

## Chinese Commerce in Wollongong, 1850s – 1950s

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Wollongong, on the South Coast of New South Wales, is little-known in the history of the Chinese southern diaspora; yet, it was the site of numerous, diverse and often highly successful Chinese commercial ventures between the 1850s and 1950s. Chinese people in Wollongong ran dairy farms, fished, grew tobacco, kept market gardens, had shops, operated restaurants and even drove buses. This was in spite of their small community, which numbered around 150 at peak - among 18,000 “whites” – during the early 1900s. Given this unexpectedly intense concentration and rich diversity of Chinese commerce, the Wollongong case stands out from others and suggests a need for detailed local research in other locations.

In 1923, the Australia-born children of market gardener Thomas Dion (黃帝安) started a bus company in Wollongong, on the New South Wales South Coast. With a humble Model T Ford, sporting solid rubber tires and a custom-built wooden body similar to a horse-drawn carriage, the Dion siblings launched a modern commercial venture that would become a local legend. Although it initially comprised just one bus and driver, with eldest brother Tom driving alone, the business grew rapidly. Further buses were soon driven by brothers Ted, Barney, Ernie and Les, and the company’s finances then required the careful management of eldest sister Rose. By 1948, 25 years after its launch, Dion’s Bus Service boasted the crowning achievement of local transportation: the double-decker Leyland Titan, which regularly roared past the former site of Thomas Dion Sr.’s market garden.<sup>1</sup> The Dion family prospered in Wollongong because of their success in business and the family still runs the bus firm today.

Wollongong was a “white” town. Eighty kilometres south of Sydney, it was settled by the British in 1815 at devastating cost in land and life to local Aborigines. In the first decades of European settlement, it was dominated by beef pastoralists, though dairy farming emerged in the 1850s and replaced beef as the area’s most important industry.<sup>2</sup> Coalmining developed as well, during the late 19th century, and fostered a strong – and almost exclusively “white” – local working-class culture.<sup>3</sup> As the 20th century advanced, several smelting works were built, along with an Australian Iron and Steel factory in 1927, thus transforming Wollongong into a hub of heavy industry, the “Steel City”, throughout which the Dions drove their buses.<sup>4</sup> Its population grew from 3,000 in 1851 to 100,000 in 1954.<sup>5</sup>

While Dion’s Bus Service was the most successful Chinese enterprise in Wollongong, there was a remarkable variety of other such enterprises there between the 1850s and 1950s. The town was home to a small but significant Chinese community of around 150 at peak in the early 1900s, and they knew it as “Dark Dragon Ridge” (烏龍岡).<sup>6</sup> To make a living, Chinese people engaged in a range of commercial activities, the earliest being dairy farming. There were also fishermen, tobacco growers, market gardeners, shopkeepers and restaurateurs. Indeed, such commercial diversity, and success in many

<sup>1</sup> John Birchmeir and Barney Dion, *The Dions – Bus Pioneers of Wollongong: A History of the Dion Brothers Bus Partnership* (Sydney: Oughtershaw Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> John McQuilton, “Settlement”, in Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells, *A History of Wollongong* (Wollongong: University of Wollongong Press, 1997), 23-34.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Lee, “‘Rocked in the Cradle’: The Economy, 1828-1907”, in Hagan and Wells, *A History of Wollongong*, 35-52.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Lee, “A Corporate Presence: the Economy, 1908-1945”, in Hagan and Wells, *A History of Wollongong*, 53-70.

<sup>5</sup> Census population data – Appendix 2a-2b, in Hagan and Wells, *A History of Wollongong*, pp. 267-8.

<sup>6</sup> Donation Book for KMT Headquarters (Wollongong, Joe Wah-Gow) [澳洲國民黨建築雪梨支部黨所捐一冊, 民國九年(封面寫有烏龍岡阜周華九兄)], Kuomintang Australasia Archives A191, 1920.

cases, despite such a tiny Chinese population – and in a political climate like “White Australia” – has rarely featured in the history of the Chinese southern diaspora. In this discussion of Chinese commerce in Wollongong, I explore the variety, origin, number, scale and longevity of these operations.

