

## Chinese Australian Women in White Australia: Utilising Available Sources to Overcome the Challenge of “Invisibility”\*

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**Abstract:** Chinese Australian women are largely absent from scholarly accounts of Chinese Australian migration and settlement in the White Australia Policy period. This invisibility in research has been perpetuated by studies that emphasise the sex imbalance of the Chinese Australian population at the time, focus on male spheres of influence and activity, and utilise “traditional” historical sources that generally overlook the lives of women. Despite their relatively low numbers compared to their male counterparts, Chinese Australian women were present in the Australian nation throughout the White Australia Policy period and their lives, experiences and contributions are worthy of investigation. Despite limitations of official documentation, sources are available that bring to light the presence and lived realities of Chinese Australian women in this historical and geographical context. By combining information obtained from historical census records and in-depth interviews with Chinese Australian women themselves, the presence and migration experiences of this previously “invisible” group are brought to the fore.

**Keywords:** Chinese Australian, women, White Australia Policy, migration, sources

### Introduction

This paper brings much needed attention to the presence and lived experiences of Chinese Australian<sup>1</sup> women who lived throughout the White Australia Policy period (1901–1973)<sup>2</sup>. As I will detail below, while the experiences of Chinese Australians in this historical context have been and continue to be of much interest to researchers and the general public, Chinese Australian women – their presence and diverse experiences – continue to be overlooked in research. Emphasis continues to be on Chinese Australian men, their experiences and spheres of activity and influence and, as such, Chinese Australian women, their presence, lived realities and contributions remain largely “invisible” in scholarly research.

Based on the assertion that Chinese Australian women were present in Australia throughout the White Australia Policy period and that their lives are worthy of investigation and visibility in research, this paper contributes to the broadening field of Chinese Australia studies by highlighting ways in which available sources can be utilised to overcome the challenge of female Chinese Australian invisibility. After first providing a brief outline of the research context and immigration restrictions on female Chinese in the White Australia Policy era, I suggest that revisiting official records – particularly historical census records – is crucial for challenging assumptions of female Chinese Australian absence in the first half of the twentieth century. However, given the limitations of official statistical records, I then move on to highlight the importance of the voices and recollections of Chinese Australian women themselves in bringing to the fore their lived realities in the White Australia period – particularly of migration and mobility – as told from their own point of view. In this paper I do not present an in-depth analysis of the data collected, but instead utilise information obtained from historical census records and a

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Chinese Australian” throughout this paper in reference to Chinese immigrants to Australia and their descendants who reside(d) in Australia and identify themselves or have been identified in official documents as having Chinese ancestry. The use of the term “Chinese Australian” has been applied to Australian citizens and non-citizens, denoting presence in and contribution to the Australian nation rather than citizenship status.

<sup>2</sup> The defined date range of the White Australia Policy period is contentious. For the purposes of my research I define the beginning of the period by the introduction of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*. The Whitlam Labor government’s formal abolishment of the policy in 1973 is used as an official marker of the end of the period.

series of in-depth interviews with Chinese Australian women to indicate that official and non-official sources can be combined to begin to make visible the thousands of Chinese Australian females, both migrant and Australian-born, who were present in the nation throughout the White Australia Policy period. In this way, this paper not only contributes to the growing body of Chinese Australian research that advocates inclusive research strategies and the utilisation of alternative sources and methods, but also brings to the fore the presence and experiences of Chinese Australian women in this historical context.

### **Chinese in White Australia: The Research Context**

Characterised by systematic exclusion and segregation of “non-Whites”<sup>3</sup>, the White Australia Policy not only restricted the entry of non-White migrant groups into the country via the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* and its later manifestations, but promoted institutionalised discrimination and less formal discriminatory practices and prejudice against non-Whites who were already present in Australia (Palfreeman 1967; London 1970; Choi 1975; Yong 1977; Elder 2005). It is widely acknowledged that Chinese immigrants in Australia and their Australian-born descendants were primary targets of the discriminatory policy, with restrictions on their movements in and out of the country, their ability to reunite with family members, denial of citizenship and naturalisation rights, and institutionalised discrimination in areas such as employment (Palfreeman 1967; Fitzgerald 1997; Elder 2005; Fitzgerald 2007). In fact, Chinese in Australia had been the targets of restrictive legislation and discriminatory practices decades prior to the passing of the 1901 Act, with various colonies enacting immigration restrictions and other anti-Chinese laws in the hope of deterring the influx of “Asian hordes” (London 1970; Markus 1994; Elder 2005)<sup>4</sup>.

In the aftermath of World War II, the forced resettlement of Asian refugees and exclusion of non-European brides of Australian servicemen affected academic and non-academic attitudes towards the policy (Markus 1983). A critical attitude emerged in this period (Markus 1983; Reeves and Mountford 2011) which was marked by the publication of now iconic studies that “confronted the ugly spectre of endemic racism” (Reeves and Mountford 2011: 114) in nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia (see, for example, Yarwood 1964; Palfreeman 1967; London 1970; Price 1974; Curthoys and Markus 1978; Markus 1979). In addition to addressing the purpose and administrative mechanisms of immigration restriction, such studies began to assess the historical development of racial exclusion and impacts on Australian society. Drawing primarily upon English language sources – official and unofficial – these early studies exemplified the preoccupation with the perspectives of White Australians and research from “above” approaches (Cushman 1984; Giese 1997; Chan 2001; Shen 2001; Bagnall 2011). Nonetheless, by uncovering the relationship between Chinese immigration and the development of the policy, as well as the impacts administrative changes had on Chinese immigrants (among other non-European groups) and their descendants’ experiences in Australia (albeit from a White, male perspective), they began to provide an alternate and often more critical view of the White Australia Policy and the Immigration Restriction Act by illustrating their discriminatory nature.

At the same time that academics such as Yarwood (1964), Palfreeman (1967) and London (1970) were publishing research on the historical background and administration of the White Australia Policy, research more centrally concerned with the Chinese Australian experience also emerged. This included works by Huck (1968), Teo (1971), Choi (1975) and Yong (1977). This Chinese-focused research moved closer towards more migrant-centred approaches and, for the first time, ventured beyond the use of traditional English language sources. Questionnaire surveys, interviews, Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> Terms such as “White”, “non-White” and “race” are used throughout this paper, often seemingly untroubled. I have used these terms in accordance with the historical context which this paper is concerned.

<sup>4</sup> At the same time, other White settler nations such as Canada, the United States and New Zealand had also introduced discriminatory legislation aimed at restricting numbers of Chinese and other non-European groups (see Price 1974 and Markus 1979 for comparisons of these geographical contexts).

language sources such as newspapers and temple records were utilised: however, the lack of direct quoting of qualitative material (as in Teo 1971 and Yong 1977) and limited engagement with Chinese Australian attitudes and perspectives (as in Choi 1975), meant that “[Chinese] life in Australia [was] not described in terms of their own values and categories of experience” (Cushman 1984: 106).

It was not until the 1980s that a substantial body of research focusing on Chinese Australian communities “on their own terms”, or uncovering the experiences, views and attitudes of Chinese Australian individuals, emerged (Fitzgerald 2007; Reeves and Khoo 2011; Reeves and Mountford 2011). Primarily actioned by Australian historians such as Henry Chan, John Fitzgerald, Ann Curthoys, Andrew Markus and Jennifer Cushman, this research utilised more inclusive “research from below” approaches that have placed Chinese Australian communities and individuals themselves at the centre of enquiry (see for example Fitzgerald 1997; Chan, Curthoys and Chiang 2001; Tan 2003; Couchman, Fitzgerald and Macgregor 2004; Fitzgerald 2007). As a result, Chinese Australian history is increasingly being considered part of the broader national history (Reeves and Mountford 2011) and the complexity of Chinese Australian experience is being revealed (Reeves and Khoo 2011).

The recent remaking of a more inclusive Chinese Australian history “from below” has been achieved through the uncovering and utilisation of alternative sources and methodological approaches. Emphasis has been taken away from “traditional” sources such as census records and parliamentary debates, and instead there is an increasing use of Chinese Australian sources such as oral histories, autobiographies, and other personal/business documents written in both English and Chinese. Approaches aligned with historical archaeology, material cultures and historical landscape studies have also begun to gain momentum (Reeves and Khoo 2011). Giese’s (1997) use of oral history, Shen’s (2001) study of Chinese immigrant autobiographies, Wilton’s (2004) engagement with personal objects and oral histories, and Couchman’s (2011) examination of early twentieth-century photography exemplify this new focus (see also Couchman 2004; Bagnall 2011). The use of these alternative sources has allowed the experiences, views and attitudes of nineteenth and twentieth century Chinese Australians to be voiced and uncovered.

