

## Dancing Dragons: Reflections on Creating a Cultural History of the Chinese Australian Community

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the author's approach to researching the history of Chinese involvement in dance-related cultural activities in Australia. It highlights the potential of such research to contribute to understandings of Chinese Australian identity and to the field of Australian history more broadly, while reflecting on the current state of this research and the leads that remain to be pursued. Australian interest in Chinese cultural activities has grown in the last few decades, as has interest in Chinese Australian history; this interest has coincided not only with China's growing prominence on the global stage but also with increasing recognition overseas of the significance of embodied cultural forms and heritages such as dance. Yet, despite the fact that traditional activities such as dragon and lion dance have become emblematic of both multicultural Australia and Chinese culture overseas, few studies have devoted themselves solely to exploring the social role and history of such cultural activities in a local context. Seeking to address this gap, the research discussed focuses on the experiences of Chinese in activities such as Cantonese opera, dragon dancing, the Young Chinese League's debutante balls and the Sydney Chinese community's Dragon Balls.

**Keywords:** dance, oral history, Cantonese opera, Australia

Every Lunar New Year, Chinese dragons are awakened across Australia, never failing to attract a healthy crowd of onlookers as they slowly wind their way down the street. In Victoria, residents can also catch dragons dancing at Melbourne's Moomba Festival in March and at the annual Bendigo Easter Fair in April. Traditionally, the dragon has been a symbol of Chinese masculinity and of the Emperor, but it has later come to represent the Chinese nation and Chinese diasporic communities around the world. In the context of local performance, it has been integrated into the visual language of multicultural Australia, the most prominent among a range of genres and symbols that have featured in community and government flyers, websites and pamphlets. Indeed, Australia's celebration of Chinese culture has gained political significance in recent decades, not only as a result of China's growing prominence on the global stage, but also because of the increased recognition internationally of the significance of embodied cultural forms and heritages such as dance, as global initiatives such as UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Collection make evident.<sup>1</sup>

So recognisable is the historical presence of Chinese people and Chinese culture in Australia, that it is curious to observe how little has been done to address the many complex and relevant questions relating to the social role and history of such cultural activities in a local context.<sup>2</sup> Mainstream Australian dance historians have rarely included

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<sup>1</sup> In the decades since multiculturalism became Australia's official policy, large-scale academic structures supporting the study of aspects of Chinese culture have increased, particularly as economic links between Asia and Australia have strengthened. The University of Melbourne's Asia Institute, established in 1994, is one example, while the earlier established Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University has become internationally recognised as a leading institute for the study of the Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>2</sup> A number of scholars have chosen to focus on Chinese cultural activities. Colin Mackerras, for instance, has published studies of Chinese classical drama and related topics, see, for instance, Colin Mackerras, *Chinese Drama: A Historical Survey* (Beijing: New World Press, 1990) and Colin Mackerras (ed.), *Chinese Theatre: From its Origins to the Present Day* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983). David Holm has researched Chinese regional drama and related topics, see, for instance, David Holm, "The Death of Tiaoxi (the 'Leaping Play'): Ritual Theatre in the Northwest of China," *Modern Asian Studies*, 1 (2003): 863–84. Yang Mu has studied Chinese folk music, see, for instance, Yang Mu, "Music Loss Among Ethnic Minorities in China: A Comparison of the Li and Hui Peoples," *Asian Music*, 27.1 (1996): 103–31; "Academic Ignorance or Political Taboo?: Some Issues in China's Study of its Folk Song Culture," *Ethnomusicology*, 38.2 (1994): 303–20. Ethnomusicologist Cathy Falk has published extensively on the music of the Hmong, see, for instance, Cathy Falk, "The Dragon Taught Us: Hmong Stories About the Origin of the Free Reed Pipes Qeej," *Journal of Asian Music*, 35.1 (2004): 17–56; "If You Have Good Knowledge, Close It Well Tight': Concealed and Framed Meaning in the Funeral Music of the Hmong Qeej," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 12. 2 (2003): 1–33. Few such scholars, however, have shown extensive interest in the cultural activities of the Chinese living in Australia.

the experiences of Chinese performers or students and only a handful of scholars have discussed aspects of Chinese socio-artistic culture in Australia in a more specialised context; those who have done so have generally chosen to focus on events after World War II, particularly in work since the 1980s, and many questions remain unanswered.<sup>3</sup> How, for example, have the local Chinese reworked inherited cultural forms such as dragon dance and Cantonese opera over the course of Australia's history, a history that has often called for resourcefulness and adaptation on the part of this community? In what ways and why has the public history of such activities been remembered and/or forgotten? What does this say about our present-day association of these activities with recent migration and the post-World War II era? Have local hybrid traditions such as Sydney's Dragon Balls garnered more or less attention than they merit, and how can an in-depth consideration of their historical role alter and inform our understanding of Chinese Australian identity? This article reflects on my approach to researching the history of Chinese Australian involvement in dance-related cultural activities, focusing on the experiences of Chinese in activities such as Cantonese opera, dragon dancing, the Young Chinese League's debutante balls, and the Sydney Chinese community's Dragon Balls. In particular, it will explore the complex relationship between the historian and her sources in the process of constructing a cultural history.

