

How Gold Rush Immigrants Can Talk to Today's Kids: Using Nineteenth-Century Cantonese–English Phrasebooks in the Classroom

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“Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia” or “Asia literacy” is one of the key cross-curriculum priorities identified in the new, partially rolled-out Australian national curriculum¹. This cross-curriculum priority, designed to permeate all subject areas in schools, provides an excellent opportunity for school children to learn more about the experiences of Chinese in Australia and how these have shaped and continue to shape what it means to be Australian. It is also an opportunity for scholars of the history of Chinese in Australia to work with educators to create the resources needed by teachers to meet this priority. The *Language: A Key to Survival* project is one attempt to do this. One of the project outcomes is an education kit that formally links classroom activities with the Victorian iteration of the national curriculum, AusVELS (formerly the Victorian Essential Learning Standards or VELs). The project outcomes are also a valuable resource for scholars of Chinese Australian history.

Language: A Key to Survival was a collaborative project between Culture Victoria and the Chinese Museum which has resulted in the publication of a web story on the Culture Victoria website (<http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/language-a-key-to-survival/>).² The web story includes high resolution digital samples of six different Chinese-English phrasebooks from different eras; short essays with information about the former owners of the books; background information about the history of Chinese-English phrasebooks; information about the nature of Chinese language and dialects; and three video interviews. Two of these interviews are with elderly Chinese Australians who recall their experiences learning English in the mid-twentieth century, while the third is a group discussion demonstrating how the phrasebooks worked (and didn’t work!) as a pronunciation guide. High-resolution copies of historical images associated with Chinese life on the Victorian goldfields from the Chinese Museum’s collection have also been published as part of the project.

The initial drive for the project came from a desire by the Chinese Museum to learn more about a particular gold-rush era Cantonese–English phrasebook in its collection and also, through digitisation, to make this very fragile document available to researchers. The volume had been donated to the Museum prior to the Chinese Museum’s formal establishment in 1985, but there was no documentation about the donor and very little was known about it. While the phrasebook contains information about the name of the editor of the phrasebook (Zhu Rui-sheng 朱瑞生) and a short title (光照英语, *Guang-zhao yingyu*, *English Through Cantonese and Zhaoqing*) there was no date or any other publication information. The Museum also wanted to learn more about how significant this phrasebook was. Were there other Cantonese-English phrasebooks around during the gold rushes? How did such phrasebooks function and how did they change over time?

The phrasebook held by the Chinese Museum is of particular interest because it was specifically designed for use on the Victorian goldfields – according to the text the editor spent time on the Victorian goldfields – though its content indicates it may have been adapted from a previous version used on the Californian goldfields. It also offers a pronunciation guide in not just one but two Cantonese dialects. Determining which two has been a more difficult task than might be imagined due to the non-standard use of linguistic terminology in the volume. Research on the phrasebook involved working closely with elders in the Chinese Australian community and experts in linguistics to

¹ The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au>.

² The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of Emily Cheah (Chinese Museum) and Cathy Churchill (Australian National University) on this project.

understand the nature of the dialects used, as well as mapping the history of the goldfield place names listed in the book as part of getting a rough date range for the book. Dating the book was greatly helped by the coincidental visit of a family holding a slightly later edition of the same phrasebook, which included a publication date. We were delighted to also be able to incorporate this phrasebook and the history of the family who owned it into the project.

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Language, A Key to Survival: Cantonese-English Phrasebooks in Australia

Most international travellers today are familiar with phrasebooks. These books provide a guide to pronunciation, useful vocabulary, but most importantly lists of useful phrases to help travellers negotiate their way around a country where they don't speak the language.

Anyone who has tried to communicate across the language divide without such a tool knows how valuable they are.

This web story explores how Chinese from the gold rush period onwards have used phrasebooks to help them find their way in Australia. You can compare examples of Cantonese-English phrasebooks from different eras, watch Museum volunteers Nick and David speak English using a gold-rush era phrasebook; learn a little about the lives of some of the people who owned these phrasebooks; and hear Mr Ng and Mr Leong discuss their experiences learning English in Australia and China in the early to mid-twentieth century.

We hope that teachers will also be inspired by the education kit which contains AusVELS-aligned classroom activities designed to encourage students to reflect on the challenges that a lack of English might have posed for Chinese immigrants in Victoria during the gold rushes and also what the contents of these phrasebooks can tell us about the lives of these Chinese men. To supplement the education kit are a collection of historical newspaper engravings to help you imagine life during the gold rushes for Chinese immigrants.

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Story Credits

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Images

Video

Text

Maa Louey (1835-1915) and his family
[Donald is my home: George Ah Ling \(c1884-1987\)](#)

Phrasebook use in China
[Introduction to Chinese and Cantonese dialects](#)

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**Language, A Key to Survival, Culture Victoria website,
<http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/language-a-key-to-survival>**

The Museum is, however, more than just a keeping place for Australia's Chinese heritage: it is also a locus for engagement with that heritage, particularly for teachers and students. The Museum has long provided guided tours for school children, but it is also keen to extend its reach to schools through the development of classroom activities that facilitate this engagement. The Museum's *English Through Cantonese and Zhaoqing* phrasebook, edited by a Chinese man who visited and lived in Victoria during the gold rushes, is a valuable primary source. By selecting the phrases and words he thought most useful to new arrivals, he offers an extraordinary insight into the nature of cross-cultural engagement during the gold rushes through the voices of the Chinese themselves.