Despite the plethora of recent research and shifts towards more inclusive research approaches, large gaps in research on twentieth-century Chinese Australian history remain (Chan 2001; Couchman 2011; Khoo and Noonan 2011; Reeves and Mountford 2011). One such area that continues to be cast to the margins is the lived experiences and contributions of Chinese Australian females in the White Australia Policy era. Loh (1986), Chan (1995) and Bagnall (2006) have all drawn attention to the patriarchal perspectives and methodological approaches in Chinese Australian research which has, since the 1960s, largely overlooked Chinese Australian female experience in the White Australia context and rendered these women invisible in Australia’s Chinese past. In early studies, such as that conducted by Huck (1968), Choi (1975) and Yong (1977), the actual presence of female Chinese Australians in the nation throughout the White Australia Policy period was made evident via the various demographic statistics presented. But rather than focus on those women who were present in the nation, this research tended to emphasise the sex imbalance and discount female Chinese Australian experience and contributions on this basis (see, for example, Choi 1975: 47). Furthermore, focus was on traditional spheres of male influence and activity – migration, economics and politics – in which female participation and contributions were not considered. Limited evidence and official documentation regarding the movements and experiences of female Chinese in Australia at the time – an historic outcome of patriarchy in official administration – somewhat justified this patriarchal research bias (Ryan 2003). Even within the traditionally feminine spheres of family and social life, Chinese Australian women were poorly represented in the literature (see in particular Yong 1977: Part IV). In more recent scholarship, a preoccupation with male spheres of experience and disregard for female lived realities has continued. For example, in his report for the NSW Heritage Office on

Chinese settlement in New South Wales, Michael Williams importantly noted that “The greatest gap in our knowledge concerns women” (Williams 1999: 59). Despite his assertion, as Bagnall (2006) noted, Williams failed to include women in any substantial way into his thematic history which covered the male dominated areas of migration, social institutions, commerce, law and order, labour, agriculture, and mining. Even in his chapter titled “Leisure” – a more gender neutral sphere of activity – females were not mentioned. Williams instead relegated Chinese Australian women to a brief two-paragraph section titled “Women” in which he discussed the sex imbalance and marriage prospects of male migrants (1999: 59). By focusing on male lives in the White Australia context, the recent work of Williams (1999), among others such as Fitzgerald (2007), has painted a history of men and largely erased the presence of Chinese Australian females in communities, organisations and prominent positions throughout the White Australia Policy period.

Within this androcentric research context, calls have been made to include the experiences of females in understandings of Australia’s Chinese past (see Loh 1986; Chan 1995; Bagnall 2011). Additionally, a small body of research has begun to use the voices and experiences of women – as sourced from oral histories, biographies or objects – to provide insights into Chinese Australian experiences at the time. These studies have, however, predominantly included females within subsidiary discussions or framed their experiences within male-dominated understandings of migration and settlement (see, for example, Giese 1997; Shen 2001; Tan 2003; Wilton 2004). In contrast, the contributions of Loh and Ramsey (1986), Couchman (2004), Khoo and Noonan (2011), and Martinez (2011) have been particularly significant. Bringing female experience to the fore, Loh and Ramsey’s (1986) *Survival and Celebration* seminar series and photographic exhibition included Loh’s overview of the first 100 years of Chinese settlement in Australia with a particular focus on women (Loh 1986) as well as autobiographical papers by Ramsey (1986), Liow (1986), and Moss (1986). The autobiographical papers included descriptions of life as a university student, travel, mixed marriages, living in Sydney’s Chinatown, and family histories within the White Australia context and beyond. Much more recently, Couchman’s (2004) overview of the lives of a select few women (Chinese and non-Chinese) of Melbourne’s Chinatown during the federation period, Khoo and Noonan’s (2011) examination of Chinese Australian women’s contributions to wartime fundraising, and Martinez’s (2011) exploration of the political activities of members of the Darwin Kuo Min Tang (KMT) in the early decades of the twentieth century (with a particular focus on the role of women in politics) have been pioneering. Through a shift away from patriarchal research traditions and close analysis of female lives, these studies have drawn attention to the experiences and contributions of early twentieth-century Chinese Australian women and provided important footing for further research on this much neglected group.

With the largely androcentric research tradition as backdrop, this paper builds upon the limited body of research characterised by Loh and Ramsey’s (1986) *Survival and Celebration* seminar series and exhibition and the work of Couchman (2004), Khoo and Noonan (2011), and Martinez (2011) to advocate the inclusion of Chinese Australian women in understandings of Australia’s past – particularly within the White Australia context. By highlighting the utility of “traditional” (historical census records) and “non-traditional” (in-depth interviews) sources of information, this paper asserts that official data and the voices of Chinese Australian women themselves are available and extremely valuable for overcoming the challenge of female invisibility in research.

### **The White Australia Policy and Immigration Restrictions on Chinese Australian Females**

In 1901, “survivalist anxiet[ies]” about Australia’s geographical proximity to “land hungry” Asia (Walker 2005: 71) culminated in the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* – one of the first pieces of legislation to be passed by the newly federated nation and the first federal legislative tool of the White Australia Policy (Yarwood 1968; London 1970: 9). Via the “dictation test” the Act unified colonial attempts to exclude Chinese (and other “coloured races” such as Japanese, Indians and Polynesians) from entering the nation and thus

aimed to prevent an “invasion” from the “East” (Elder 2003). In the two decades following the passing of the Act, departures of Chinese immigrants exceeded arrivals almost every year so that at the close of the 1930s there were no more than 15,000 Chinese resident on the continent, down from almost 30,000 in 1901 (Choi 1975; Fitzgerald 2007). While the number of Chinese in Australia had decreased in previous decades due to colonial restrictive measures, the massive population decreases experienced after 1901 were incomparable. In its original and later amended forms, the Immigration Restriction Act remained the fundamental means of fulfilling the immigration objectives of the White Australia Policy until its abandonment by the Whitlam Labor Government in the early 1970s (Palfreeman 1967; Brawley 1995; Walker 2005).

In its initial form, the Immigration Restriction Act did permit the entry of wives and children of migrants who were not prohibited. However, two years after its inception, the clause concerning the entry of wives and dependents was suspended and finally repealed in 1905. In addition, wives of Chinese nationals who were resident in Australia were no longer permitted to stay in the country (unless, of course, they were of European descent). Thus, despite the fact that Chinese families were more willing to allow females, particularly those who were married, to emigrate due to cultural and social changes in Republican China in the 1920s and 1930s, Australian immigration law continued to restrict female Chinese presence in the nation (Choi 1975; Loh 1986). The entry restrictions placed on Chinese women are often emphasised in the literature and used to explain the “absence” of Chinese Australian females in the period (see, for example, Yarwood 1964, Yong 1977 and Williams 1999 discussions of the Chinese “bachelor society”, as well as Palfreeman’s 1967 discussion of “Families and dependants”).

There were, however, means by which Chinese females were able to enter Australia in the first half of the twentieth century. The wives and children of well-established merchants were permitted temporary entry (usually six months) with extensions often granted and temporary permits, in some cases, being converted into permanent ones (Bagnall 2013). Sponsored students were also allowed temporary entry using Chinese passports. Illegal dealings were another possible avenue for entry. Some cases have been noted of corrupt officials supplying false identities that allowed entry into Australia (Williams 1999), but the trade in identities facilitated by brokers connected to companies with Chinese and Australian branches may have been more common. It was through such connections that the purchase of birth and naturalisation certificates or Certificates Exempting from the Dictation Test (CEDTs) of deceased Australian-born or non-returning migrants was made possible (a phenomenon briefly noted by Macgregor 1998 and Williams 1999). It must also be remembered that females who had entered Australia prior to 1901 were considered domiciled in Australia (some were also married to naturalised husbands) and permitted to remain in Australia throughout the period. There were also the Australian-born females who were a product of these unions or Chinese-Anglo relationships, who were, by legal right, British subjects or, later, Australian citizens.

While the White Australia Policy was still formally in operation until 1973, the post-war abandonment of overtly racist policies and practices saw dramatic changes in the Australian government’s views of Chinese immigration and, in particular, the entry of females. In 1950, the Colombo Plan was introduced and allowed the large scale entry of assisted female (and male) tertiary students from the Asian region – most of who were of ethnic Chinese origin (Williams 1999). More significantly, in 1956 immigration legislation pertaining to the entry and settlement of non-Europeans was relaxed. Central to this relaxation were changes to naturalisation laws. Those Chinese (and other non-Europeans) who had been resident in Australia for fifteen years or more were now able to apply for naturalisation, as were those persons who had been permitted to stay in Australia without periodical extensions of their permits. Additionally, Chinese spouses of Australian citizens were able to apply for naturalisation and naturalised Chinese were able to bring their families to Australia (London 1970; Ryan 2003). With such changes to Australia’s immigration laws, the Chinese sex ratio quickly equalised by the 1960s.

