that he wished to study economics at Shanghai University.¹⁷ He reportedly had a gift for music and languages, although he did not speak much English on his arrival in

¹⁰ Trove (<http://trove.nla.gov.au>); NewspaperSG (<http://newspapers.ni.sg>); PapersPast (<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>).

¹¹ Hu Fa-kuang, "History of the South China Athletic Association," in *The Quest for Gold: Fifty Years of Amateur Sports in Hong Kong, 1947–1997*, ed. S. F. Lam and Julian W. Chang (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2005), p. 23.

¹² *China Mail*, 18 December 1934, 4.

¹³ *China Mail*, 18 December 1934, 4.

¹⁴ *China Mail*, 18 December 1934, pp. 4–5. See also *Hong Kong Sunday Herald*, 22 October 1933, p. 1; *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 11 September 1934, p. 15. Distances for many races are not reported.

¹⁵ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1 May 1934, p. 15; *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 11 September 1934, p. 15.

¹⁶ *China Mail*, 18 December 1934, p. 4; *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 January 1935, p. 12. His age in early 1935 is listed as twenty-one in his application for a Certificate of Exemption under the Immigration Act 1901–1930. See National Archives of Australia: B13, 1934/21222, "Amateur Swimming Union of Australia – Re Kwok Chung Hang – Departure per 'Changte' July 1935".

¹⁷ *China Mail*, 18 December 1934, p. 4 (school); *Argus*, 11 January 1935, p. 12 (University of Hong Kong); *Mail* (Adelaide), 12 January 1935, p. 9; *China Mail*, 7 February 1935, p. 5 (Shanghai University).

Australia.¹⁸ We are also told he was 5' 6" tall, of slight build, sported a gold tooth, and was a non-smoker and total abstainer.¹⁹ Beyond this, there is scant background information.



Figure 1. Kwok Chun Hang (front row, centre) at a farewell event in Melbourne, 1935

Wai Bu Zhou Kan, Nanjing: *Wai jiao bu wai bu zhou kan bian ji wei yuan hui* [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China], 58 (22 April 1935)

Courtesy of Mei-fen Kuo, La Trobe University

Providing Context

Newspaper reports, digitised or otherwise, frequently provide broad contextual background. More specific context, especially behind-the-scenes institutional-level discussions, deliberations and negotiations, is less commonly revealed and deeper archival research would be necessary to glean a more complete contextual understanding.²⁰ This is the case with Kwok, where digitised newspapers fail to offer insight into the full context for his visit.

The key context for Kwok's visit, which is not found in press accounts, is the increasing internationalisation of Australian swimming by the mid-1930s. The Australian Swimming Association (ASA) had sponsored regular visits by international swimmers since the 1914–15 season when the Hawaiian Olympic champion Duke Kahanamoku toured the eastern seaboard.²¹ The staging of the 1935 national competition in Melbourne at the new Olympic-size pool on Batman Avenue to honour Victoria's centenary, and to coincide with a special Victorian centenary swimming championship, gave occasion to invite several international aquatic luminaries, including four Japanese and French Olympic swimmers: Yasutaro Sakagami, Masaji Kiyokawa, Jean Taris and Emile Poussard.²² China, and colonial Chinese societies like Hong Kong, did not have

¹⁸ *Argus*, 29 December 1934, p. 16 (music); *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 2 January 1935, p. 4 (linguist); *China Mail*, 7 February 1935, p. 5; *Argus*, 28 February 1935, p. 7 (English).

¹⁹ *Argus*, 11 January 1935, p. 12 (height, smoking); *Mirror* (Perth), 19 January 1935, p. 13 (tooth).

²⁰ The National Archives of Australia online search engine, RecordSearch, reveals two files related to Kwok: NAA: B13, 1934/21222 and B13, 1934/21099, "Amateur Swimming Union of Australia - Re Admission to Australia of Sakagami, Kiyokama, Kwok Chun Hang, Jean Taris and Emil Poussard to compete in annual swimming championships". The former file contains information regarding his application for exemption from the Immigration Act, his arrival, extension of stay, and departure. Another promising-sounding file actually concerned a different individual: "Kwok Chang Chun - Student's passport," A1, 1936/773.