### **Dion's Bus Service**

The best-remembered Chinese business in Wollongong, perhaps because it still thrives today, is Dion's Bus Service. The Dion family helped sustain this memory by publishing a history of the bus service in 1997.<sup>7</sup> The company was founded in 1923 by the Dion siblings, three years after the death of their market gardener father Thomas. They were part of an ambitious new generation of Australia-born Chinese who refused to be consigned to traditional Chinese economic roles in Australia, such as market gardening. They saw the limitations of the market garden left to them by their father when he died in 1920. As such, they used its profits to launch a new commercial enterprise which helped meet Wollongong's growing demand for efficient and reliable transport given rise to by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation.<sup>8</sup>

Dion's Bus Service was a local success story. Thomas Dion Jr.'s first application to operate a bus was approved by North Illawarra Municipal Council in the November of 1923.<sup>9</sup> In 1926 and 1929, his brothers Ted and Barney had applications approved by the three other local councils of Wollongong and two other councils—Shellharbour and Kiama—to the south of Wollongong.<sup>10</sup> The Dions soon had a number of local bus routes, including specific services for coalminers commuting to and from the mines each day. They also ran a Wollongong to Sydney service from 1927 to 1931.<sup>11</sup> They had expanded their business to take in multiple routes and a fleet of eight buses, including the imposing Leyland Titan, by 1948.<sup>12</sup> The bus service was lucrative, enabling Dion matriarch Annie Dion to have accumulated a real estate portfolio worth £25,000 by 1950, making her one of the wealthiest women in town.<sup>13</sup> Even as early as 1930, the company was being referred to as the “Dion Syndicate” in local government circles because of its dominance of the local bus industry.<sup>14</sup> This was allowed for by an amicable and mutually beneficial relationship between the Dions and members of the local “white” working class, scarcely observed in such a form elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

Local memories of the Dions and their buses are plentiful. Thelma Dorma, for instance, a local schoolgirl in the 1920s, recalled telling her mother on her first day of school regarding Tom Dion and the Model T Ford: “There is a Chinese man outside ready to drive us to school in a hearse”. She also recalled that the Dions let nobody walk during the Great Depression, even if they had no money.<sup>16</sup> Frank Ryan, another local youngster in the 1920s, remembered the Dion brothers always being ‘cheerful and courteous’.<sup>17</sup> Doris Burnett, a young woman in the 1930s, also remembered an alarming incident where one of the brothers had a fit while driving.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, James Wallace Gibson, a local boy in the 1930s, recalled the endearing names given to the Dion buses: one bus was dubbed the

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<sup>7</sup> Birchmeir and Dion, *The Dions – Bus Pioneers of Wollongong*; see also John and Eileen Birchmeir, *Sixty Five Years of Service: A Brief History of Dion's Bus Service in Wollongong* (Wollongong: Self-Published, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Birchmeir and Dion, *The Dions – Bus Pioneers of Wollongong*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> North Illawarra Council Minute Books, WCLA N1/10, November-December 1923; Birchmeir and Dion, *The Dions – Bus Pioneers of Wollongong*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Birchmeir and Dion, *The Dions – Bus Pioneers of Wollongong*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-42.

<sup>12</sup> Personal correspondence with Les Dion (proprietor of Dion's Bus Service), August 2012.

<sup>13</sup> “Real Estate Holdings”, Annie Dion Deceased Estate File.

<sup>14</sup> Birchmeir and Dion, *The Dions – Bus Pioneers of Wollongong*, 39-41.

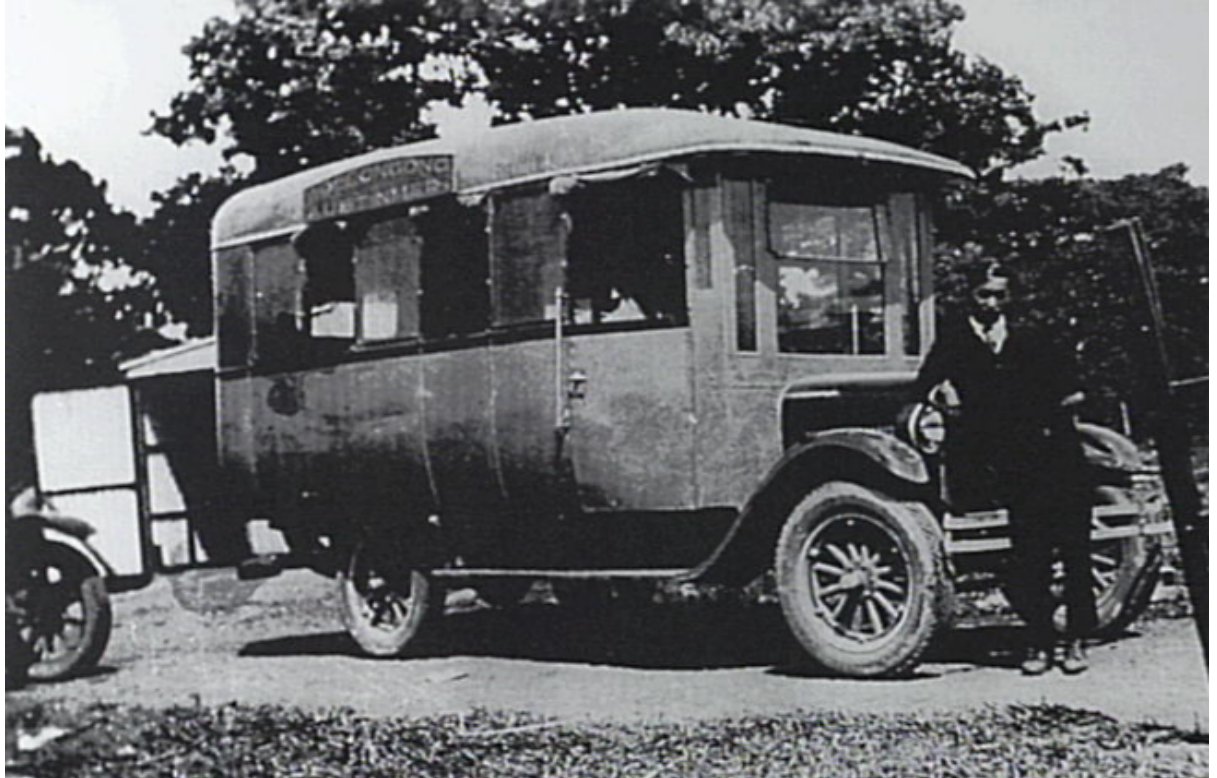
<sup>15</sup> It was, however, seen also to some degree in The Rocks in Sydney, see Jane Lydon, *Many Inventions: The Chinese in the Rocks, 1890-1930* (Melbourne: Monash Publications, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Thelma Dormer, in Frank Ryan, *My Fairy Meadow*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Ryan, *My Fairy Meadow*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Wayne Davis (ed.), *Our Memories – Your History: An Oral History of Port Kembla* (Wollongong: Wollongong City Council, 1985), 104-5.