### The Sources: Historical Census Records and In-Depth Interviews

As I detailed earlier, there is a plethora of sources available that can be (and have been) used to uncover and examine the presence and experiences of Chinese Australians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Census records, immigration records (including CEDTs and related case files), naturalisation records, and Hansard continue to provide detailed insights into the development of policy, administrative changes, governmental pressures and attitudes of the dominant society towards Chinese and other non-European groups in Australia. Other English-language sources found in Australian archives such as newspaper reports, police reports and anti-Chinese meeting minutes are also readily available and continue to be extremely useful, particularly for illustrating non-government perspectives. As I also detailed earlier, the perspectives and experiences of Chinese Australians themselves have also begun to be uncovered from temple records, Chinese Australian newspapers, business records, Chinese consulate records, records from various Chinese Australian institutions and societies, as well as personal accounts in the form of letters and diaries, photographs, oral histories and interviews. Within this large body of source material – English or Chinese language, official or unofficial – accounts of Chinese Australian female presence and experience can be found. For example, CEDTs and other immigration records that detail women's experiences are held in Australian archives; records and newspaper reports of Chinese Australian women's activities and associations are available; and visual evidence of their presence and experiences can be found in family photographs. While all these sources are extremely valuable, within the confines of this paper I have focused on historical census records and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Chinese Australian women to illustrate the utility of these two very disparate data sources.

#### *Census records*

Between 1901 and 1973, the formal years of the White Australia Policy period, eight national censuses were conducted by the Commonwealth (later Australian) Bureau of Statistics. The first was conducted in 1911 and the last of the period in 1971<sup>5</sup>. Included in the census records were information on age, education, occupation/employment, marriage status, geographical location, birthplace, and length of residence of "Chinese"<sup>6</sup> females. These official records provide the most accurate and efficient means of examining the diverse demographic characteristics of the total Chinese Australian female population throughout the twentieth century. Given the breadth of the national censuses (in terms of population coverage, time span and information collected), they can be used to piece together a broad national picture of female presence, experience and contributions within various social contexts across time (for example, within families, schools, workplaces, and communities). Within this paper I will illustrate that on the most

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<sup>5</sup> The "Federation Census" of 1901 was the last of the co-ordinated colonial censuses that were implemented in the later decades of the nineteenth century. While the date, the form, the questions and the occupation classification were all standardised across the various state censuses of 1901, final results varied in their tabular presentation, for example, calculations of groupings. There were also subtle differences in who was included and excluded in the population (Wright 2011). It is for these reasons that I did not endeavour to include state census data for 1901 where it had not been previously aggregated.

<sup>6</sup> That is, those racially defined as Chinese in the censuses. I acknowledge the socially constructed nature of racial classification; however, I have drawn upon racial data, as opposed to birthplace or nationality data, as a key indicator of Chinese identity for a number of reasons. Firstly, the racial categories in the Australian censuses reflect racial ideologies of the time and the way governments dealt with the "colour issue". Thus, the "race" category provides insight into the ways in which Chinese Australian females were racialised and classified by authorities. Census data on "race" was also used on the basis that it has been directly linked to policy – in this case, perceived threats of "coloured others" reflected in census data justified the White Australia Policy and its associated discriminatory legislation. In this way, the racial inventory would have had real impacts on the lives of Chinese women in Australia. Finally, despite the obvious inadequacy and racist underpinnings of the categorisations, "race" provides the closest numerical reflection of those females who identified themselves as ethnically "Chinese". Utilising birthplace or nationality data would disregard those individuals who were Chinese nationals or China-born but did not define themselves as ethnically "Chinese". Similarly, utilising these categories as markers of "Chinese" identity would overlook those "Chinese" who were born in countries other than China or who were not Chinese nationals.

basic level, census records spanning the twentieth century provide statistical evidence of female Chinese Australian presence at the national scale and, at the same time, the mobility and migrations of Chinese women in and out of the Australian nation. Given that researchers have propagated notions of the absence of Chinese Australian women in the White Australia Policy era by largely ignoring them in research or emphasising the inability of Chinese females to enter the Australian nation, I argue that the re-examination of population counts is an important first step for revising gendered understandings of Australia's Chinese past.

#### *In-Depth Interviews*

In recent decades, historians and other social researchers have made calls to utilise "research from below" approaches in order to uncover the lived realities and diversity of experience of "subaltern" or "Other" groups such as immigrant women (Peake 1993; Johnson 2000; Chakrabarty 2005; Sharp 2011). Given that the White Australia Policy period was formally abandoned only forty years ago, many Chinese Australian women who lived through this period of time – as immigrants or Australian-born citizens – continue to be important sources of information regarding their own lived realities in this historical and geographical context. Therefore, in keeping with postcolonial calls for more inclusive research, in this paper I also draw upon qualitative material obtained from interviews with Chinese Australian women. While a re-examination of historical census data is an extremely valuable means of revising the twentieth century presence of Chinese Australian women at a national scale, interviews with Chinese Australian women provide alternative views from the official government record and can provide nuanced and textured insights into individual lives of women who lived throughout the White Australia Policy era. These voices can be used not simply as accompaniments to the voices and recollections of men, or as a means to further uncover the experiences of their male counterparts – be it husbands, fathers or brothers – but to examine their own lived experiences and those of their female forebears.

The voices I present in this paper are excerpts from a series of interviews I conducted as part of my doctoral research. Within this project, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with nineteen Chinese Australian women who are currently resident in the greater Sydney region<sup>7</sup>. The interviews were carried out over one year (April 2010 to April 2011) and interview questions focused on personal background information, family migration history, transnational linkages, continued cultural traditions, experiences of work and family life, experiences of racism and exclusion (or inclusion), and feelings of identity and belonging in the White Australia Policy period. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. Given the length of the White Australia period and the diasporic history of Chinese immigration and settlement, the basic criterion for interview participation was quite broad. Interview participants simply had to be women who identify themselves as being "Chinese" and who were resident in Australia prior to 1973 (whether Australian-born or migrant). Interview participants could be "full" or "mixed" Chinese. Potential participants were recruited at various Chinese Australian community events and via cooperative relationships with Chinese Australian community organisations (such as the Chinese Heritage Association of Australia, Chinese Women's Association and various clan associations). Potential participants were also recruited via word of mouth. This dual sampling strategy aimed to diversify my sample by including women who were not necessarily actively involved in the Sydney Chinese community. Some of the demographic characteristics of my final group of interview participants are presented in table 1.

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<sup>7</sup> Narrowing my sample by geographical location was, unfortunately, necessary due to time and funding restrictions. Limiting recruitment to Sydney was an obvious choice given its long history of Chinese settlement.

Table 1. Selected demographic characteristics of interview participants

Participant name <sup>1</sup>	Year of Birth	Place of Birth	Generation <sup>2</sup>	Year of ancestral migration/ self-migration <sup>3</sup>
Mabel	1939	Warialda, NSW, Australia	Second (Australian-born father; Chinese-born mother)	c. 1880
Sandy	1943	Hong Kong	First	1962
Ina	1943	Sydney, NSW, Australia	Second (Australian-born father; Chinese-born mother)	c. 1890
Lily	1939	Hong Kong	First	1971
Susan	1938	Sydney, NSW, Australia	Second (Australian-born father; Chinese-born mother)	c. 1900
Mei-Lin	1942	Texas, QLD, Australia	Third	c. 1890
Daphne	1939	Wellington, New Zealand	First	1964
Stella	1931	Thursday Island, NSW, Australia	Second (Australian-born mother; Chinese-born father)	c. 1900
Sally	1942	Tumut, NSW, Australia	Second (Chinese-born father; Chinese-born mother)	1926
Nancy	1941	Sydney, NSW, Australia	Second (Australian-born father; Chinese-born mother)	c. 1900
Mary	1952	Hong Kong	First	1967
Doreen	1941	Sydney, NSW, Australia	Second (Chinese-born father; Chinese-born mother)	c. 1920
Kaylin	1920s	Sydney, NSW, Australia	Second (Australian-born mother; Chinese-born father)	1868
Marina	1934	Inverell, NSW, Australia	Third	c. 1870
Edith	1949	Glenn Innes, NSW, Australia	Third	1885
Eileen	1946	Sydney, NSW, Australia	Second (Australian-born father; Chinese-born mother)	1914
Patricia	1941	Dongguan, Guangdong, China	First	1947
Margaret	1948	Sydney, NSW, Australia	Second (Chinese-born father; Chinese-born mother)	c. 1946
Helen	1943	Hong Kong	First	1961

(For notes, see over)

### Notes

1. Participants' names are used with consent. Where consent was not granted, pseudonyms have been applied.
2. In accordance with definitions of "generation" used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, "first generation Australians" are people living in Australia who were born overseas; "second generation Australians" are Australian-born people living in Australia, with at least one overseas-born parent; "third-plus generation Australians" are Australian-born people whose parents were both born in Australia – one or more of their grandparents may have been born overseas or they may have several generations of ancestors born in Australia (ABS 2013).
3. For participants that are migrant/first generation Australians, the year of their arrival to Australia is presented. For those participants that are second-plus generation Australians, the year that the first of their forbears arrived in Australia is presented.