²¹ Gary Osmond, "'Honolulu Maori': Racial Dimensions of Duke Kahanamoku's Tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1914-1915," *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 44.1 (2010): 22–34.

²² Gary Osmond, "'Lively Little Visitors' and 'Peaceful Ambassadors': Reading Japanese Sporting Tours through the Australian Press - 1926 to 1935," *Sport in Society*, 15.4 (May 2012): 529–50. Coinciding with the swimming tour in 1934–35 were visits by French and Czechoslovakian tennis players (see *China Mail*, 14 December 1934,

swimmers of equivalent international standing; however, Australians were able to read newspaper reports of promising Chinese swimmers by 1934.²³

If digitisation is not so useful in providing a broader context for Kwok's visit, it is helpful in revealing the more immediate trigger. The direct impetus for Kwok's invitation was the visit to Australia of Eric W. Railton, honorary secretary of the Hong Kong International Swimming Association, in May 1934. Railton coached Kwok, whose record was faster than the Australian breast stroke champion, Allan Higginson.²⁴ Based on this realisation, the Melbourne Centenary Celebrations Committee, on behalf of VASA, invited Kwok to participate in the Victorian competition. They offered free passage and payment of expenses but no appearance fees, which would have breached the prevailing amateur sporting code.²⁵ The precise role of the Melbourne Chinese community in extending this invitation is unknown, but sectors reportedly promised funding.²⁶ Kwok initially declined the invitation due to an unspecified misunderstanding but quickly reversed that decision and embarked for Australia aboard the S.S. *Changte* on 18 December 1934.²⁷

Detailing the Tour

In researching events such as Kwok's tour, one of the great advantages of digitisation is its facilitation of charting itineraries and specific events. Historian Alun Munslow, citing David J. Staley, has written of the potential practical implications of digitised history in terms of the "reporting of data".²⁸ Digitally derived histories constituting mainly data, without analysis or context – histories by list – have limited appeal, but factually summative data *can* be useful in illuminating unknown or previously unresearched events and for providing a basis for further exploration. While many specific details may remain elusive, an overall picture can quickly be gleaned. For a sporting tour, such a "snapshot" can be especially useful, as in this case where an itinerary can be reconstructed.

As summarised in Table 1, Kwok's visit focussed on Victoria, where throughout January and February 1935 he gave exhibition swims at suburban Melbourne swimming clubs, toured regional centres with the two French Olympians, Taris and Poussard, and competed in the state and national titles. In these he won both the 100-yards breaststroke championship of Victoria and the Centenary 110-yards breaststroke championship. It is likely that he continued to train and compete at local level over the following few months while he studied at the Christian Brothers College in West Melbourne in order to improve his English; however, the digitised record is silent on this.²⁹ Historic records of schools and local community swimming clubs in Australia, and many community newspapers, are rarely digitised and to research this tour more comprehensively would require a deeper search of these types of sources.³⁰

p. 14; *Referee*, 13 December 1934, p. 11), and for the Victorian Centenary in 1935 no fewer than ten foreign Olympians from the 1932 Los Angeles Games visited Melbourne for amateur and professional completion in swimming, track and field events, and cycling; *Referee*, 17 January 1935, p. 1.

²³ *Australian Women's Weekly*, 2 June 1934, p. 47.

²⁴ *Argus*, 29 September 1934, p. 28. By 1936 Railton had gone to Japan as a private professional coach, but he returned to Australia in 1938 due to hostilities: *West Australian*, 12 January 1938, p. 7.

²⁵ *China Mail*, 13 September 1934, p. 5.

²⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 September 1934, p. 24.

²⁷ *Argus*, 24 September 1934, p. 3; *China Mail*, 18 December 1934, p. 4.

²⁸ Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 76, 165n. 48; David J. Staley, *Computers, Visualization, and History: How New Technology Will Transform Our Understanding of the Past* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

²⁹ VASA arranged Kwok's enrolment at the college: see letter from A. W. B. Fawcett to Collector of Customs, Melbourne, 22 June 1935, in NAA: B13, 1934/21222.

³⁰ Oral history research would also be useful; however, there are few remaining witnesses from this period. Maurice Kwok C. Leong, who was a schoolboy at the Christian Brothers College in West Melbourne at the same time, recalled that Kwok studied at the school but did not have personal memories of him: Maurice Kwok C. Leong, conversation with author, 12 November 2011.