Following historian Jennifer Cushman's call in her 1984 paper "A Colonial Casualty" to "relocate the Chinese experience within the Chinese community itself", the current generation of historians has emphasised histories told from within the Chinese Australian community: stories of survival, friendship, adaptation and even love across racial lines.<sup>4</sup> The oral histories of Diana Giese, Morag Loh, Wendy Lowenstein and Janis Wilton have capitalised on the new openness of ageing members of the Chinese Australian community to record stories about early Chinese settlement that would otherwise have been lost.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, historians working in areas beyond living memory have developed a range of techniques to counter the scarcity and fragmented nature of archival sources created by the Chinese themselves; the writings of Jane Lydon and Keir Reeves have demonstrated the value of an interdisciplinary approach to historical questions, utilising both archaeological evidence and documentary sources to piece together the respective histories of the early twentieth century Chinese hub, Sydney's Rocks, and the nineteenth-century Mount Alexander gold field.<sup>6</sup> The localised scope of these histories – also the hallmark of Barry McGowan's study of Chinese migration and settlement in the Riverina and Murray regions, *Tracking the Dragon*, and Janis Wilton's history of the Chinese in

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Fisher, for instance, discussed the experience of Susan Wang, a popularly acclaimed Chinese dance artist and post-war migrant who has faced difficulties with restrictive funding criteria attached to multiculturalism, while Gary Lester focused his research on the acclaimed choreographer Kai Tai Chan; see Lynn Fisher, "From Cultural Revolutionary Dancer to Sandgroper Choreographer: The Transformation of Susan Wang," in *Chinese in Australia and New Zealand: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Jan Ryan (New Delhi: New Age International Publishers Wiley Eastern, 1995), pp. 54–8; Gary Lester, "Kai Tai Chan: A Different Path", Ph. D. thesis, Deakin University, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer W. Cushman, "A 'Colonial Casualty': The Chinese Community in Australian Historiography," *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, 7 (1984): 100–13.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Giese, *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons: Voices of Today's Chinese Australians* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997); Diana Giese and National Library of Australia, *Beyond Chinatown: Changing Perspectives on the Top End Chinese Experience* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1995); *Survival and Celebration: An Insight into the Lives of Chinese Immigrant Women, European Women Married to Chinese and Their Female Children in Australia from 1856 to 1986* (Melbourne: M. Loh and C. Ramsay, 1986); Wendy Lowenstein, *The Immigrants* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1991); Janis Wilton, "Chinese Voices, Australian Lives: Oral History and the Chinese Contribution to Glen Innes, Inverell, Tenterfield and Surrounding Districts During the First Half of the Twentieth Century", Ph. D. thesis, University of New England, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Lydon, *"Many Inventions": The Chinese in the Rocks, Sydney 1890–1930* (Clayton, Vic: Monash University, Department of History, 1999); Jane Lydon, "The Chinese Community in The Rocks Area of Sydney: Cultural Persistence and Exchange," in *The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions: Proceedings*, ed. Henry Chan, Ann Curthoys and Nora Chiang (Taipei: Interdisciplinary Group for Australian Studies; Canberra: National Taiwan University and Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, 2001), pp. 17–24, 152–3; Keir Reeves, "A Hidden History: The Chinese on the Mount Alexander Diggings, Central Victoria, 1851–1901," Ph. D. thesis, University of Melbourne, 2006.

regional New South Wales, *Golden Threads* – has proven a highly effective way for scholars of Chinese Australian history to overcome the issue of source material.<sup>7</sup> Still others, notably Kate Bagnall and John Fitzgerald, have gone back to the archives to retrieve Chinese voices hidden among the records.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most famous history of this kind is Fitzgerald's *Big White Lie*, published in 2007, in which he argues successfully against writers such as Keith Windschuttle in emphasising the democratic "Australian" spirit exhibited in the petitions, letters and articles left behind by the Chinese.<sup>9</sup> Together, these approaches have recovered much of the richness of the Chinese Australian narrative.