From table 1 it can be seen that interview participants' year of birth ranged from approximately 1920 to 1952. As such, participants' ages at the time of interviews ranged between 57 years of age to approximately 80 years of age. In addition, six of the interview participants are foreign-born, the remaining thirteen being Australian-born. Of the six migrant participants, three were born in Hong Kong, two in China, and one in New Zealand. All migrant participants arrived in the post-war period – between 1947 and 1971. Australian-born participants included second and third generation Australians, with some having forebears (male and female) who migrated to Australia as early as the 1860s. Their places of birth give some indication of the geographical reach of their (and their family's) previous locations in Australia. While this group of participants is relatively diverse, the limitations of this sample must be acknowledged. Women who migrated in the first half of the twentieth century are under-represented with no females who migrated in the pre-war period being represented, and only one participant, Patricia, having migrated prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Qualitative information regarding the migrations of older-generation women was obtained in the form of Australian-born participants recalling the migration stories of their mother or grandmothers in the first half of the twentieth century. A broader interview base would provide valuable and enlightening first-hand accounts of earlier migrations.

Despite the sample limitations, interviews with these nineteen women provided an opportunity to record the voices and recollections of a group of individuals who had lived throughout the White Australia Policy period and to gain insight into their feelings of identity and their experiences across a variety of spatial and temporal contexts as told from their own point of view. This collection of first hand information was not only a practical and efficient means of gathering experiential data, but it provided important insight into their everyday realities throughout many stages of their life – in childhood at home and school, as young adults at university, as mothers and workers. Relationships between interview participants and family members, school friends, work colleagues and the general public were also explored and the contributions these women made to their families, communities and the nation were examined.

While an abundance of information was obtained from these interviews and via the re-examination of historical census records, within the confines of this paper, my discussion focuses on census data pertaining to population numbers of "Chinese" women and birthplace statistics, as well as interviewee recollections of their own migration and/or the migration histories of their female forebears in Australia. I illustrate that when combined, these pieces of information paint a picture of Chinese Australian female presence and mobility in the White Australia Policy period – a picture that can be used to help correct the gender blindness in much of the existing research.

### Re-Examining Census Records: Statistical Evidence of Female Presence

The decline of the “full” Chinese population in Australia in the decades following the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act has been well documented in the literature (see, for example, Choi 1975). Census statistics collected between 1901 and 1971 indicate that the “full” Chinese population decreased by almost 20,500 individuals in the years between 1901 and 1947 (from 29,627 “full” Chinese in 1901 to a mere 9144 in 1947; table 2). Such a rapid decline has been attributed to the Immigration Restriction Act as well as broader social exclusions associated with the White Australia Policy. In the post-war period, however, calls to abandon discriminatory legislation, moves towards more open immigration policy and “unfavourable conditions”<sup>8</sup> in China (Choi 1975: 57) saw the quick recovery of the number of “full” Chinese in Australia, with 20,382 “full” Chinese being documented in the census of 1961. It is crucial to note that within the declining Chinese population in Australia between 1901 and 1947, and the decades following, the number of “full” Chinese females steadily increased. In 1901 females numbered 474 (1.6 percent) compared to 29,153 males. By 1947 the female population had increased to 2550 (27.9 percent) and in 1961 the number of “full” female Chinese in Australia had reached 6145 – almost one third (30.1 percent) of the “full” Chinese population (table 2). Thus despite constructions of female absence in much of the existing literature, a close inspection of the census data clearly indicates a more complex picture of increased presence of Chinese Australian females in the period.

Including “mixed”<sup>9</sup> Chinese Australians in the total Chinese Australia population provides additional complexity to the picture of Chinese presence in Australia. Most fundamentally, it can be seen that the number of Chinese Australians was larger across all census years when “mixed” Chinese are included (table 2). What is most striking, however, is the large increase in female presence. For example, in 1901 the female population increases from 474 (“full” Chinese) to 2008 (“full” and “mixed”). This further challenges the numerical paucity argument so often presented by researchers (for example, Choi 1975 and Fitzgerald 2007). What is also important to note is the relative gender balance in the “mixed” Chinese population in addition to the relative numerical consistency of this population across all census years. That is, while the “full” Chinese population experienced significant shifts in its size in the period, the “mixed” Chinese population averaged around 3000 individuals each year (table 2).

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<sup>8</sup> For example, after the Communist takeover and establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Land Reform Act 1950–53 not only eliminated large land ownership but confiscated land owned by overseas Chinese families. These factors weakened family lineage systems and made the desirability of return migration minimal. Return migration itself was made difficult due to strict immigration–emigration controls (Choi 1975: 57).

<sup>9</sup> I use the term “mixed” as defined in the census records as “half-caste”. My inclusion of “mixed” Chinese females in population counts is premised on the assertion that while some of these females may never have identified themselves as Chinese in day-to-day life, according to census definitions they could never be considered part of the European/White population. Another reason for their inclusion, in accordance with Kate Bagnall’s assertion, is that they reflect an important component of Chinese presence in Australia, that is the formation of intimate relationships between Chinese and non-Chinese Australians and Chinese-European families who were integral to the development of Chinese Australian communities (see Bagnall 2011). Thus the inclusive connotations of “half-caste” have been utilised.

Table 2. “Full Chinese”<sup>1</sup> and “Mixed Chinese”<sup>1</sup> in Australia, 1901–1971

Year	“Full Chinese” (%)			“Mixed Chinese” (%)			Total (%)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1901	29 153 (98.4)	474 (1.6)	29 627 (100)	1 556 (50.4)	1 534 (49.6)	3 090 (100)	30 709 (93.9)	2 008 (6.1)	32 717 (100)
1911	21 856 (96.1)	897 (3.9)	22 753 (100)	1 518 (50.3)	1 501 (49.7)	3 019 (100)	23 374 (90.7)	2 398 (9.3)	25 772 (100)
1921	16 011 (93.3)	1 146 (6.7)	17 157 (100)	1 891 (51.4)	1 778 (48.6)	3 655 (100)	17 902 (86.0)	2 924 (14.0)	20 826 (100)
1933	9 311 (85.8)	1 535 (14.2)	10 846 (100)	1 901 (54.3)	1 602 (45.7)	3 503 (100)	11 212 (78.1)	3 137 (21.9)	14 349 (100)
1947	6 594 (72.1)	2 550 (27.9)	9 144 (100)	1 599 (54.2)	1 351 (45.8)	2 950 (100)	8 193 (67.7)	3 901 (32.3)	12 094 (100)
1954	9 150 (71.1)	3 728 (28.9)	12 878 (100)	1 404 (52.4)	1 276 (47.6)	2 680 (100)	10 554 (67.8)	5 004 (32.2)	15 558 (100)
1961	14 237 (69.9)	6 145 (30.1)	20 382 (100)	1 648 (51.7)	1 538 (48.3)	3 186 (100)	15 885 (67.4)	7 683 (32.6)	23 568 (100)
1966 <sup>2</sup>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	17 131 (64.1)	9 592 (35.9)	26 723 (100)
1971 <sup>2</sup>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	15 173 (57.9)	11 025 (42.1)	26 198 (100)

**Notes**

1. For the years 1901–1954, figures for “Full Chinese” have been appropriated from the category “Full Blood Chinese” and “Mixed Chinese” from the category “Half Caste Chinese” as defined by the Commonwealth (later Australian) Bureau of Statistics. Explanatory notes in the 1954 Census Report indicated that “Full Blood” individuals had parents of the same non-European race while “Half-Caste” individuals had one parent of European race. If an individual had parents of different non-European races, their own race followed the paternal line and they were classified as “Full Blood” (Census Report 1954). In 1961 the terminology changed and individuals were categorised as either “non-European” (for example, non-European: Chinese) or as “European and —” another race (for example, European and Chinese). The former category replaced “Full-Blood” while the latter replaced the term “Half Caste” to denote “persons with European blood to the extent of one-half and blood of a Non-European race to the extent of one-half” (1961 Census data: 65). “Full Chinese” figures presented for 1961 therefore refer to those classified as “Non-European: Chinese” while “Mixed Chinese” figures presented for 1961 refer to those classified as “European and Chinese”.

2. 1966 and 1971 Census data is not available for the sub-categories “Full Chinese” and “Mixed Chinese”. It must also be noted that in 1971 “Mixed Chinese” were no longer included in the total figure for Chinese, hence total figures in 1971 are lower than 1966 figures (with the exception of the female population).

**Source**

Choi 1975; Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1917, 1927, 1940, 1952, 1962, 1965, 1971, 1972

Much information can also be uncovered when we consider the birthplace of those Chinese Australian females who were present in Australia on census nights during the White Australia period. The majority of the “mixed” Chinese female population were Australian-born – 99 percent (n: 1488) in 1921 and 80 percent (n: 1390) by 1961 (table 3). This reflects the many unions between Chinese and White Australians in the colonial and White Australia period (a phenomenon explored in great depth by Kate Bagnall 2006, 2011). In the period before World War II, the majority of “full” Chinese females were also Australian-born. For example, in 1911, 632 of the 897 (70 percent) “full” Chinese females were Australian-born. By 1933 this increased to 1316 of 1535 (86 percent) “full Chinese” females in Australia. Given that the number of foreign-born “full” Chinese decreased in that same period (from 260 individuals in 1911 to 219 in 1933), as Inglis (1972) and Choi (1975) have argued, we can extrapolate that the overall increase in the “full Chinese” female population between 1911 and 1933 was primarily attributed to the birth of Australian-born females rather than immigration.