“Shanghai Express” and another the “China Clipper”.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, at a meeting of the Illawarra Historical Society in 1999, at which Les Dion spoke, apparently everyone “had a tale to relate of their experiences with either the blue buses or the family”.<sup>20</sup>



**Fig. 1 Thomas Dion and his Chevrolet bus, 1928**  
(Source: Wollongong City Library Images Collection, P14384)

### **Dairy Farms**

Dion’s Bus Service is a recent feature of Wollongong’s past relative to its earliest Chinese commercial ventures: dairy farms. These had their origin in the British “coolie” trade in Amoy (廈門) – current-day Xiamen (厦门).<sup>21</sup> In 1852, indentured labourers from this small island arrived in Wollongong at the request of local dairy farmer Henry Osborne. According to correspondence between labour agent Robert Towns and Osborne, at least five “coolies” came on the ship *Spartan* at a cost of £54. One was identified as “Sang” or “Song”, but the others were not identified.<sup>22</sup> Amoy natives appearing in local church registers and newspapers at this time were John Chin Chi, John Chi, John Jui Dan, Thomas Gam, John Tanzi, Joseph Chuchin, “Cha”, Joe Ritchie and Hang Wang.<sup>23</sup> It is possible that Osborne requested more than five labourers. On arrival in Wollongong, they were engaged in dairy farming – for which there was a dearth of local workers – as well as domestic duties in John Chin Chi’s case.<sup>24</sup> Given the labour-intensive nature of dairying in this period, life must have

<sup>19</sup> Personal correspondence with James Wallace Gibson (Wollongong boy in the 1930s), January-May 2013.

<sup>20</sup> “Meeting Reports, Les Dion and the Dion Family, September”, *Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin*, 11 (1999), 74.

<sup>21</sup> Maxine Darnell, “The Chinese Labour Trade to NSW, 1783-1853: An Exposition of Motives and Outcomes”, PhD Thesis, University of New England, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Towns Correspondence, Mitchell Library, MSS 307/5, 12 August 1852.

<sup>23</sup> St. Luke’s Anglican Church, *Register of Marriages*, Wollongong City Library Archives (WCLA), 21 March 1854 – 23 September 1864; St. Francis Xavier’s Catholic Church, *Register of Marriages*, WCLA, 25 July 1855, 25 November 1859; *Register of Baptisms*, WCLA, 27 May 1864; “Sydney Police Court”, *Empire*, 25 January 1855; “Local Intelligence”, *Illawarra Mercury* (hereafter *IM*), 2 June 1856.