The powerful window into this history that engagement with Chinese cultural activities can offer has become better acknowledged with the establishment of the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne and the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo.<sup>10</sup> The importance of the late nineteenth-century processional and musical collections of the Golden Dragon Museum, which include the world's oldest processional dragon and costumes used by the Chinese in the 1882 Bendigo Easter Fair, has encouraged museum staff and researchers to study these collections in detail. Associated community history societies and their publications have also added to both public and scholarly awareness of the histories of specific Chinese communities within Australia. The fruitful partnership of these organisations with scholars interested in aspects of Chinese social life can be seen in Amanda Rasmussen's research on the Bendigo Easter Fair and Tsanhuang Tsai's research into the Golden Dragon Museum's musical collections.<sup>11</sup> Outside of these institutions, Harold Love's 1985 study of Chinese theatres in Victoria remains a groundbreaking contribution in this area, while John Fitzgerald, Jan Ryan and Mei-fen Kuo have all made equally important, though less specialised, contributions to the history of the cultural activities of the Chinese.<sup>12</sup> Related studies on Chinese religious practices and temples in Australia by Toylan Ah Ket, Hu Jin Kok and Gordon Grimwade have also contributed valuable information about the ways in which the Chinese perceived their world and contextualised their rituals and cultural activities.<sup>13</sup> When considered alongside studies from fields as diverse as economics and digital art and media, they constitute a considerable body of literature such that Chinese Australian historians can no longer claim that the field is undervalued or neglected.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Barry McGowan, *Tracking the Dragon: A History of the Chinese in the Riverina* (Wagga Wagga: Museum of the Riverina, 2010); Janis Wilton, *Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional New South Wales, 1850–1950* (Armidale: New England Regional Art Museum in association with the Powerhouse Museum, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Kate Bagnall, "Golden Shadows on a White Land: An Exploration of the Lives of White Women Who Partnered Chinese Men and Their Children in Southern Australia, 1855-1915," Ph. D. thesis, University of Sydney, 2006; John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*; Keith Windschuttle, *The White Australia Policy* (Paddington: Macleay Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Bendigo Chinese Association & Golden Dragon Museum, *The Golden Dragon Museum Presents the 1880s Processional Regalia of the Bendigo Chinese Association* (Bendigo: Golden Dragon Museum, 2010); *Chinese Procession: Easter in Bendigo* (Bendigo: Golden Dragon Museum, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Rasmussen, "Networks and Negotiations: Bendigo's Chinese and The Easter Fair," *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, 6 (2004): 79–92. Tsanhuang Tsai's work on "Relational Instruments: How Bendigo's Past Soundscape is Shaping its Present and Future" is yet to be published, see <http://hrc.anu.edu.au/2011-visiting-fellows>, accessed 14 December 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Love, "Chinese Theatre on the Victorian Goldfields, 1858–1870," *Australasian Drama Studies*, 3.2 (1985): 45–86; Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*, pp. 115–26; Jan Ryan, *Chinese Women and the Global Village* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2003); Mei-fen Kuo, "Making Chinese Australia: The Role of Sydney Chinese Community, 1892-1912," Ph.D. thesis, La Trobe University, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Toylan Ah Ket, *Chinese Religious Practice in Sydney, 1850-1981: Changes to Traditions in the 20th Century Resulting from Encounters with Australian Culture and Christianity* (Melbourne: Chinese Museum, 1999); Gordon Grimwade, Cairns Museum and Cairns Historical Society, *Lit Sung Goong: Chinese Religious Practices in Cairns, North Queensland*, Records of Cairns Museum No. 2 (Cairns: Cairns Museum, 1985); Hu Jin Kok, *Chinese Temples in Australia: Hall of the Ranking Sages*, vol. 4 (Bendigo: Bendigo Golden Dragon Museum, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> As a starting point, see, for instance, Tseen Khoo (ed), *Locating Asian Australian Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008) and Helen Gilbert, Tseen Khoo and Jacqueline Lo (eds), *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian-Australia* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

Given these relatively recent developments,<sup>15</sup> the continued lack of inclusion of Chinese dance traditions within mainstream artistic narratives becomes difficult to explain. Early histories of dance in Australasia, perhaps unsurprisingly, tended to emphasise a European dance heritage. Edward Pask's important *Enter The Colonies Dancing* (1979), for instance, primarily features ballet, while Nell Challingsworth's *Dancing Down the Years* (1978) focuses on nineteenth-century European-style balls and dance parties.<sup>16</sup> Maurice Hurst's *Music and the Stage in New Zealand*, meanwhile, gives a popular account of nineteenth and early twentieth century entertainments such as vaudeville, ballet, song and pantomime.<sup>17</sup> However, more recent dance histories frequently mention the pioneering influence of the post-war Jewish refugees who brought their expressionist modern dance traditions with them, and acknowledge the local significance of importations such as American jazz and the Argentinean tango.<sup>18</sup>