In contrast, during and after World War II, the immigration of Chinese females had much larger impacts on the population – a phenomenon made possible as a result of the relaxation of immigration restrictions. Between 1933 and 1947, the “full Chinese” female population increased by 1015 individuals (table 2). According to birthplace data (table 3), this period saw an increase of 527 foreign-born females and an increase of 488 Australian-born females. Thus, for the first time since 1911, Australia not only experienced a net gain of foreign-born females, but a gain that marginally outnumbered the increase of the Australian-born cohort.

In the post-war decades that followed, the impact of immigration on the female population was even greater. Between 1954 and 1961, the number of Australian-born “full Chinese” females increased by 378. In comparison, the foreign-born “full Chinese” population increased by 2039 (table 3). Unlike the pre-war years, we can assume from this information that the large increases in the “full Chinese” female population from 1954 was primarily due to the migration of foreign-born females. Thus, as the census data indicates, both Australian-born and migrant females made significant numerical contributions to the Chinese Australian population in the White Australia period.

Information regarding the birthplace of Chinese Australian women also provides important insight into the official status of national “belonging”. The status of “Australian citizen” was created through the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948*. Prior to the introduction of the Act in 1949, Australians could only hold the status of “British subject” in accordance with the *Naturalisation Act 1903* and its later amended forms (Klapdor, Coombs and Bohm 2009). Whether of European or non-European descent, those born in Australia or elsewhere in the Commonwealth were, by default, officially classed as British subjects. Under the *Naturalisation Act 1903*, “aliens” could also be granted naturalisation by the Commonwealth and attain the rights and privileges of British subjects (Klapdor, Coombs and Bohm 2009). However, in line with the rationale of the White Australia Policy, up until the 1950s Australian residents from Asia, Africa or the Pacific Islands were prohibited from applying for naturalisation. These “undesirable Others”, including the Chinese, were therefore denied the privileges of Australian-born subjects. In 1956, amendments to discriminatory policies allowed those previously undesirable immigrants to apply for naturalisation if they had been resident in Australia for fifteen years (reduced to five years in 1966) (Jones 2005). Given the birthrights of Australian-born individuals, Australian-born Chinese were therefore officially classed as British subjects/Australian citizens despite the discriminatory naturalisation policies. The numbers of Australian-born “full” and “mixed” Chinese females therefore indicate an official national “belonging” that deviates from the ideologies inherent in the White Australia Policy.

**Table 3. Australian-born and Foreign-born Chinese Females in Australia, 1911–1971**

Year	“Full Chinese” <sup>1</sup>			“Mixed Chinese” <sup>1</sup>			Total <sup>2</sup>
	Australian - born	Foreign-Born	Total Full-blood**	Australian - born	Foreign-Born	Total Half-caste**	
1911	632	260	892	1488	8	1496	2388
1921	906	237	1143	1755	16	1771	2914
1933	1316	219	1535	1588	14	1602	3137
1947	1804	746	2550	1296	55	1351	3901
1954	2222	1506	3728	1199	77	1276	5004
1961	2600	3545	6145	1390	148	1538	7683
	<b>Australian-born</b>			<b>Foreign-born</b>			
1966 <sup>3</sup>	4463			5129			9592
1971 <sup>3</sup>	3845			7180			11025

**Notes**

1. See table 2 for definitions of these categories.
2. The number of individuals that did not specify their place of birth in the censuses has not been included in this table. Discrepancies in “Totals” therefore occur between table 1 and table 2.
3. 1966 and 1971 Census data is not available for the sub-categories “Full Chinese” and “Mixed Chinese”. Furthermore, a direct comparison between 1966 and 1971 figures cannot be made as “Mixed Chinese” were no longer included in the total figure for Chinese in 1971 – an explanation for the lower “Australian-born” figure in 1971.

**Source**

Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1917, 1927, 1940, 1952, 1962, 1965, 1971, 1972

**Re-examining Census Records: Statistical Evidence of Female Migration and Mobility**

In addition to Australian immigration policy, it is widely understood that the “absence” of Chinese females (more particularly wives) in Australia was a reflection of economically driven migration patterns and patriarchal ideologies in China. Migration paradigms that centre on the role of male Chinese migrants as traders, coolies and sojourners have focused on the economic motivations for male movement across the globe within the contexts of colonial exploits in South East Asia, the expansion of global markets and economic networks (see, for example, Wang 1991 and McKeown 1999). Jan Ryan (2003) emphasised this gender imbalance in reference to Wang’s explanation of “modern” Chinese global migrations. She stated:

Strictly speaking, the terms are “gender neutral”. However, because the discourse ignores women, and migrant patterns that are dominated by women are excluded in the dialogue, the terms are inscribed male by default (Ryan 2003: 26).

Explanations of the gendered and economic nature of Chinese migration in the nineteenth and twentieth century, as purported by researchers such as Wang (1991) and McKeown (1999), are characteristic of broader migration paradigms that have, until fairly recently, leaned towards understanding political and economic reasons for male migration as uncovered by the “push-pull” approach (Menjivar 2005; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Ryan and Webster 2008). Within this broader research tradition, males have been conceptualised as the primary actors in the migration process with women assumed to be dependants – either passively accompanying their independently mobile husband or

following later as part of family reunification processes (Kershen 2008; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Ryan and Webster 2008).

In the nineteenth and twentieth century context, the absence of “dependant” Chinese wives in the “Gold Mountain” countries of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States has been directly linked to women’s position within the “traditional” Confucian family system which denied them the opportunity to be independently mobile (see, for example, Choi 1975). Within the patrilineal context, women were defined by their subordination and dependence on their husband, father or eldest son. They were expected to marry – and in doing so become cut off from their natal family – and fulfil their obligations to the running of the household and bearing of children. In addition to caring for their children and having responsibility for their upbringing, wives were also expected to care for senior members of her husband’s family (Ip 1990; Stockard 1992; Ip 2002; Ryan 2003; Bagnall 2011). With the continuation of husbands’ family and male descent line being paramount, female migration away from her husband’s ancestral village was not encouraged. Thus, while Chinese men ventured to Australia, New Zealand, Canada or the United States in search of wealth and prosperity, it is understood that their wives (generically known as “Gold Mountain women”) were left behind and relegated lives of “live-widowhood” (Ip 1995; 2002; Yung 1998; Ip and Liu 2008). As Choi explained:

As far as the Chinese were concerned, even when there was no restriction on Chinese female migration, Chinese wives had not often migrated with their husbands. A petition for the repeal of the “Act to Make Provisions for Certain Migrants” in 1856, explained that Chinese wished to leave their wives and children to look after their aged parents, and that Chinese women were too weak physically to travel over long distances (Choi 1975: 40).

In Choi’s (1975) view, the sojourner system of migration so favoured by the Chinese was, in itself, gendered and indicated a disinclination of the Chinese to bring their wives to Australia and/or settle permanently with or without them. Yarwood (1964) made similar assertions. By utilising population statistics (more particularly the small number of females) for the first decade of the twentieth century, Yarwood pointed out “the disinclination of the Chinese, Indians and Japanese to establish families in Australia” (1964: 78). In other geographical contexts, Manying Ip, Judy Yung and Huping Ling have uncovered that there were exceptions, with many Chinese wives following their husbands to New Zealand and North America (see Ip 1990; 1995; 2002; Ling 1993; 2000; Yung 1998). In Australia, however, such framings of the gendered nature of Chinese migrations, combined with immigration restrictions, have aided in the perpetuation of the “absent wife” thesis.

Birthplace statistics within the census records are therefore particularly significant as they reveal mobility among the Chinese Australian female population throughout the White Australia Policy period. The large numbers of “foreign-born” Chinese Australian females (table 3) clearly indicate that Chinese women, like their male counterparts, were mobile and crossing international borders. This was so much the case in Australia that female mobility and immigration accounted for the majority of female Chinese Australian population growth in the post-war era (as was similarly evident in New Zealand – see Ip 1995). It cannot be known from these statistics alone whether these women were wives reuniting with their husbands or independent immigrants. However, such evidence of female mobility further challenges dominant understandings of the immobile Chinese female.