<sup>24</sup> St. Luke’s Anglican Church, *Register of Baptisms*, 3 September 1854.

been difficult for the men.<sup>25</sup> Most of the 3,500 or so indentured labourers shipped to New South Wales from China between 1847 and 1853 – and the thousands of others sent around the world thereafter – suffered hardship, with parallels being drawn between their lives and those of African slaves.<sup>26</sup>

After a five-year period of indenture, some of Henry Osborne's former labourers stayed on his estate, as tenant farmers, channelling skills acquired as dairy hands into their own farms. John Chin Chi and Thomas Gam in particular were mentioned in local newspapers in relation to dairy farming in the late 1850s and early 1860s.<sup>27</sup> As Wollongong's economy tended towards beef farming and mixed agriculture in this period, their operations constituted little threat to the established order.<sup>28</sup> The new farmers needed workers on their own farms, so they sent for relatives and others to join them. Thomas Gam's brother John arrived in Wollongong in 1857. In 1860, however, he dramatically committed suicide with a pistol after a dispute with Thomas over money.<sup>29</sup> Other Chinese relatives and/or associates of the Amoy dairy farmers were Hoar Miar, Sha Hu, Ong Ing, Twa-hie, John Pow, Joseph Chuchin and Gerry Loung.<sup>30</sup> It is more than likely that these men were also former indentured labourers, who came to Wollongong after their labour contracts had been served out in other parts of New South Wales.<sup>31</sup> Evidence suggests a high degree of cooperation between Osborne and his Chinese tenants, mostly in the form of land-clearing.<sup>32</sup> Dairy farming is virtually unheard of in Chinese southern diasporic history. In fact, it was once lauded as a means of driving Chinese people out of agriculture in northern Australia because they were assumed to be incapable of it.<sup>33</sup>

Two especially successful Chinese dairy farmers were John Chi – not to be confused with John Chin Chi – and Thomas Gam. Both were naturalised in 1872 and began farming away from the Osborne estate.<sup>34</sup> They both married European women and had a number of children who helped them with their work.<sup>35</sup> In 1878, Thomas Gam had almost 40 head of cattle, 9 pigs, a number of horses and carts and his own dairy equipment on his own farm.<sup>36</sup> John Chi's dairy venture appears to have been similar. Milk and cream were produced on his farm and cattle were also bred for sale on the open market.<sup>37</sup> In 1908, the year he died, his farm extended over 300 acres and required the payment of £133/8/- in annual rates to the local council: it was larger and more valuable than most neighbouring farms.<sup>38</sup> Both the Chi and Gam farms were strictly local operations. Aside from with their Chinese associates in Wollongong, they had no physical connection to China. John Chi and Thomas Gam were recorded in Australia uninterrupted until their deaths in the early 1900s, having made no return trips to Amoy. The same can be said of John Chin Chi, John Jui Dan, John Tanzi and Joseph Chuchin. This economic isolation from Amoy stood in contrast to

<sup>25</sup> Lee, "Rocked in the Cradle", 40.

<sup>26</sup> Darnell, "The Chinese Labour Trade to NSW, 1783-1853", 1; Wang Singwu, "The Organisation of Chinese Emigration, 1848-1888, with Special Reference to Chinese Emigration to Australia", MA Thesis, Australian National University, 1970, 76.

<sup>27</sup> "Local Intelligence", *IM*, 2 June 1856; "Determined Suicide of a Chinaman", *IM*, 10 January 1860; "By Electric Telegraph", *Empire*, 13 January 1860.

<sup>28</sup> Lee, "Rocked in the Cradle", 40-1.

<sup>29</sup> "Determined Suicide of a Chinaman", *IM*, 10 January 1860.

<sup>30</sup> "Local Intelligence", *IM*, 2 June 1856; "Illawarra", *Empire*, 28 July 1860; "Determined Suicide of a Chinaman", *IM*, 10 January 1860; "Court of Petty Sessions", *IM*, 5 June 1860; "Court of Petty Sessions", *IM*, 15 February 1867.

<sup>31</sup> Maxine Darnell, "Master and Servant, Squatter and Shepherd: The Regulation of Indentured Chinese Labourers, NSW, 1847-1853", in *The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions*, ed. Henry Chan et al. (Canberra: ANU Press, 2001), 54-68.

<sup>32</sup> "Electors of East Camden", *IM*, 21 January 1858; Robyn Florance, *Tracing Chinese Footsteps on the South Coast of NSW: A Thematic History, 1850-1950*, (Sydney: Heritage Office of NSW, 2008), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Warwick Frost, "Migrants and Technological Transfer: Chinese Farming in Australia, 1850-1920", *Australian Economic History Review*, 42:2 (2002), 128.

<sup>34</sup> Registers of Certificates of Naturalisation, NSW State Records (NSWSR) 4/1202-5, Register 3, 125, 127; NSW Electoral Rolls, Illawarra Electoral District, 1874-5, 720; 1876-7, 794.

<sup>35</sup> St. Luke's Anglican Church, *Register of Marriages*, 22 November 1859, 18 February 1863; *Register of Baptisms*, 16 November 1860 – 28 June 1877.

<sup>36</sup> "Avondale", *IM*, 9 April 1878.

<sup>37</sup> "Wollongong Agricultural Show", *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*), 29 January 1885, 4 February 1886, 3 February 1887, 12 February 1887.