Interest in indigenous dance forms in both Australia and New Zealand has also grown since the 1970s. The Maori Action Song has received scholarly attention from dance anthropologist Jennifer Shennan and the ever-iconic haka has received attention more recently from Wira Gardner.<sup>19</sup> Kapa Haka is now a standard subject in many high schools around New Zealand and there are also courses available at major tertiary institutions such as the University of Auckland, as well as in the private sector.<sup>20</sup> Paul Diamond's biography of New Zealand's most famous Maori dance figure, Makureti (Maggie) Papakura, offers a welcome biographical contribution to the history of New Zealand dance.<sup>21</sup> In Australia, the profile of indigenous companies, most notably Bangarra Dance Theatre, has increased popular interest in indigenous dance and notable scholarly contributions have come from Amanda Card and Raymond Stanley Robinson.<sup>22</sup>

The absence of the Chinese within this literature seems quite at odds with the movement of dance studies away from Anglo-centric narratives – if the Chinese represent the largest non-indigenous, non-European migrant group in Australasia and one of the

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<sup>15</sup> Prior to the most recent decade, topics such as migration and settlement, assimilation, and stories of violence and discrimination were the major focus of Australasian scholars studying the Chinese, see C. Y. Choi, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1975); C. F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia, 1901–1921* (Richmond: Raphael Arts, 1977); Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967); Bickleen Ng Fong, *The Chinese in New Zealand: A Study in Assimilation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1959); Nigel Murphy, *The Poll-Tax in New Zealand* (Wellington, N.Z.: Office of Ethnic Affairs, Department of Internal Affairs, 2002); Nigel Murphy, *Guide to Laws and Policies Relating to the Chinese in New Zealand 1871–1997* (Wellington, N.Z.: New Zealand Chinese Association, 2008); Kathryn Cronin, *Colonial Casualties: Chinese in Early Victoria* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Edward H. Pask, *Enter the Colonies, Dancing: A History of Dance in Australia, 1835–1940* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979); Nell Challingsworth, *Dancing Down the Years: The Romantic Century in Australia* (Melbourne: Craftsman Press, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Hurst, *Music and the Stage in New Zealand: A Century of Entertainment, 1840–1943* (Auckland: Charles Begg, 1944).

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Pask, *Enter the Colonies, Dancing*; Challingsworth, *Dancing Down the Years*; Jordan Beth Vincent, "In Pursuit of a Dancing 'Body': Modernity, Physicality and Identity in Australia, 1919 to 1939," Ph. D. thesis, University of Melbourne, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Shennan, *The Maori Action Song: Waiata a Ringa, Waiata Kori, no Whea Tenei Ahua Hou?* (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 1984); Wira Gardner, *Haka: A Living Tradition* (Auckland: Hodda Moa Beckett, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, The University of Auckland, "Maori Studies," course guide, available online at <http://artsfaculty.auckland.ac.nz/courses/?Subject=MAORI>, accessed 15 August 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Tara Jahn-Werner, *Dance: The Illustrated History of Dance in New Zealand* (Auckland: Random House, 2008); Paul Diamond, *Makureti: Taking Maori to the World* (Auckland: Random House, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Raymond Stanley Robinson et al., "Dreaming Tracks: History of the Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Scheme, 1972–1979 – Its Place in the Continuum of Australian Indigenous Dance and the Contribution of its African American Founder, Carole Y. Johnson," Ph. D. thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2000; Amanda Card, "From Aboriginal Dance to Aboriginal Dancing: The Appropriation of the Primitive in Australian Dance," in *Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

most historically significant, why do the Chinese not seem to merit even a cursory mention in local dance histories?<sup>23</sup>

I suggest that while the historical presence of the Chinese in Australia is becoming more well known, Chinese culture is still seen as foreign, both geographically and psychologically. The anthropological interest in indigenous dance cultures notwithstanding, the legacy of White Australia is arguably present in the tendency to assume greater kinship with lighter-skinned white migrant cultures while relegating often longstanding non-European migrant traditions to the status of “ethnic history”.<sup>24</sup> Historical Western depictions of the Orient remain influential in contemporary discourses concerning the Chinese diaspora. While dragon dances and annual festivals celebrate Chinese culture, they are generally viewed as portals into a distant and exotic world.<sup>25</sup> School groups are attracted by the opportunity to learn about the traditional customs and history of China, which seem to bear little direct relevance to their own lives except as a point of curiosity; the fact that these traditions have been adapted for performance within contemporary Australia, are funded by Australian organisations and often involve non-Chinese participants and organisers is temporarily forgotten.