In my discussion of population growth and numbers of immigrant women I have not made reference to specific data on migrant arrivals and departures, but have instead utilised census data on birthplace for those females racially categorised as Chinese. It is difficult, in this instance, to use migration data to understand the population growth of Chinese Australian females as it is not clear which arrivals and departures were made by Australian-born or foreign-born individuals and permanent/temporary losses or gains in

any given year are not indicated (as discussed by Choi 1975: 44). The post-war migration data are also compromised as arrivals/departures according to “race” are not available – rather “nationality” figures are used<sup>10</sup>. It is for this reason that I have utilised birthplace data as a more reliable source for understanding increases in the female Chinese population.

Migration data do, however, provide other important information that supports my arguments of female mobility. Migration figures from 1914 to 1965 as collated by Choi (1975) indicate constant flows of Chinese in and out of the country between those years. In fact, in the post-war years both male and female Chinese migrant arrivals far exceeded departures so that the male population had a net gain of 4536 individuals and the female population 2252 individuals (Choi 1975: 62). It is also important to note that in the earlier period between 1914 and 1947, female Chinese arrivals outnumbered departures by 321 compared to a loss of 8060 Chinese men (Choi 1975: 43). Choi stated that this increase in females between 1914 and 1947 was not “appreciable” (1975: 45), but I argue that these data, as well as the post-war gains, indicate a mobility and presence of Chinese females in the nation which should be acknowledged especially given decreases in the male population. Such movements challenge patriarchal assumptions of female immobility as well as understandings of female absence in this historical and geographical context.

### **Looking Beyond the Official Record: Chinese Australian Women’s Recollections of Migration**

Given the presence of foreign-born females in White Australia and the flows of Chinese females in and out of the country between 1914 and 1965, interesting and important questions emerge regarding the nature of mobility and migrations of Chinese women to Australia. For example, did entries into the nation reflect temporary settlements, did the experiences of Chinese women who migrated to Australia follow dominant understandings of passive wives following their husbands abroad, or did their movements challenge patriarchal power structures within Chinese family systems? Census and migration data are limited in their ability to give insight into these questions as motivations and reasons for migration have not been officially documented. Information obtained from interviews with female migrants shines some light on the nature of female Chinese mobility in the White Australia period – although definitive conclusions must be tentative given the limitations of the interview sample (as outlined previously) and diversity of experience.

#### *Childhood Migration*

As indicated in table 1, of the nineteen interview participants for this project, six were foreign-born. The first to arrive was Patricia who came to settle in Surry Hills, Sydney with her family at the age of six in 1947 – closely following the end of World War II and just prior to the establishment of the PRC. Patricia’s father, however, arrived years earlier, being sponsored by his brother-in-law (his sister’s husband) to help in their restaurant business:

The brother-in-law had set up a restaurant called the Nan King Café in Sydney. It was in Campbell Street and they needed people to help because the business was getting better and better. So they sponsored him [Patricia’s father] to come over to help with the books and cash and all that sort of thing (Patricia 2010).

This type of sponsored migration of Chinese men by Chinese Australian entrepreneurs (whom they were often connected to by kinship, village or clan ties) was extremely common in the White Australia Policy period (particularly after legislation

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<sup>10</sup> As Choi (1975: 62) argues, “we have to be content with ‘nationality’ figures, which, though undercounting large numbers of ethnic Chinese who have non-Chinese nationality, are probably slightly better than ‘birthplace’ figures which have a high proportion of non-Chinese”.

reforms of 1934) as Australian immigration legislation exempted male Chinese from restrictions if they were providing non-competitive labour most commonly in the market garden industry, as chefs and café workers, assistants, special clerks and substitutes (Choi 1975: 41). According to Patricia, the earlier migration of her father was also influenced by the patriarchal Confucian family system and its emphasis on male members of the family to maintain family prosperity. She explained:

In those days, being the eldest son, if you had a job, you had to help the family. So of course his [Patricia's father's] father had other sons and daughters and needed help [as] the business back home wasn't doing well. So when the opportunity came for him [Patricia's father] to come over here, he came over here and set up business, or helped my brother-in-law first, but set up his own later (Patricia 2010).

From Patricia's recollections, it therefore seems that her father's migration was first and foremost rooted in his sense of Confucian "family duty" and need to financially support his family in China – a common practice among Chinese men in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Patricia went on to explain that once in Australia, "He missed the family, so we came out. That's why I came" (Patricia 2010). After a long and strenuous boat trip from Dongguan in Guangdong province, China, to Australia, Patricia's family were able to settle in a rented house in inner-city Sydney – a "big house" that Patricia described as "wonderful compared to what I lived in back in China" (Patricia 2010). Thus, while Patricia's migration story reveals the often unheard of entry of female Chinese into White Australia (herself and her mother), Patricia and her mother's movement was dependent on Patricia's father – Patricia was positioned as a dependent child while her mother, having stayed back in China to care for the family later followed her husband. In this way, Patricia's migration story closely follows gendered understandings of migration and parallels the migration experiences of many other overseas Chinese women in other "Gold Mountain" countries (see, for example, Ip 1990 and Ling 2000).

#### *Migrant Wives*

The common position of female Chinese migrants as wives of migrant men was further highlighted in the recollections of many of the other interview participants – either of their own migration or of the migration of their mothers and grandmothers. These migration experiences were, however, diverse and did not always follow the "traditional" or expected route of passive or dependant housewife following their migrant husband. For example, Lily, who is only two years older than Patricia, was the most recent arrival of the six migrant participants, having arrived in Australia from Hong Kong with her husband and children at the age of thirty-two in 1971. Both Lily and her husband wished to leave Hong Kong due to the impacts of the Cultural Revolution in China and the possibility of a better life and education for their children. She explained:

At that time there was the Cultural Revolution in China, even Hong Kong. I was in Hong Kong working at the Hong Kong University Library then. Even Hong Kong was affected and so we were thinking of leaving Hong Kong, not just because of the political situation, but also my husband and I felt that Hong Kong was not an ideal place to raise children because, you know, of the educational system and the crowded sort of living quarters (Lily 2010).

On her and her family's arrival in Sydney, Lily quickly obtained professional employment with the help of her Master's degree and specialised training:

I actually got two offers when I started to look for jobs: one is just librarian and the other one was the Oriental Librarian at the University of Sydney. They had a special collection of Chinese and Japanese [texts] and they need[ed] someone with library qualifications as well as, you know, able to read Chinese, so I fitted in (Lily 2010).

Lily's recollections indicated that she was not positioned as a passive wife following her husband abroad, but was actively involved in the migration process—from the initial decision to migrate through to the maintenance of the economic stability of her family in their new home. In this way, Lily challenged Confucian expectations of the submissive wife and mother.

Indicating further diversity of female migrant experience in the post-war period, New Zealand-born Daphne migrated to Australia from New Zealand in 1964 at the age of twenty-five. Her move across the Tasman Sea was a result of her marriage to a Chinese Australian resident in Sydney: "I got married and then came here because my first husband was from here" (Daphne 2010). Unlike Lily who seemed to have quite a problem-free entry into Australia, Daphne had firsthand experience of the discriminatory practices associated with Australian immigration policy at the time. She recalled the measures she had to go to in order to be permitted into the country despite her New Zealand citizenship:

This is White Australia Policy, right? Here I had travelled, been back to China and everything, done all these things and never ever had it hit me. But it really hit me when I came. I had to report down to the Immigration Department and I had to get a visa and put in papers for whatever it was, must've been permanent residency. Anyhow, I needed a visa and I only found out the reason I needed the visa was because I was Chinese (Daphne 2010).

Despite the obvious discrimination Daphne encountered in the Australian immigration system, her ability to obtain a visa and, eventually permanent residency, was a result of relaxations to immigration legislation in the post-war period.

Like several of the New Zealand Chinese women interviewed by Manying Ip for her monograph, *Home Away from Home* (Ip 1990), it was extremely common for the mothers or grandmothers of the Australian-born cohort of interview participants to have arrived in Australia as migrant wives. In their cases, emigration was usually from mainland China in the period before World War II and they were commonly positioned as dependants – being married in China and then migrating to Australia with their husbands, or following them later. The following interview excerpts provide pertinent illustrations of this type of movement:

[My Grandfather] kind of got friendly with the MP because he'd delivered food like vegetables in a cart from door to door [...] and managed to get papers to have his wife brought out (Ina 2010).

[Dad] never actually lived in China. He commuted. He would come to Sydney to work and then go back to visit and that's how he met Mum. And after they were married she went to live with his family [...] in one of his trips back to her, she pleaded with him to take her to Australia with him. [...] So I think it was about 1932 (Nancy 2010).

My grandmother came out to be the concubine for a general merchant and pearl dealer and she had no background material of her own. [...] she and some other girls – babies – were adopted by a woman who raised them and married them off (Stella 2010).