<sup>38</sup> Central Illawarra Council (CIC) Ward Books, WCLA C15/1-3, 1907-8, C.

the close economic connectedness that existed between most overseas Chinese and their home villages in China.<sup>39</sup>

After the deaths of their fathers, at least three Wollongong-born Chinese continued on in the local dairy industry. James Chie, son of John Chi, took over the farm when his father died in 1908. He supplied milk and cream and bred cattle, as per usual, though he also bred horses and fowl and grew vegetables.<sup>40</sup> The dairy industry was Wollongong's most important at the turn of the century and the Chie farm one of the longest-established farms. By 1937, its value was £1,500 and James had purchased five other such properties.<sup>41</sup> He died a dairy farmer in 1954.<sup>42</sup> His brother David worked on the family farm after the death of their father as well; he also ran his own dairy farm between 1920 and 1941.<sup>43</sup> George Tansey, the son of John Tanzi, did much the same between 1908 and 1933.<sup>44</sup> He dealt in dairy products, bred cattle and supplied hides to local leather workers.<sup>45</sup> In the 1930s, members of the Tansey family also worked as specialist contractors on other dairy farms.<sup>46</sup> It is significant that these Australia-born Chinese continued in their fathers' footsteps. Not only do these dairying dynasties show that Chinese people were capable of this form of agriculture, but this also constitutes an additional point of difference between local Amoy Chinese and many other overseas Chinese, that is, non-China-born children often eschewed their parents' careers, particularly when not enmeshed in kinship systems stretching back to the villages.<sup>47</sup>

### Fishing

Chinese fishermen were first recorded in Wollongong in 1859 amid the Australian gold rushes. Local newspapers reported that a large party of "Celestials" arrived in Wollongong Harbour on a vessel from Sydney. Observers stated that they disembarked, loaded their equipment onto bullock carts and proceeded overland to Lake Illawarra, in the Wollongong area's south, where they set up camp. From this base, they caught fish, salted and packed them on-site and sent them to their countrymen on the goldfields.<sup>48</sup> This was common in areas where there was no gold, like Wollongong.<sup>49</sup> Chin Ah Teak stated before a government commission in 1880 that there were hundreds of Chinese fishermen in the waters around Sydney during the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>50</sup> They were affiliated with Sydney merchant Ah Chuney, a native of the Pearl River Delta region around Canton city – current-day Guangzhou (廣州) – and most fishermen came from the same region.<sup>51</sup> It is likely, then, that these Lake Illawarra fishermen were Cantonese and thus distinct, both linguistically and culturally, from the Amoy dairy farmers. They are unlikely to have had much contact with each other. These fishermen are also unlikely to have dealt with local Europeans due to the remoteness of Lake Illawarra from the town centre and the fact that they were apparently the only ones able to fish the lake profitably in this period. Their skill brought praise from

<sup>39</sup> For some successful but similarly isolated former "coolies" in Southeast Asia, such as Towkay Yau Tat Shin of Perak, see Yen Ching-Hwang, *Ethnic Chinese Business in Asia: History, Culture and Business Enterprise* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2013), 175-6.

<sup>40</sup> "Dapto Agricultural Show", *SMH*, 12 March 1908, 28 February 1912, 19 February 1923, 19 January 1925, 15 January 1927, 12 January 1929, 12 January 1935, 16 January 1937.

<sup>41</sup> CIC Rate Books, WCLA C6/1-36, 1933, 4; 1937, 53.

<sup>42</sup> St. Luke's Anglican Church, *Register of Burials*, WCLA, 24 November 1954.

<sup>43</sup> *Sands Business Directory*, 1920, 58A; 1926, 100A; St. Luke's Anglican Church, *Register of Burials*, 29 September 1941.

<sup>44</sup> CIC Ward Books, 1907-8, T; George Tansey Deceased Estate File, NSW SR Probate Packet 4/194264.

<sup>45</sup> "Wollongong Agricultural Show", *SMH*, 25 February 1938; Wayne Davis (ed.), *Talking History: Memories from Dapto* (Wollongong: Wollongong TAFE, 1990), 157; George Tansey Deceased Estate File.

<sup>46</sup> "Accidents", *IM*, 23 April 1937.

<sup>47</sup> See Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez, *Chinatown and Transnationalism: Ethnic Chinese in Europe and Southeast Asia* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> "Celestial Fishermen", *IM*, 17 January 1859.

<sup>49</sup> For a thorough account of Chinese fishing in Victoria, see Alister Bowen, *Archaeology of the Chinese Fishing Industry in Colonial Victoria* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Janis Wilton, *Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional New South Wales, 1850-1950* (Armidale: New England Regional Art Museum, 2004), 26.