For me, taking on the task of recovering the cultural history of the Chinese Australian community has generated deep reflection about what such a history should include. Simply narrowing down my choice of dance events proved a difficult task, for in the process of selection I became highly aware of my role in promoting a particular view of Chinese Australian identity. Should I include traditional Chinese genres such as Cantonese opera despite the fact that to Western scholars such a genre does not fit neatly into the category of dance? Should I include Western traditions such as ballet, jazz and social dance in a history of the Chinese? How do I decide which genres are the most worthy of study and which will help create the most nuanced depictions of Chinese Australian experiences? My decision to cover an unusually large period of time (about a hundred years) hopes to draw attention to the varied and changing nature of identities within the Chinese community. I tackle this breadth by adopting a case study approach, narrowing my focus to three specific traditions I have deemed most historically significant to the Chinese community: nineteenth-century Cantonese opera in Victoria, debutante balls in the White Australia era and the longstanding dragon dance, along with its accompanying processions.

Jan Ryan, writing in 1995, contended that the myth of a single Chinese identity, as opposed to a single Australian identity, is still pervasive and prevents the contrasting and multidimensional experiences of Chinese people from being appreciated.<sup>26</sup> Zhengting Wang’s history of Chinese music in Victoria, currently the only scholarly history of its kind, appears to support Ryan’s claim, restricting its scope only to traditions deemed to be

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<sup>23</sup> Cantonese opera arrived in Australia in 1858 at the latest, dragon dance has delighted audiences in the Antipodes since at least the late nineteenth century, and both the Sydney and Melbourne Chinese debutante balls, which began in the late 1930s, can claim to have lasted almost continuously until the 1970s and 1980s respectively. Love, “Chinese Theatre on the Victorian Goldfields, 1858–1870”; Rasmussen, “Networks and Negotiations: Bendigo’s Chinese and The Easter Fair”; “Young Chinese League debutante balls,” Chinese-Australian Historical Images in Australia, available online at <http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au/biogs/CH00105b.htm>, accessed 10 April 2012; d/Lux/Media Arts in association with 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, the Powerhouse Museum and the Project Factory; “Dragon Balls,” China Heart website, available online at <http://www.chinaheart.org.au/flow-7.3.php>, accessed 10 April 2012. Note that the Dragon Festival Ball continued at least several years longer than the end date listed on the China Heart website, and I have interviewed debutantes who have participated as late as 1976.

<sup>24</sup> Gavin W. Jones, “White Australia, National Identity and Population Change,” in *Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture and Nation*, ed. Laksiri Jayasuriya, David Walker and Jan Gothard (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2003), p. 114.

<sup>25</sup> The British fascination with China first saw a peak in the eighteenth century with the large-scale trade and consequent importation of silks, tea and luxury items. Another wave of interest followed the Opium War and again in the 1920s and 30s. For a more in-depth discussion on this topic, see David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Jan Ryan, “Chinese Australian History,” in *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*, ed. Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), p. 73.

typically “Chinese”.<sup>27</sup> The relatively low level of awareness of Chinese involvement in non-traditional Chinese activities also supports this conclusion. Despite the popularity and longevity of the debutante ball tradition within the Chinese community, for instance, the tradition has only received cursory treatment in the historical literature, generally as an example of the Westernised tendencies of second and third generation Chinese growing up during the White Australia period.<sup>28</sup> While it might be tempting to dismiss a tradition such as the Chinese debutante balls as frivolous, a naive form of Western imitation or as a “fantasy” of assimilation,<sup>29</sup> the longevity of the tradition suggests that it in fact served multiple important purposes. Because of this, I have chosen to discuss the historical significance and role played by the balls within the Chinese community at length, despite the ritual’s more familiar association with British tradition. My work can therefore best be understood as a history of the Chinese community’s engagement with dance (in the broadest sense) in Australia, rather than a local history of “Chinese dance”.