Interpreting Kwok's Reception and Racial Constructions

Ultimately more interesting than Kwok's itinerary are the broad responses to his tour and specific racial constructions of him in the dual context of the White Australia Policy and contemporary understandings of Asians and sport. In this respect, digitisation is wanting, not only because newspapers offer scant insight but also because they are only one voice among many. Missing is radio coverage and public reaction in the form of conversations, discussion and debate. Newspapers did construct Kwok in particular ways that reflected and contributed to racialised discourses about Chinese and Asians more generally but, as I have argued previously in the case of the Japanese visitors that summer and at other junctures in the 1920s and 1930s, we cannot possibly know which of many possible interpretations readers took from published articles and photographs.³¹

Increasing research is revealing the extent of Chinese sporting participation and contribution in Australia.³² Notwithstanding this involvement, the literature makes clear that Chinese were regarded more as gamblers and sporting spectators than as athletes, and the contemporary Australian press throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes it clear that Chinese were not ranked with "white" people in sport. In swimming, while Otto and Ophir Kong Sing were making their mark in Sydney around 1900, negative stereotypes about Chinese played out in aquatic farces and costumed events at swimming and surf carnivals.³³ In 1906, for example, Dick Cavill, a former Australian swimming champion, played to these stereotypes by including in his international aquatic exhibitions a "Chinaman imitation" which demonstrated a "clumsy style" of propulsion.³⁴

Kwok's attractiveness to swimming organisers stemmed from his defiance of this stereotype as the "First Chinese swimmer to reach international standard".³⁵ His success in the Centenary 110-yards breaststroke championship, together with wins by the Japanese swimmers on the same day, further challenged notions of Asian athletic inadequacy and prompted the *Bulletin* to write, only half in jest: "The Caucasian would appear to be played out on the water as far as the sprint events are concerned, judging by events at the Melbourne swimming carnival".³⁶ At no stage did the newspapers surveyed in this research racially denigrate Kwok or draw upon tired racial stereotypes to describe him.

One frequently reported incident during Kwok's visit illustrates well the press avoidance of overt racial constructions. On 19 January 1935, Kwok disappointed spectators in his first major public appearance when he placed fourth in the 220-yards national breaststroke championship. Initial commentary attributed this not to inflated expectations or assumptions of racially based inferiority but rather, more fairly, to his lack of condition following his long sea voyage and short training period in Melbourne.³⁷ Shortly afterwards Kwok admitted that he had made an error of judgment at the start of the race; unfamiliar with the Victorian system of drawing colored marbles to allocate starting positions, and unsure what to do with his chosen orb, he had popped it into his mouth. This drastically interfered with his breathing during the race.³⁸ Rather than depict this as a sign of personal stupidity or cultural ineptitude, the Australian press attributed Kwok's lamentable error to language issues and to his modesty and anxiety not to offend.³⁹

³¹ Osmond, "Reading Japanese Sporting Tours through the Australian Press", pp. 543–44; Gary Osmond, "Destabilising the Past through Photographs: Picturing Japanese Sporting Tours to Australia," in *Examining Sport Histories*, ed. Richard Pringle and Murray G. Phillips (Morgantown, WV: FiT, University of West Virginia, in press).

³² See footnotes 5, 7.

³³ Osmond and McDermott, "Mixing Race", p. 343.

³⁴ *Bay of Plenty Times* (New Zealand), 20 April 1906, p. 2.

³⁵ *Argus*, 11 January 1935, p. 12.

³⁶ *Bulletin*, 30 January 1935, p. 40. This is not digitised.

³⁷ *Argus*, 21 January 1935, p. 4.

³⁸ *Argus*, 26 January 1935, p. 22. On his return to Hong Kong, Kwok denied the marble incident had occurred: *China Mail*, 9 August 1935, p. 5.

³⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 1935, p. 18.