<sup>51</sup> Shirley Fitzgerald, *Red Tape Gold Scissors: The Story of Sydney's Chinese* (Sydney: Halstead, 1996), 91.

observers as a result, though the “Celestial fishermen” appear not to have remained long in the area.<sup>52</sup>

Another, smaller party of Chinese fishermen appeared in 1862. Five set up camp on Waniora Point, just north of Wollongong, and worked the ocean for “mutton fish”, now known as abalone. Their catch may have gone to the goldfields, but it was purportedly despatched to China where it attracted a high price.<sup>53</sup> Chinese abalone fishermen often worked further south of Wollongong as well and in cooperation with Aboriginal people.<sup>54</sup> Abalone was sought after by Chinese in a number of locales around the world, though was seldom sought after by European fishermen.<sup>55</sup>

### **Tobacco**

Chinese tobacco planters began work in Wollongong in 1878 as part of a post-rush exodus of Chinese miners from exhausted goldfields. Information on these tobacco planters is sketchy for the most part, with no surviving records of leases or rate payments. Nevertheless, newspaper reports indicate that the plot of land leased for the plantation – by an unnamed Sydney Chinese merchant – was approximately 50 acres and that 20 or so Chinese planters worked there.<sup>56</sup> The longevity of this agricultural venture is uncertain. It was associated with a leprosy scare in 1879, which was also a time of anti-Chinese agitation locally and throughout the Australian colonies due to the employment of Chinese seamen by the Australian Steamship Navigation Company.<sup>57</sup> There is no evidence of the continued operation of the Wollongong Chinese tobacco plantation after 1879. Indeed, there is a chance it was ruined by the negative publicity associated with the leprosy scare and the anti-Chinese agitation. Another immigrant group, namely former American gold miners, had more luck with tobacco planting in Wollongong.<sup>58</sup> The Wollongong Chinese tobacco plantation was comparable to others in northern New South Wales in the same period, but it was small compared to many of those further afield, such the massive Chinese tobacco operations in Sumatra which had thousands of workers.<sup>59</sup>

### **Market Gardens**

Chinese market gardeners initially arrived in Wollongong in the late 19th century; these people were also part of the post-rush Chinese exodus from exhausted goldfields. The first to appear in local government records were Ah Nam and Lee Wah, who kept market gardens in the Wollongong town centre from 1876.<sup>60</sup> The workers on Lee Wah’s garden were remembered by one resident as “little men in blue pants and pigtails (who) carried watering cans on a stick along the rows of peas and beans”.<sup>61</sup> Many more Chinese market gardens sprang up in the area over the late 1800s and early 1900s. At least 50 operated locally between 1876 and 1939, with perhaps 20 doing so simultaneously at peak around 1912.

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<sup>52</sup> “Celestial Fishermen”, *IM*, 17 January 1859.

<sup>53</sup> “A New Article for Export”, *IM*, 31 January 1862.

<sup>54</sup> Florance, *Tracing Chinese Footsteps on the South Coast of NSW*, 22-3; see also Beryl Cruse et al., *Mutton Fish: The Surviving Culture of Aboriginal People and Abalone on the South Coast of NSW* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> For an American example, see Todd Braje et al., “An Historic Chinese Abalone Fishery on California’s Northern Channel Islands”, *Historical Archaeology*, 41:4 (2007), 117-28.

<sup>56</sup> “Chinese Enterprise”, *Evening News (EN)*, 8 July 1878; “A Chinaman from Sydney”, *Australian Town and Country Journal (ATCJ)*, 13 July 1878.

<sup>57</sup> “Leprosy Reported at Wollongong”, *EN*, 4 January 1879; “The Chinese Question”, *ATCJ*, 11 January 1879; “Wollongong”, *SMH*, 13 January 1879.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Organ et al., *Old Pioneers’ Reminiscences of Illawarra, 1830s-1920s* (Wollongong: Illawarra Historical Publications, 1989), 65, 70.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Williams, *Chinese Settlement in NSW: A Thematic History* (Sydney: NSW Heritage Office, 1999), 41; Yeetuan Wong, “The Big Five Hokkien Families in Penang, 1830s – 1890s”, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 1 (2007), 108-9.

<sup>60</sup> Wollongong Council (WC) Assessment Rolls, WCLA SLR352-WOL, 1876-7, 21-22.

<sup>61</sup> Organ et al., *Old Pioneers’ Reminiscences of Illawarra*, 123.