“Chinese Dramatic Characters,” *Australian Monthly Magazine*, October 1865, p. 88

My unusual approach necessarily means that my research methods must vary to suit the period on which I am focusing. Interested colleagues and members of the public often assume my major primary source will be actual dances; however, this is neither feasible nor appropriate. Dances are by nature ephemeral and the performances discussed in my thesis are long gone. Historians working in the fields of music history, literary history and art history will usually have at least a score, image or written piece as a basis for their investigations; for the most part, however, I am not in that position and

<sup>27</sup> Zhengting Wang, *Chinese Music in Australia – Victoria: 1850s to mid-1990s* (Melbourne: Australia Asia Foundation, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Ryan, *Chinese Women*, pp. 135 and 142.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 142.

must therefore chase fragments left behind in all sorts of archives, piecing everything together as patiently as possible. Despite the absence of recorded dance as a source, I believe there is much to be gained from the sources available by exploring the social dimensions of class, gender and ethnic identity within the Sydney and Melbourne Chinese communities rather than choreography, dance structure or genre, and I have frequently been surprised by how much material is out there waiting to be examined.

The Chinese who arrived in the mid to late nineteenth century left very few written records of their own. Government archival documents, digital repositories, such as Trove from the National Library of Australia, and newspapers have thus contributed significantly to my body of research. I am indebted to Tim Sherratt for his creation of a Trove harvester which allowed me to conduct large scale digital “harvests” of articles.<sup>30</sup> This enabled me to gain a critical level of detail to piece together with information found in other kinds of documents such as theatrical licence applications and pictures. Such tools have their limitations, of course, and can create a number of traps for inexperienced researchers. Technical limitations associated with search functions can omit or obscure important results, while financial limitations have delayed the digitisation of some newspapers. Any kinds of analyses done with a computer must be treated critically for a whole host of reasons discussed at length elsewhere; however, the solution is simply to be aware of these problems and take reasonable precautions to prevent or minimise them.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, it should be apparent that digital history can open up topics that otherwise would be difficult to consider as the basis for historical research projects.

In order to reconstruct the history of the Chinese debutante tradition in the White Australia era – a ritual that has been little researched and of which little evidence has been formally archived – I have also relied heavily on oral history interviews. These are primarily those I have personally conducted with members of the Melbourne and Sydney Chinese community, but also those held at the State Library of New South Wales, the Melbourne Chinese Museum, and, in the rare instance, privately held by relatives or descendants of the interviewee.<sup>32</sup> During this process, I suddenly found myself on the same turf as the sociologist or anthropologist, attempting to gain the trust of the Chinese community for the purpose of academic research. My motivations for conducting research frequently came up and I was often asked why I was interested in Chinese Australian history, particularly something as seemingly unimportant as debutante balls.<sup>33</sup> Reference to my part-Chinese heritage tended to satisfy the questioner – indeed, our shared ethnic heritage meant I was often granted insider status by my participants and expected to understand things that an “outsider” would not. This was a tremendous privilege that enabled me to ask questions I would otherwise not have been able to and, in return, gave me valuable insights into the social lives of Chinese growing up in the White Australia era.

However, this shared trust has the potential to complicate my research later on, for the priorities of a researcher and that of the members of a community are generally quite

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<sup>30</sup> To access these tools, see “Trove Tools,” Wraggelabs Emporium, available online at <http://wraggelabs.com/emporium/trove-tools/>, accessed 10 March 2011.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Lena Roland and David Bawden, “The Future of History: Investigating the Preservation of Information in the Digital Age,” *Library and Information History*, 28.3 (2012): 220–36, particularly the discussion at pp. 228–31; Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Among the most well-known oral histories recorded by others that I have so far included and can be found in publicly available archives are those of Beryl Yip, interviewed by Judy Wing, 1996, MLOH 273, Tape 18, Side B, State Library of NSW; Albert Leong, interviewed by Shirley Fitzgerald, 1996, MLOH 273, Tape 1, Side A, State Library of NSW; William Sang Fong, interviewed by Sophie Couchman, 9 November 2010, Chinese Museum Oral History Collection; Alfred Whee, interviewed by Sophie Couchman, 21 September 2010, Chinese Museum Oral History Collection. I have chosen not to include exhaustive details of all interviews studied and conducted while at this incomplete stage for reasons of practicality and ethics.

<sup>33</sup> For a pertinent and personal discussion about ethical considerations within the context of conducting research within the Chinese American community, see Melford Weiss, “The Research Experience in a Chinese-American Community,” *Journal of Social Issues*, 33.4 (2010): 120–32.

distinct.<sup>34</sup> I was reminded of this when one of my participants suggested that my line of questioning (which focused in-depth on one major social event, the debutante ball) reflected more closely what was of personal interest to him and enabled him to go into greater detail about important aspects of the Chinese community about which other scholars had apparently not thought to ask. He explained that this must be my “Chinese instinct” – that because I was already seen to possess a Chinese Australian “mentality” I was moving beyond the traditional ethnographic agenda of Western researchers. This implied trust was both flattering and disconcerting. What would this person, for whom I had gained a healthy respect and admiration, think of my final research conclusions? Could I be seen as alienating or betraying my participants if I structured my analysis around academic rather than community-specific concerns?