Table 1. Kwok Chun Hang's 1935 Australian swimming tour⁴⁰

| Date (1935) | Location | Activity |
|-----------------|--------------------|---|
| ~1 Jan | Townsville | Transits aboard S. S. <i>Changte</i> |
| 4 Jan | Brisbane | 100 metre sprint at Valley Baths |
| 6 Jan | Sydney | Swims at Manly, guest of the Manly Amateur Swimming Club. Tour of district. Watches water polo match |
| 10 Jan | Melbourne | Arrival and swim at City Baths |
| 12–19 Jan | Melbourne | Trains at City Baths; exhibition swims at Footscray Swimming Club carnival and at opening of the new pool on Batman Avenue |
| 19 Jan | Melbourne | Start of Centenary Carnival. Places 4th in 220 national breaststroke championship |
| 20 Jan | Creswick, Victoria | Exhibition swim with other international visitors |
| 22 Jan | Melbourne | Wins heats and sets record in 110 "Back or Breaststroke" handicap; not in final |
| ~22 Jan | Werribee, Victoria | Trains in the Werribee River |
| 24 Jan | Melbourne | Wins Centenary 110-yards breaststroke championship |
| 26 Jan | Melbourne | Wins 100-yards breaststroke championship of Victoria |
| 27 Jan to 6 Feb | Regional Victoria | Swimming carnivals and club appearances in Healesville (27 Jan), Kyneton, Castlemaine and Bendigo (28 Jan), Swan Hill (30 Jan), Mildura (31 Jan), Horsham (3 Feb), Beaufort (4 Feb) and Maryborough (6 Feb) |
| 7–9 Feb | Melbourne | Exhibition swim with French visitors at Essendon (7 Feb) and Surrey Park, Melbourne (9 Feb) carnivals |
| 11–12 Feb | Regional Victoria | Exhibition swim with French visitors at Seymour (11 Feb) and Benalla (12 Feb) |
| 16–27 Feb | Melbourne | Exhibition swims at Victorian Ladies' Amateur Swim League (16 Feb), Preston (21 Feb) Northcote (27 Feb) and Essendon (27 Feb) |
| 8 March | Melbourne | Swims in 12th annual swim champs of the Christian Brothers' primary schools at City Baths |
| March to June | Melbourne | Studies English at Christian Brothers College, West Melbourne |
| 10 July | | Departs Melbourne by train for Sydney |
| 20 July | | Departs Sydney for return to Hong Kong aboard S. S. <i>Changte</i> |
| 9 August | | Arrives Hong Kong |

⁴⁰ This table was compiled via digitised searches of the following newspapers using Trove, NewspaperSG and gwolo: *Argus*, *Courier Mail* (Brisbane), *North Eastern Ensign* (Benalla), *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, *Malaya Catholic Leader* and *China Mail*. Kwok's arrival and departure details were confirmed in NAA: B13, 1934/21222. A planned tour of New South Wales and Queensland did not eventuate due to wrangling between swimming associations and, later, Kwok's study commitments: *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 14 February 1935, p. 7; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 15 February 1935, p. 8; *Canberra Times*, 21 February 1935, p. 6. Kwok also cancelled a planned tour of Gippsland in Victoria in January 1935 before the Centenary Carnivals because he needed to practice after his long sea voyage (*Argus*, 14 January 1935, p. 1), and a visit to New Zealand scheduled for 4 to 14 March 1935 did not eventuate: *Auckland Star*, 28 January 1935, p. 1; *Evening Post* (Wellington), 2 February 1935, p. 22; 5 March 1935, p. 6.

More generally, the newspapers also turned Kwok's modesty into a personal virtue. Frequent personal descriptions portray him as a shy, "[u]nassuming Chinese boy".⁴¹ Humility, modesty and shyness had aided the racial reception of other non-"white" sporting tourists to Australia in the past, including Duke Kahanamoku, and in combination with his athletic ability contributed to Kwok's positive reception in 1935: "An unassuming lad with a pleasant smile, Kwok has become popular with people all over Victoria. Boys and girls like him because he swims so well; older people like him because he is modest and natural".⁴² Newspaper construction of Kwok's popularity is corroborated elsewhere: in a letter written to immigration officials in 1935, the honorary secretary of VASA wrote: "Kwok has proved to be easily the most popular and obliging international visitor that has come under our jurisdiction".⁴³ The press also approvingly commented on his enrolment as a pupil in Melbourne after the tour and lauded his eventual acquisition of "a splendid knowledge of the [English] language".⁴⁴