Recollections of immigrant mothers and grandmothers who had managed to enter and stay in Australia despite discriminatory immigration legislation indicated that the older cohort of immigrant wives who arrived in Australia prior to World War II also benefitted from legislative changes in the post-war period. Often precariously positioned as temporary entrants, relaxations to naturalisation and immigration restrictions after 1956 allowed many of these women to settle permanently in Australia. For example, Eileen's mother migrated from Canton to Australia in the early decades of the twentieth century as the wife of a Chinese herbalist. After her first husband's death, she married Eileen's

Australian-born father in 1945. Despite this marriage, Eileen's mother was under constant threat of being deported until her naturalisation in the early 1960s. Eileen recalled:

Mum was naturalised [on the] 1st of March 1963. Then that gave her the right to stay. That's what I couldn't understand, because Dad being born here and he's got papers to say he's an Aussie. [...] I thought well how come dad being an Aussie didn't give mum the right to stay? They said no. So back in those days they were still going to send my mother back to China, even though she married an Australian-born Chinese (Eileen 2010).

Australian-born Doreen similarly recalled the circumstances that allowed her Chinese mother to stay in Australia despite strict immigration restrictions. Remaining in China as the second wife of a sojourning market gardener, Doreen's mother managed to obtain a one year temporary entry visa for herself and her first born child (Doreen's elder brother) to reunite with her husband in Australia in the late 1930s:

So after the child was born, my mother decided that she would come and visit my father because that was all the White Australia Policy allowed them. Again, she had bought somebody's papers because those immigration documents put her about ten years older than what she actually is. So then, she comes out here, becomes pregnant with me, World War II Pacific action flares up and she can't get back to China (Doreen 2010).

Given the unstable political situation and the outbreak of civil war in China after World War II, Doreen's father, who had always had the mentality that he and his family would return to China, decided that "There was a better life for his children here" (Doreen 2010) and consequently gave up his plight to return "home". In Doreen's memory, however, this time was always marked by uncertainty as her parents were unable to be naturalised:

Well, I mean it was very difficult because I can remember as I said, my mother came out here on just obviously a temporary entry and she had to stay because she couldn't get back to China, and having to go into immigration every year to get the extension, and even my father had to do that but my mother more so because she was supposed to be on a more temporary status than what my father was. So there was a period where they kept being frightened they would be forced to return to China (Doreen 2010).

With changes to naturalisation legislation in the 1950s, Doreen's parents and elder brother (who was born in China) became Australian citizens in 1958–59.

### *Student Migrants*

While research is slowly emerging regarding the emigration of female Chinese students between the 1880s and more contemporary times, particularly to the United States (see, for example, Ling 1997), very little is known of the female Chinese students who arrived in Australia under exemptions from immigration restrictions (see Choi 1975 for an outline of changes to student entry provisions). The experiences of three of the interview participants illustrate that girls did indeed enter Australia as students, particularly in the post-war period. Helen, Sandy and Mary were all students arriving from Hong Kong in the 1960s. Helen left Hong Kong in 1961 to join her brother and complete her high school education in Australia before going on to university study. While both her parents highly valued education for all their children – boys and girls – the decision for Helen to come to Australia was made by her mother:

She [Mother] was the one who actually encouraged me at that time, not only to finish high school – she didn't finish high school herself – but go to university if I can because she said, [...] "you'll have nothing, because

without education you wouldn't climb the ladder at all, your ability will be stagnated" (Helen 2011).

Helen did successfully complete her high school education in Australia and went on to obtain two university degrees in Arts and Law before becoming a practicing lawyer and member of parliament. Helen's educational and professional achievements, her parents' pro-education stance, and her mother's active role in the migration decision making process are particularly pertinent as they challenged patriarchal Confucian ideologies characteristic of "traditional" Chinese family structures.

In a similar way, Sandy arrived in 1962 to join her sister and complete her high school education in Melbourne. She described her position as a foreign student as a privilege:

I came as a student so I was very lucky. [...] I started my Leaving Certificate which is year 10 ... year 11, sorry. And then I did year 12, which is called Matriculation in those days, and then I went and studied at university. [...] After that I went and did a Diploma of Mathematics at RMIT (Sandy 2010).

While Sandy and Helen arrived in Australia during the latter years of high school, Mary left Hong Kong in 1967 with her half-sister at age fourteen to restart her high school education at a boarding school in Maitland, New South Wales. Unlike Helen and Sandy, Mary did not view her arrival in Australia as a student in a positive light. She explained:

I didn't want to leave Hong Kong. I had friends; I was starting to do well at school. I had a very unhappy childhood and didn't do well at school to start off with. [...] But by the time I started High School [in Hong Kong] I was happier, having more friends doing well at school. [...] So I didn't want to come here (Mary 2010).

While their experiences as foreign students differed in many ways, as dependent children/adolescents at the time of migration, the decision for Helen, Sandy and Mary to move to Australia was similarly made by their parents. In addition, as noted above, in all three cases the participants did not settle in Australia alone but were accompanied by or were reunited with siblings in Australia. These experiences shed some light on the female Chinese student experience in post-war Australia.

The migration experiences recalled by the foreign-born interview participants, and those recalled by Australian-born participants of their female forebears, clearly indicate differences between early twentieth century female migrations and those that occurred in the post-war period. Many of the migrant participants experienced mobility as children/students, while the mobility of the female forebears of the Australian-born participants was predominantly defined by their role as wives. Despite this difference, as children/students or wives, the experiences of both cohorts generally follow established understandings within migration studies of women's position as dependant migrants (with some exceptions). They do, however, challenge existing notions of Chinese female immobility within this historical context and absence from the White Australian nation.

#### *Political/Historical Contexts of Migration*

The countries of origin of the foreign-born interview participants also provide important insights into the broader political contexts of migrations and the diversity of female immigrant experience. Patricia arrived from mainland China just prior to the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and just before the Chinese government enforced strict immigration–emigration controls. While Patricia was able to emigrate before these controls were introduced, the political shift had direct impacts on her family's migration experience. She explained:

Now, at that time [1947], my older sister was doing university [in China] and she didn't want to break it [...] So she said "no, I'll stay here until I finish my university". But as time went by [...] the Communists came in

and they shut the doors. Nobody else could come out. But luckily, my mum and myself and older brother had already left and came out to join my father (Patricia 2010).

Patricia's sister, then, remained in China and was not able to be reunited with her family until the 1970s under new immigration reforms and diplomatic relations with China had been established by the Whitlam Labor government. Patricia remembered: "When [Whitlam] established [diplomatic relations], then China opened its doors and the people were allowed to come and go" (Patricia 2010). This post-war context of strict immigration–emigration controls in China can perhaps be used to help explain the absence of interview participants in the sample that emigrated from mainland China between 1949 and 1973<sup>11</sup>. While China was exercising such strict immigration–emigration controls in the post-war period, Hong Kong, as a British colony at the time, was providing (as it had from the nineteenth century) "the primary node through which Chinese overseas migration increased to unprecedented volumes" (McKeown 1999: 314). The relative ease of migration for Helen, Sandy, Lily and Mary in the 1960s and 1970s from Hong Kong is perhaps reflective of this.

It is more difficult to extrapolate the connections between political/historical context and female Chinese migrant flows from census and migration data. Raw migration data is limited as they do not indicate the country of origin of arriving migrants – their birthplaces are unknown as are their place of departure. Census data on birthplace of racially defined "Chinese" females is more useful in its ability to provide some sense of where female migrants originally came from. In the census years between 1911 and 1961, at least thirty-three countries besides Australia were represented as places of birth of female Chinese – both "full-Chinese" and "mixed-Chinese" (table 4). These included countries in Australasia (such as New Zealand and New Guinea), Asia (such as China and South East Asian countries commonly associated with the Chinese diaspora, as well as India and "Arabia"), the Americas (including the United States and British West Indies), Polynesia, Africa, and Europe (including England, Norway, Italy and the USSR). The breadth of countries documented in the censuses indicates a diversity of migrant "Chinese" females present in Australia in the period.

While we cannot know when using these data if birthplaces were indeed places of migrant departure, we can make tentative connections between country of birth and context of migration. For example, the position of Hong Kong as a British colony and migrant "node" is most likely reflected in the consistent presence of Hong Kong-born females. The large number of China-born females counted in the 1954 census is perhaps associated with the mass emigration of mainland Chinese during the Chinese civil war and communist takeover of China in 1949. The large increases in immigrant/foreign-born women between 1947 and 1961 can also be more generally connected to the slight relaxation of Australian immigration policy in 1947 which made the entrance of students and dependants, among others, much easier, as well as the Australian government's granting of naturalisation rights to Chinese in 1957 which enabled the reunion of Chinese families in Australia (Choi 1975). While India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Indonesia were member countries of the Colombo Plan in 1954 (Malaysia and Singapore entering agreements in 1957 and 1966, respectively), it is difficult to make connections between the Colombo Plan and female immigration from 1954 birthplace statistics. It is even more difficult to make connections in 1961 as specific countries of birth were not specified. More generally, however, larger increases in migrant females in the 1960s and 1970s are most probably also related to the revised *Migration Act 1958* and Australia's more "open door" policy. The immigration of the six foreign-born interview participants can also be linked to this latter context. As they all migrated to Australia in the post-war period, the slightly relaxed post-1947 immigration context can provide a general background to their entry into the country.