One of the first real lessons in the history classroom is learning to tell the difference between primary and secondary sources. Good history teachers spend a lot of class time emphasising the importance of primary sources. But for the beginning history student a primary source can be hard to “read” – either literally, because of language barriers or physical deterioration, or figuratively, because the skills required for analysis and interpretation have not yet been acquired.

Even once students have begun to develop and practise these skills, there is often a sense of artificiality to the study of a popular primary source. Students who study the Rosetta Stone or the Bayeux Tapestry can have few illusions about the fact that these milestone artefacts have already been pored over by thousands. It is easy for them to feel that they have nothing to add to what experts have already said and written. A good history teacher will, of course, work hard to mitigate this impression. All students should be encouraged to see their own individual viewpoint as a unique and important contribution. This being so, everyone, even a primary school student, wants to feel that they have discovered something new, that their work is original.

The phrasebooks that feature in the *Language: A Key to Survival* project present as a relatively “new” primary source for use in the classroom and so it is easy for students to feel that their work is original and fresh. They are documents that have only recently been made available and the mid-nineteenth-century English they use is easily accessible yet unfamiliar enough for schoolchildren to feel they are studying an “old” document. The possibilities for developing classroom activities are endless, and there is great potential for students at all levels to feel that they can contribute something.



Page from Zhu Ruisheng, *English Through Cantonese and Zhaoqing*, unknown publisher, c.1857–c.1862 (Chinese Museum, Melbourne)

Five classroom activities were developed as part of the project, focusing on the two almost-identical gold-rush era Cantonese–English phrasebooks, one held by the Chinese Museum and the other in a private collection. The first two activities are preliminary, setting the historical context of the phrasebook and familiarising students with the nature of the document. “The World at the Time of the Gold Rushes” asks students at Level 9 to research key contemporary events such as the Opium Wars, the California Gold Rush,

the Taiping Rebellion and the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. In this digital age, schoolchildren may never have come across a phrasebook before, so in the second activity, “What is a Phrasebook?”, they are asked to explore printed phrasebooks of the last few decades where available, as well as online and app-based contemporary phrasebooks. They are encouraged to consider the difficulties of arriving in a new country, and to make predictions about what the gold seekers of 150 years ago might have needed to talk about with locals and other inhabitants of the goldfields.

In the third activity, the voices of the 1860s Chinese immigrants begin to enter the classroom. Having made a list of what they already know about the Chinese in the gold rushes, students are asked to read excerpts and interpret the phrases from the book. When choosing the excerpts for the kit, we made sure we included those most likely to pique the curiosity of schoolchildren. There are references to murderers being hung; pirates being caught, tried and convicted; claims being stolen; and people being hit and struck, all of which can stimulate class discussion about the violent nature of the goldfields. Students are encouraged to hypothesise on the definition of obscure words such as “physic”, “opening pills” and “poop” (which will surely cause great mirth in the primary classroom). The sobering nature of the phrase, “If you do not fear of fire, what do you fear” is used to initiate research on the famous Black Thursday bushfires, which burned a quarter of what is now the state of Victoria.

The conversational nature of the phrases really come into their own in the fourth activity, in which students use exact phrases from the books as a base for a short goldfields drama or play. As whole page excerpts have been included, it is easy to see that much of the phrasebook is set out as two-way conversations, which students can easily re-enact in the classroom. The following exchange can be used to generate a play about the dangers of serious illness on the goldfields and the difficulties in getting medical assistance:

How long have you been sick?
I have been sick for a few days.
The doctor said that I cannot be cured.
He did not dare to give me physic.

Some of the phrases in the books suggest that users utilised them to recognise what was being said by others. Students can conjecture about the commercial activities of Chinese hawkers from:

Find out the gloves for me.
May I put on a pair of bracelets?
You may do it if you please.
I will try to put on a new bonnet.

Some of the more cryptic phrases could yield very creative responses. Who knows what goldfields drama a year 5 class will make from “I have bought a diamond ring”.

The final activity is a more traditional document study, with explicit guiding questions to focus students on drawing conclusions about the lives of the Chinese immigrants on the goldfields from the evidence presented by the phrasebooks. This could also be done with any one of over a hundred phrasebook pages presented on the website (only a selection is reproduced in the education kit). Each of these could be used as a discussion starter in the classroom.

For the purposes of the education kit, the Chinese language element of the phrasebooks was not considered. However, there is great scope for this to be used to illustrate the difficulties in writing and correctly speaking English sounds by using Chinese characters. Teachers can use the videos provided in the project to assist with this. The videos encourage students to have a greater empathy for the experience and frustrations

endured by the Chinese miners, as well as for those who were trying to communicate with them.

The activities presented in the education kit provide a starting point for teachers to develop their own classroom materials. There is no shortage of written documents from the 1860s, but the phrasebooks from this project are unusual in that their writers selected the most useful and common items of conversation for communication between Cantonese and English speakers. Each phrase tells us something that was so important to daily life that people could not avoid talking about it and, when taken as an exchange, each page is a record of a conversation that took place many times on the goldfields in the 1860s. We see Cantonese speakers as active players on the goldfields operating outside the confines of “Chinese camps” doing business, making friends (and enemies), dealing with the law, and responding to violence. These phrasebooks offer classroom history teachers a rich resource that they will be able to use in a myriad of ways, across various year levels, over and above the ideas suggested here.