It is worthwhile considering racial constructions of Kwok in light of research on other tours by non-"white" athletes in the early twentieth century. In his pioneering study on this topic, Andrew Honey asked if such sport tours influenced white Australian racial chauvinism.⁴⁵ He concluded that while some tourists could be exempted from racial stereotypes, negative racial stereotyping was common and such tours "probably strengthened rather than weakened the racial images that lay behind the White Australia Policy".⁴⁶ Later studies of tours made by Japanese athletes to Australia problematise these conclusions. In their analyses of Japanese sporting tours to Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, including the visit by Kiyokawa and Sakagami that coincided with Kwok's appearance in Victoria, Sean Brawley and I separately argued that while cultural difference was racialised, the goodwill generated by the tours challenged Honey's conclusion that they strengthened racial images underlying the White Australia Policy.⁴⁷ Kwok's case corroborates this. While attention was drawn to Kwok's "Chineseness", he was granted "relatively race-rancour free passage" by the press.⁴⁸ Why exactly this was the case is unclear, but it likely stemmed from his personal popularity and modesty, which generated a great deal of goodwill. While his visit may not have significantly weakened the well-entrenched racialism that lay behind the White Australia Policy, it did not reinforce such thinking.

Understanding Local Chinese Community Reactions and Encounters

While the digitised press offers some insight into "white" Australian constructions of the visitor, it is not so forthcoming on specific Chinese community reactions. Several reports indicated that Kwok's visit was sponsored financially by the Melbourne Chinese community: however, neither specific groups nor their precise intentions are revealed.⁴⁹ Cultural historian Carole Tan has argued that sport provided young Chinese Australians a route to assimilation and acceptance in the 1920s and 1930s, and the community's sponsorship of Kwok can be partially explained because it offered an opportunity to showcase Chinese pride in a sporting endeavour broadly perceived to be atypical.⁵⁰ On

⁴¹ *Argus*, 28 January 1935, p. 8.

⁴² *Argus*, 28 February 1935, p. 7.

⁴³ Letter from Fawcett to Collector of Customs, Melbourne, 22 June 1935, in NAA: B13, 1934/21222.

⁴⁴ *Argus*, 26 June 1935, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Andrew Honey, "Sport, Immigration Restriction and Race: The Operation of the White Australia Policy," in *Sport, Federation, Nation*, ed. Richard Cashman, John O'Hara and Andrew Honey (Sydney: Walla Walla Press), p. 26.

⁴⁶ Honey, "Sport, Immigration Restriction and Race", p. 46.

⁴⁷ Sean Brawley, "'They Came, They Saw, They Conquered': The Takaishi/Saito Tour of 1926-27 and Australian Perceptions of Japan," *Sporting Traditions*, 26.2 (November 2009): 61; Osmond, "Reading Japanese Sporting Tours through the Australian Press", p. 540.

⁴⁸ Honey, "Sport, Immigration Restriction and Race", p. 46.

⁴⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 September 1934, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Carole Tan, "Boundaries, Border-Crossings and Gatekeepers: Issues Relating to the Formation of Identity Amongst Young Chinese Australians in the 1920s and 1930s," paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Chinese History Workshop, 2000, pp. 13-14.

Kwok's arrival at the wharf in Melbourne on 10 January 1935, the secretary of the Chinese Club, Mr W. Tack, presented him with a "message of welcome in black Chinese characters on a small red scroll".⁵¹ The community had pre-planned a welcome swimming carnival, which was held at the City Baths that evening. The Melbourne Chinese Association had booked out most of the downstairs seats for the hundreds of Chinese spectators who gave Kwok an "enthusiastic welcome" before his demonstration swim.⁵² Competition that night included State selections for the national championships, but also two Chinese races: a Chinese Citizens' [freestyle] Championships of Victoria (66 yards) and a Chinese Citizens' Breast Stroke Championship (66 yards) for which ten entries were reportedly received.⁵³ On 24 January, when Kwok won the Centenary 110-yards breaststroke championship, members of the Young Chinese Society in the stands lit crackers and fired rockets into the air.⁵⁴

Local Chinese community organisers also used the visit to develop or improve links with the Anglo-Australian community through their interactions with VASA. Public functions, including Kwok's welcome and farewell receptions, were attended by officials of both organisations.⁵⁵ VASA officials made an effort to learn some Chinese expressions for such occasions, including a "much-rehearsed 'Tim Ying Loi Au Chau'" – translating as "welcome to Australia" – shouted from the wharf on Kwok's arrival. In addition, a VASA official, Mr. A. W. B. Fawcett, made a crowdstirring appeal over the loudspeaker at the Centenary Championships: "Chang ching Kwok yun di sing foon ying Kwok sing sung" – "Come on, Chinese, give your competitor a wonderful welcome".⁵⁶ Shortly afterwards, Fawcett was elected to life membership of the Young Chinese Association because of his kindness to Kwok.⁵⁷ Whether these gestures towards improved community ties were sustained over the longer term is unknown.