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<sup>11</sup> Alongside obvious sampling limitations.

**Table 4. Country of birth of foreign-born Chinese Australian females, 1911–1961**

Region	1911	1947	1954	1961
Australasia	New Zealand (1)	New Zealand (6) New Guinea (61)	New Zealand (7) New Guinea (97) Papua (5)	Unspecified (215)
Europe	England (2)	England (1) Ireland (1) Germany (2)	England (3) France (1) Germany (1) Norway(1) Italy(1) USSR(3)	Unspecified (14)
Asia	Hong Kong (12) Straits Settlements (2) China (250)	Malaya (29) Hong Kong (95) Straits settlements (26) Other British possessions (3) China (532) Japan (1) Timor (2) Philippines (1) Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia) (2) Arabia (3) Other (3)	Malaya (122) Hong Kong (246) Singapore (52) India (1) Ceylon (Sri Lanka) (1) China (952) Philippines (2) Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia) (28) Other (21)	Unspecified (3359)
Americas	USA (1)	USA (1) British West Indies (1) Other (3)	USA (5) British West Indies (2)	Unspecified (15)
Africa	–	–	–	Unspecified (4)
Polynesia		Fiji (2) Solomon Islands (11) New Caledonia (3) New Hebrides (2)	Fiji (13) New Caledonia (2) New Hebrides (4) Other (13)	Unspecified (86)
Unspecified	10	–	–	–
Total	278	801	1583	3693

**Source** Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics (1917; 1952; 1962; 1965)

*Mobility of Australian-Born Women*

Foreign-born females were not the only females who were internationally mobile. Marina's and Stella's Australian-born mothers travelled to and from China/Hong Kong on multiple occasions. Marina's mother was of mixed-Chinese descent (her maternal grandmother was English) and born in Sydney. After being adopted and spending some time in Glen Innes, New South Wales, Marina's mother was sent to China where she later married a Chinese Australian. Marina explained:

[...] he married my mother in 1916. He had to go to China and I think they married in Zhongshan somewhere, in the Canton area. Then they came back to Australia, and they came on the boat three months – because she'd had a bit of smallpox before that, she'd arrived – so when they got here they had to go to the quarantine station for so many months, I suppose. Then they went straight to Inverell, and they lived on top of the shop (Marina 2010).

Stella's Australian-born mother was also sent back "home" to be married:

[My mother] didn't get married until she was about twenty-one and they decided that she was getting really old, so they arranged for her to go to Hong Kong and marry a friend's son, which she did (Stella 2010).

Unlike Marina's mother, however, Stella's mother returned to Australia alone: "she left him to come back to Thursday Island to have me after her first baby died" (Stella 2010). Stella's mother also made an additional two trips back to Hong Kong, the first time to search for her estranged husband: "... and when she went back to find him, my father, he was gone and she never found out where he went to" (Stella 2010), and the second time to obtain medical treatment for her son: "... when she met another man and had my first half-brother, she went back to Hong Kong with him because he was sick and he wanted some traditional Chinese medicine" (Stella 2010).

It has been argued elsewhere that the repatriation of young Chinese females back to China was quite a common experience in the early decades of the twentieth century (Ip 2002). While boys were sent back to China to receive a "proper" Chinese education, girls were sent "home" to find "proper marriage partners" (Ip 2002: 155), as was the case for Marina's and Stella's mothers. Many of the interview participants explained that marriage to a non-Chinese was totally discouraged by parents, as Ina recalled: "I remember most of our parents would say, 'Marry a Chinese. Don't marry an Australian'" (Ina 2010). Such recollections echo assertions made by researchers, such as Macgregor (1998), in regards to endogamy within Chinese Australian communities. Marriages were often arranged between locally born individuals and the repatriation of Chinese Australian men for the purpose of marrying back in their home village was common (Macgregor 1998). Sending daughters back to China was perhaps another way of ensuring the continuation of endogamy in the Chinese Australian context. It is interesting to note that Marina's mother and father were both Australian-born yet their marriage took place in China. In the New Zealand context, these types of marriages between two local-born Chinese back in China were common (Ip 2002). More research is needed to further examine the extent of these unions among early twentieth century Chinese Australians.

Two of the Australian-born interview participants were themselves internationally mobile in the White Australia period – leaving Australia to live abroad for some time. Ina left Australia in 1968 with her husband and did not return to Australia until 1989, well after the official abandonment of the White Australia Policy. Her life abroad was anything but static, comprised of several international relocations over the twenty-one-year period. She explained her mobility in the following way:

Now the thing in those days was to go overseas for a couple of years. [...] I think we had three years in Amsterdam and then stayed in London for six years and the children were born there. And after six years, London was in the pits of depression and a friend of ours who was also Chinese [...] said, "Oh, you know you can go and be an architect in Hong Kong. They are looking for expatriate architects". And so we applied for that and it took a year to come through. And we got through to Hong Kong and we lived there for twelve years (Ina 2010).

While Ina and her husband's eventual settlement in Hong Kong was driven by her husband's profession as an architect, it cannot be argued that Ina's entire migration experience was shaped by her position as a "dependant wife". Their time spent in Amsterdam was, in fact, largely shaped by Ina's employment:

[My husband's] Sydney degree wasn't recognised in Holland, and he worked as a draftsman [...] so [in the summer holidays] he would leave his job, and I would keep my job at the International School and come back in September when the term opens (Ina 2010).

While Ina moved abroad with her husband, Nancy on the other hand set sail to Canada independently after completing her nursing qualifications in 1963. She explained:

I did my four years nursing at Royal Prince Alfred. Did a year over in Queen Elizabeth in Adelaide – my midwifery – and then about six weeks later I was on the ship going to Canada (Nancy 2010).

It was in Canada that she met her Australian husband and lived for two years before settling in London for an additional year and returning to Australia in 1966. Once again, further investigation is needed to determine whether or not Nancy's initial independent travel was unique among her cohort. What can be said, however, is that her mobility illustrates deviance from the female "norm" perpetuated by male-centred migration paradigms.

The experiences of migration retold by interview participants – foreign and Australian-born – not only aid in further indicating the presence of Chinese Australian women in the White Australia Policy period but indicate a diversity of experience of migration. This is particularly important as such experiences reveal mobility among this group of women – a cohort who have so often been characterised by their immobility and resultant absence from the nation. The utilisation of the voices of Chinese Australian women themselves also allow us to move beyond two-dimensional demographic profiling. As I have illustrated, information obtained from interviews can be used to flesh out the raw numerical data obtained from official statistical records such as national censuses. By combining information from the two sources, a three dimensional picture of who these women really were is presented – not simply a number on a census form but as real people who journeyed across continents, lived, worked and established families within the context of discriminatory laws and state oppression.

### **Conclusion: Looking Forward**

From the examination of census and interview data it is clear that Chinese Australian women were not only present in the nation throughout the White Australia period, but were internationally mobile. Their population numbers, as counted in the censuses, challenge existing understandings perpetuated by existing literature that the Chinese Australian population was a population made up of a "bachelor society" of men in which the presence of females was "not appreciable". More accurately, as indicated in census results, the Chinese Australian population was complexly comprised of both "full" and "mixed", "Australian-born" and "foreign-born" Chinese Australian females in addition to their male counterparts. The presence of Australian-born females throughout the entire period reflects further insight into the Australian citizenship of the female population and, in the case of those females who were of mixed Chinese descent, a context of Chinese–European contact and interaction. A close inspection of the census data also importantly indicates that while the Chinese Australian population of males strikingly decreased in the decades following the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act, a counter trend emerged among the female cohort seeing a steady increase in their numbers. Additionally, the birthplace statistics and qualitative interview data indicate mobility among the Chinese Australian female population – a phenomenon that challenges general assumptions of female immobility in global migration patterns at this time.

Given the evident presence of Chinese Australian females in the White Australia period, moves must be made to further include the unique and diverse experiences of these women within understandings of Australia's Chinese past. This discussion has only touched the tip of the iceberg. The lived experiences and contributions of Chinese Australian women remain largely hidden, being overlooked in scholarly research regarding "race" relations and Chinese Australian experience in the White Australia Policy period. There is still much to be uncovered about the important and specific roles Chinese Australian women had in the development of Chinese Australian communities and their contributions to the broader development of the Australian nation – politically, culturally, economically, and socially. Feelings of identity and experiences of belonging and exclusion in a variety of temporal and spatial contexts are also still relatively unknown.

In her overview of Chinese Australian women's place in the past hundred years of Australian history, Morag Loh argued that numerical paucity does not justify exclusion from research (Loh 1986). As this discussion has similarly argued, the experiences of the many thousands of Chinese Australian women present in Australia between 1901 and 1973 are worthy of investigation and worthy of visibility in family, community and national histories. While the Chinese Australian female presence was relatively small compared to their male counterparts, their stories and experiences must be included in academic scholarship if we are to move towards a more accurate and inclusive understanding of Australia's past.

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