**A Young Chinese League debutante set performing their choreography at the St Kilda Town Hall, Melbourne (courtesy Len Quon)**

There has been much scholarly discussion on the question of how to ethically pursue a scholarly agenda through the use of oral history while respecting participants' own interpretations of their lives.<sup>35</sup> After all, the interviewer's perception of their own role may range from distanced observer to political advocate, while participants, of course, have their own reasons for recording their stories. When the goals of the respective sides do not align, the appropriate solution is not always immediately apparent. As K'Meyer and Crothers note, the participant may not, for instance, understand why the interviewer continues to return to remarks which seem irrelevant to what he or she believes is the central topic of discussion.<sup>36</sup> However, it might also be the case that the interviewer is, in fact, inappropriately overriding the participants' interpretation of their experience or dismissing a legitimate perspective because it does not fit the interviewer's agenda.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Weiss discusses this issue at length, see Weiss, "The Research Experience", pp. 120–32.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance, Tracy E. K'Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers, "If I See Some of This in Writing I'm Going to Shoot You': Reluctant Narrators, Taboo Topics and the Ethical Dilemmas of the Oral Historian", *The Oral History Review*, 34.1 (2003): 71–93; Steven High, "Sharing Authority: An Introduction," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 43.1 (2009): 12–34; Lorraine Sitzia, "A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?," *The Oral History Review*, 30.1 (2003): 87–101; Lorina Barker, "'Hangin' Out and Yarnin': Reflecting on the Experience of Collecting Oral Histories," *History Australia*, 5.1 (2008): 1–9.

<sup>36</sup> K'Meyer and Crothers, "If I See Some of This in Writing I'm Going to Shoot You."

<sup>37</sup> High, "Sharing Authority: An Introduction," p. 15. For a pertinent discussion of the difficulties inherent in sharing authority within the context of oral history, see Linda Shopes, "Commentary: Sharing Authority," *The Oral History Review*, 30.1 (2003): 103–10.

Such a situation is obviously problematic, hard to recognise and therefore difficult to resolve. Nonetheless, simply being mindful of these issues, one hopes, goes some way towards helping to prevent misunderstanding. I have given all my participants the chance to edit their transcripts for accuracy and potentially flag areas of concern before processing the interview material. So far, I have had few problems with this approach; however, I suspect that the tedious nature of reading back through a long document will have encouraged some participants simply to “skim over” significant paragraphs and hope for the best. Time will tell whether this will develop into a significant issue.

Equally important is the editorial process. Decisions around how much editing is required to create a clear and meaningful text from the interview transcripts – to preserve a sense of the exchange without the distractions of asides and clarifications – exist alongside concerns about confidentiality and defamation.<sup>38</sup> How much background context should be included and how should this information be incorporated? Such decisions dramatically affect the balance of voices and must be considered carefully if both the academic and participant community is to accept the final account as valid.<sup>39</sup> As Rebecca Jones reminds us, the construction of the final product is a joint responsibility and requires the negotiation of power dynamics as much as it does content.<sup>40</sup> Editing is difficult not only because of the challenges involved in reducing many voices down to one, but also because one becomes acutely aware of the incomplete and at times unreliable nature of the archive and how this too affects the final interpretation of the whole.

In making these vital choices, it remains up to the historian to maintain awareness of the ways in which the participants’ memory has been informed and influenced by formally learned accounts of history.<sup>41</sup> My interviews with the Chinese Australian community suggest that the uplifting narrative of the multicultural era, which tends to contrast “bad” White Australia with the present day, has had a profound effect on the collective memory of the local Chinese community.<sup>42</sup> My focus on celebratory social events allows considerable room for participants to avoid discussing personal and institutional discrimination if they so desire, but those who have discussed such issues have often qualified their responses by emphasising how much better things have become since multiculturalism was introduced, even while acknowledging instances of discrimination that occurred during this period.<sup>43</sup> Museum culture has also affected the experience of conducting oral history with local Chinese. The questioning of my interest in debutante balls by participants often contrasted with their assumptions of my interest in dragon dance, highlighting the way in which the government-funded visual dominance of dance icons such as dragons has affected the Chinese community’s own expectations of a historical researcher.