Chinese gardens in Wollongong operated on different scales but with consistently high levels of success. Land usage varied markedly. In 1895, Wong Gee's garden on the current site of the Wollongong steelworks was 42 acres; in contrast, Charlie Ching Won's ( 青 云 ) garden on the present University of Wollongong site was half-an-acre in 1902.<sup>62</sup> Most market gardens were recorded at between three and 10 acres by local government rates assessors. Nearly all plots were leased: only one gardener – Charlie Sang Ho – had his own plot.<sup>63</sup> As land use varied, so did the workers on each market garden. Harry Hong was recorded alone on his market garden near the Wollongong Town Hall in 1901.<sup>64</sup> Yet, Thomas Dion testified in court: “in 1916 I had three men working for me, sometimes four”.<sup>65</sup> These were in addition to the members of his family.<sup>66</sup> On average, three Chinese worked on or in association with – as hawkers – each market garden. In certain cases, non-Chinese worked alongside them. Indeed, Dion employed a ploughman named Stanton and another market gardener, Chew Hoan ( 翰 ), employed some men at what he referred to as “Englishman's wages”.<sup>67</sup> This line of work was surprisingly lucrative. In 1898, Sun Hung Wah, who kept several gardens, paid the sum of £54 in rates, which was more than his landlord and almost everybody else in Wollongong.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, Thomas Dion earned £300 in 1915 after expenses, meaning that he sat firmly within a middle-class income bracket.<sup>69</sup> Numerous Chinese market gardeners did similar, including, for instance, Ah Chee in Auckland between 1870 and 1920.<sup>70</sup>

European produce for “white” consumers was cultivated in local Chinese gardens. Competition results from the Wollongong Agricultural Show reveal that gardeners Charlie Ching Won, Sam Lee, Wong Gee, Joe War and Yee War grew oranges, peaches, plums, carrots, pumpkins, cabbages, turnips, herbs, beans, rhubarb, rockmelons, watermelons, peas, onions, celery, marrows, tomatoes, cucumbers, leeks, potatoes and chillies.<sup>71</sup> There was a preference for cultivating annuals over perennials. Sam Lee and Wong Gee had fruit trees, but most other Chinese gardeners did not. Thomas Dion admitted in 1918: “I don't understand growing fruit trees...all of my countrymen grow vegetables”.<sup>72</sup> Most changed plots every few years, with few remaining long enough in the same place to grow perennials. Changing plots in this fashion suggests intensive, short-term agricultural practices, also seen on Chinese gardens in Sydney.<sup>73</sup> It may have also been a disease control measure given that Irish Blight threatened potatoes on local Chinese gardens in 1910.<sup>74</sup> Chinese market gardeners dominated local cultivation of fruit and vegetables around the turn of the 20th century, monopolising the local market and regularly sending surplus produce to Sydney on the train.<sup>75</sup> Even so, because dairy farming had risen to the fore as Wollongong's main industry by the turn of the 20th century, these Chinese scarcely competed with other

<sup>62</sup> “Supreme Court Case”, *IM*, 7 December 1895; IM 07-12-95; WC Assessment Rolls, 1902-3, 36.

<sup>63</sup> North Illawarra Council (NIC) Assessment Rolls, WCLA N14/1-46, 1901-2, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Census of NSW, 1901, District 38, Sub-District T21, 11.

<sup>65</sup> Testimony of Thomas Dion, *Di On v. Council of Municipality of North Illawarra in the Supreme Court of NSW*, Justice Sly Transcripts, NSWSR Causes March-April 1918 6/3004, 304.

<sup>66</sup> Frank Ryan, *My Fairy Meadow* (Wollongong: Self-Published, 1986), 33.

<sup>67</sup> Testimony of Thomas Dion, *Di On v. Council of Municipality of North Illawarra in the Supreme Court of NSW*, 304-5; Chew Hoan's Expense Book, Chew Hoan Bankruptcy File, NSWSR 18157/10/23585, 23.

<sup>68</sup> WC Municipal Lists, WCLA SLR352-WOL, 1896-7, 4; WMC Assessment Rolls, 1898-9, 18; 1901-2, 34.

<sup>69</sup> Testimony of Thomas Dion, *Di On v. Council of Municipality of North Illawarra in the Supreme Court of NSW*, 321; *NSW Statistical Register*, 1909, in *A History of Wollongong*, ed. Hagan et al., 265.

<sup>70</sup> Joanna Boileau, “Researching Chinese Market Gardening: insights from Archaeology and Material Culture”, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 6 (2013), 141-3.

<sup>71</sup> “Wollongong Agricultural Show”, *SMH*, 4 February 1897, 4 February 1903, 6 February 1909, 3 February 1911, 2 February 1912.

<sup>72</sup> Testimony of Thomas Dion, *Di On v. Council of Municipality of North Illawarra in the Supreme Court of NSW*, 321.

<sup>73</sup> “Onion Growers Have Good Luck” (種洋蔥者之行運), *Tung Wah Times* (東華報) (*TWT*), 28 November 1925.

<sup>74</sup> “Irish Blight at Dapto”, *Kiama Independent*, 1 January 1910; “South Coast News”, *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, 12 January 1910.