Other than record official responses and document some community events, the Australian English-language press offers little information about personal encounters between Kwok and local Chinese. There were several such meetings, both formal and informal. For example, the Melbourne Young Chinese Association hosted Kwok at a ball in the Commodore Ballroom in January, and the following month he appeared on stage garbed in Chinese evening dress to perform two musical items on a traditional Chinese instrument at Melbourne's Imperial Theatre during an opera night sponsored by the Tai Chung Kwa Melbourne Amateur Players.⁵⁸ The Young Chinese Society insisted that Kwok join their outing on 14 January, making him unavailable for a carnival in Wangaratta, and the Overseas Chinese League of Melbourne hosted a farewell dinner in his honour.⁵⁹ Kwok also visited Chinese market gardeners at Werribee and "was taken in hand by several of his countrymen" in Bendigo.⁶⁰ We do not know if he developed close relationships with any of these people, including his homestay hosts in Melbourne, "Mr. & Mrs. Linn", or his interpreter, George Lau, all recorded in the press as being Australian-born Chinese.⁶¹

⁵¹ *Argus*, 11 January 1935, p. 12.

⁵² *Argus*, 29 December 1934, p. 16; *Argus*, 10 January 1935, p. 15.

⁵³ *Argus*, 11 January 1935, p. 12. The winners of these two races are named as George Lynn and M. Ginn, respectively. See also: *China Mail*, 9 August 1935, p. 5.

⁵⁴ *Argus*, 25 January 1935, p. 12.

⁵⁵ *Argus*, 11 January 1935, p. 12; *Argus*, 25 January 1935, p. 12.

⁵⁶ *Argus*, 11 January 1935, p. 12; *Argus*, 25 January 1935, p. 12.

⁵⁷ *Argus*, 28 January 1935, p. 8.

⁵⁸ *Argus*, 14 January 1935, p. 11; *Argus*, 18 February 1935, p. 4.

⁵⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 January 1935, p. 11; *China Mail*, 9 August 1935, p. 5.

⁶⁰ *Argus*, 24 January 1935, p. 3; *Argus*, 29 January 1935, p. 10.

⁶¹ *Argus*, 28 February 1935, p. 7.

Tracing the Tour's Aftermath Through Digitised Chinese Newspapers

Following Kwok's return to Hong Kong on 9 August 1935 he slipped from the pages of the Australian press.⁶² The digitisation of some Hong Kong and other Southeast Asian newspapers offers some access to the immediate aftermath but the overall information is scant. For a thorough account of Kwok's sporting career and life non-digitised sources would be required, possibly including archival and oral history research in Hong Kong and elsewhere in China.

What the Asian press does reveal is that Kwok continued to swim competitively in Hong Kong and later in Shanghai, where he studied at Fudan University.⁶³ Late in 1935 he won the Hong Kong and Interport breaststroke titles for the second time, and he then won the China national titles in the 100 metres and 200 metres at the new Civic Centre pool in Shanghai.⁶⁴ Several reports claim that he was training for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, but he did not compete in those games and the digitised record is silent on whether or not he sought selection.⁶⁵ By 1937 he faced serious challengers in the pool and in competition in 1940 he was described as being "not at his best".⁶⁶ Following that I can find no reference to him until 1969, when he was awarded a Royal Life Saving Service Medal as team leader of the South China Life-Saving Team.⁶⁷