Studying the way the personal interacts with the institutional is, indeed, a complex challenge and positioning such a study within a global body of scholarship presents yet another. Indeed, one of the most glaring anomalies in the field of Chinese Australian history has been its almost complete lack of engagement with histories of the wider

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of these issues, see Rebecca Jones, “Blended Voices: Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews,” *The Oral History Review*, 26.1 (2004): 44–51.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Cándida Smith, “Publishing Oral History: Oral Exchange and Print Culture,” in *Thinking About Oral History: Theory and Applications*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2008), p. 171.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, “Blended Voices,” p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, “Memory Theory: Personal and Social,” in *Thinking About Oral History: Theories and Applications*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2008), pp. 51–2.

<sup>42</sup> Most migration histories follow the outline described in Catriona Elder, “Immigration History,” in *Australia’s History: Themes and Debates*, ed. Martyn Lyons and Penny Russell (New South Wales: UNSW Press, 2005), pp. 98–115.

<sup>43</sup> Wilton discusses related issues in “Chinese Voices, Australian Lives”.

Chinese diaspora.<sup>44</sup> This is perhaps understandable on account of the relatively small numbers of Chinese who migrated to the Antipodes compared to North America or South East Asian countries and in light of criticisms of the usefulness of the concept of a Chinese diaspora.<sup>45</sup> Recent steps have nonetheless been taken to rectify this imbalance; a current ARC project linking Chinese Australian scholars with Asian American scholars, for instance, promises much in this direction.<sup>46</sup> American scholar Mae Ngai's contribution on nineteenth-century Chinese headmen in the 2011 March special issue of *Australian Historical Studies*, in which she teased out comparisons between the local structure of protectorates and those of the United States, represents another contribution.<sup>47</sup> The major challenge of the field will be to somehow incorporate local histories into a global dialogue while retaining their recognisability and relevance to their respective communities. For the purpose of my own work, I intend to draw upon research into Chinese diasporic communities in the West, in particular the Chinese American and Chinese Canadian communities, which have been vital to the globalisation of both Cantonese opera and dragon dance. The debutante traditions of Hispanic, Philippine American and African American communities, as well as those of Anglo-Celtic communities, meanwhile, provide a further interesting counterpoint to the Chinese debutante tradition and collectively contribute to broader discussions about the role of ritual and performance in constructing identity.

This article has briefly outlined the process of conducting research into the history of Chinese Australian involvement in dance-related cultural activities in Australia, the problems encountered, and the leads that remain to be pursued. This research seeks to recover the Chinese Australian cultural presence, which I suggest has to date been overlooked or ignored by dance and cultural historians because Chinese culture is viewed as foreign, both geographically and psychologically, despite its longstanding influence in Australia. The process of reconstructing this history is a labour-intensive and difficult task, reflecting the complexity of representing Chinese Australians – a multigenerational community of individuals from diverse backgrounds – to a scholarly readership. I have attempted to highlight the wealth of experience within the Chinese community through a case-study approach and have utilised a range of historical methods from digital harvesting to oral history for this purpose, each of these methods presenting their own advantages and limitations. In particular, the interactive and trust-based nature of oral history has caused me to reflect deeply on the relationship between the scholarly community and the communities it studies. My major challenge will be to create a community history that is recognisable to members of the Chinese Australian community and contributes significantly to global scholarship on the cultural history of Chinese diaspora and the function of culture within historical communities at large. Nonetheless, the potential of such research to contribute to understandings of Chinese Australian identity and to the field of Australian history more broadly makes this task equally rewarding and exciting.

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<sup>44</sup> Gungwu Wang and Annette Shun Wah, *Imagining the Chinese Diaspora: Two Australian Perspectives* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1999); Gungwu Wang, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Ien Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm," *Boundary 2*, 25.3 (1998): 223–42; Ien Ang, "Transforming Chinese Identities in Australia: Between Assimilation, Multiculturalism and Diaspora" in *Intercultural Relations, Cultural Transformation, and Identity: The Ethnic Chinese, Selected Papers Presented at the 1998 ISSCO Conference*, ed. Teresita Ang (Manila: Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, Inc., 2000). For a historical critique of the related concept of hybridity, see Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995); Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk, *Diaspora & Hybridity* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Keir Reeves & Tseen Khoo, "Dragon Tails: Re-interpreting Chinese Australian History," *Australian Historical Studies*, 42.1 (2011): 4.

<sup>47</sup> Mae M. Ngai, "Chinese Miners, Headmen, and Protectors on the Victorian Goldfields, 1853–1863," *Australian Historical Studies*, 42.1 (2011): 10.