It is possible that Kwok returned to Australia in 1936. Early in that year the *Straits Times* reported that he had abandoned his plans to study at St. John's University in Shanghai to return to Australia to further his studies.⁶⁸ And in February, the *Morning Bulletin* in Rockhampton, Queensland advertised the appearance of "Kwok Chun Hang the Water Wonder" at the Ladies' Swimming Club Social Evening.⁶⁹ There were no follow-up reports, and no subsequent references to him swimming in Australia. If it was Kwok, what was he doing back in Australia? Did he return for further study? The only report of Kwok in the Chinese press for 1936 that I can find was in August when he swam in Canton, and an overseas absence from Hong Kong could help explain why he is not mentioned again in the context of selection for the Berlin Olympics.⁷⁰

Conclusion

While many pieces of the Kwok jigsaw are missing, a fairly detailed image can be conjured by sources available online, chiefly newspapers. Newspapers as a main research source will always provide an incomplete picture but digitisation has helped improve our ability to extract information. In the case of Kwok Chun Hang's Australian tour in 1935, digitisation has provided access to a particular past and facilitated the construction of a standalone historical narrative. While research on this topic and the telling of his story was technically possible without reference to digitised sources, it was effectively denied via print and microfilm newspapers given the research challenges posed by their geographic dispersal and limited coverage of the events described. Whereas few historians in the past would have undertaken such painstaking case-study research, digitisation affords new possibilities and opportunities.

Digitisation does not mean that all research sources are available at the mere touch of a button. Much is, however, and this is one of the appeals of resources such as Trove. But digitally-based research still requires organisation, strategy, and dogged perseverance. Knowledge of various online databases not readily accessible via standard internet searches (like gwulo.com) – what Roy Rosenzweig referred to as the "deep web"

⁶² *China Mail*, 9 August 1935, p. 5.

⁶³ *China Mail*, 1 March 1937, p. 21.

⁶⁴ *Straits Times* (Singapore), 3 January 1936, p. 15.

⁶⁵ *Argus*, 6 July 1935, p. 27; *China Mail*, 9 August 1935, p. 5; *Straits Times* (Singapore), 3 January 1936, p. 15.

⁶⁶ *Hong Kong Sunday Herald*, 11 August 1940, p. 29; *China Mail*, 13 August 1940, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Hu, "History of the South China Athletic Association," p. 28.

⁶⁸ *Straits Times* (Singapore), 3 January 1936, p. 15. The *China Mail* had reported during Kwok's 1935 Australian tour that he was interested in completing his studies in Sydney: *China Mail*, 7 February 1935, p. 4.

⁶⁹ *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 10 February 1936, p. 1; 11 February 1936, p. 8.

⁷⁰ *China Mail*, 25 August 1936, p. 10. The online search engines for the National Archives of Australia and the Queensland Archives reveals no record for this visit.

– is useful.⁷¹ So too is an awareness of possible technical limitations to conducting digital research, such as the accuracy of digital searches imposed by OCR (optical character recognition) software used by searchable databases. In a study conducted by the National Library of Australia, for example, OCR accuracy varied from 71 percent to 98.02 percent.⁷² To help surmount such issues, using alternative spellings and name order aided this research, as did searching not only for “Kwok” but also for “China/Chinese swim/ming”.

In this case, digitisation has offered a partial opening onto one particular incident in Chinese Australian history. It is important to acknowledge, however, that digital searches alone are insufficient for comprehensive research tasks. Several limitations exist, aside from the technical issues raised above. Not all newspapers are digitised, and a biased account may be gleaned by not examining a range of papers of different types and aimed at varying readerships – urban vs. rural, and conservative vs. liberal, for example. Much deeper research of non-digitised sources would supplement and possibly even challenge some of what is offered here and, ideally, both digital and non-digital methods should be combined. In this case study, however, a full, detailed account utilising all possible sources was not the goal. The purpose has been to investigate and demonstrate the possibility of digital research in Chinese Australian history while uncovering a significant, interesting yet forgotten case study. And in the process, this article aims to encourage others to consider adopting digital research methods and tools.

⁷¹ Roy Rosenzweig, “The Road to Xanadu: Public and Private Pathways on the History Web,” *The Journal of American History*, 88. 2 (September 2001): 548–79.

⁷² Rose Holley, “How Good Can It Get? Analysing and Improving OCR Accuracy in Large Scale Historic Newspaper Digitisation Programs,” *D-Lib Magazine*, 15.3/4 (March/April 2009), available online at <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march09/holley/03holley.html>, accessed 29 May 2013.