<sup>75</sup> Testimony of Duck Lee, Chew Hoan Bankruptcy File, 61; Testimony of Thomas Dion, *Di On v. Council of Municipality of North Illawarra in the Supreme Court of NSW*, 304.

agriculturalists, and they supplied fresh produce to local people that was admired for its low cost and high quality.<sup>76</sup>

Chinese market gardeners in Wollongong came from Xiangshan (香山, present-day Zhongshan 中山) and Zengyi (增邑, present-day Zengcheng 增城) of the Pearl River Delta region near Canton city; they probably came from other Pearl River Delta counties as well. Charlie Ching Won dealt primarily with Xiangshan merchants in Sydney, as his financial records reveal, which suggests that he was a native of Xiangshan himself.<sup>77</sup> Thomas Dion's headstone in Wollongong General Cemetery indicates that he came from the village of Shatou (沙頭) in Zengyi. Chew Hoan came from the same county. He testified in court in 1909 that he and his nephew Duck Lee emigrated from the village of Pak Shik, which is in Zengyi.<sup>78</sup> Several gardeners, including Charlie Ching Won and George Young Song (應生), appear to have come to Wollongong indirectly after having first tried their luck on the goldfields.<sup>79</sup> Others, including Wong Gee, came to Wollongong directly, subsequent to the gold rushes, during the 1890s.<sup>80</sup> Return trips to China, often for periods of several years before ultimate retirement there, were common for local gardeners, but a few remained in Wollongong permanently.<sup>81</sup> Returning to China to marry, visit family members and retire, and to be buried, was common for most overseas Chinese.<sup>82</sup>



**Map 1 Map of Guangdong and Fujian showing areas of origin of many of the Chinese persons who came to Wollongong**<sup>83</sup>

Chinese market gardening in Wollongong declined gradually from the 1910s, disappearing entirely in the 1930s. The last entrant in the Wollongong Agricultural Show produce competition with a Chinese name was Wong Gee in 1912, which probably marked

<sup>76</sup> For reminiscences of Chinese produce, see Jean Robertson, "An Octogenarian Remembers", *Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin*, 7 (1978), 45-6; see also Jack Devitt, "Reminiscences of Jack Devitt", *Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin*, 2 (1991), 118.

<sup>77</sup> Charlie Ching Won's Expense Book, Charlie Ching Won and Jimmy Mann Hong Bankruptcy File, NSWSR 13655/10/23453.

<sup>78</sup> Testimonies of Chew Hoan and Duck Lee, Chew Hoan Bankruptcy File, 2, 145.

<sup>79</sup> Testimony of Charlie Ching Won, Charlie Ching Won and Jimmy Mann Hong Bankruptcy File, 67; George Young Song Immigration File, National Archives of Australia (NAA) SP42/1 C1903/2995.

<sup>80</sup> Wong Gee Gaol Entrance File, Long Bay Gaol, 20 February 1918, NSWSR 3/6097 16030.

<sup>81</sup> One market gardener, Gee Sin, for instance, returned to China three times before retiring there: see Gee Sin Immigration Files, ST84/1 1916/195/91-100; 1930/474/11-20; 1940/557/11-20.

<sup>82</sup> See Michael Williams, "Destination Qiaoxiang: Pearl River Delta Villages and Pacific Ports, 1849-1949" (PhD Thesis: University of Hong Kong, 2002), 106-64.

<sup>83</sup> Kate Bagnall, "Landscapes of Memory and Forgetting: Indigo and Shek Quey Lee", *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 6 (2013), 7-24.



the beginning of the end for the gardeners.<sup>84</sup> Just over a decade later, in 1924, a local newspaper reported the abandonment of a major Chinese garden in Wollongong's south.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, in 1932, the desertion of one of the oldest Chinese gardens, in Wollongong's north, was reported. After the gardeners left, "hundreds walked in and helped themselves to the vegetables that were growing".<sup>86</sup> By 1939, nearly all the Chinese market gardens had gone. Police "alien" surveys from 1939 reveal five China-born people living in Wollongong: only five potential market gardeners from China.<sup>87</sup> Chinese market gardening declined Australia-wide during the 20th century, due largely to the shortage of fresh workers brought on by the *Immigration Restriction Act*.<sup>88</sup>

### **Shops**

Wollongong had a range of Chinese shops as well, and the first and of these were mixed businesses which opened in the late 19th century. At least six opened in the local area at different times during this period. Hoong Sing Long had the first such shop in the town centre from 1876. According to his advertisements, it was a joint 'fancy goods store' and furniture showroom which sold camphor boxes, musical instruments and all manner of furniture, among other luxury items.<sup>89</sup> Chinese merchants with similar shops in the Wollongong town centre in the late 1800s were Sun Yee Yong, Son Gee, On Chong Lee, Ah May and Hob Kay.<sup>90</sup> These shops all required sizeable rate payments because of their prime locations, which suggests, as does some of the stock just noted, that their proprietors had significant financial wherewithal. Their function was most likely to provide a taste of the Orient in a place of near-total European cultural homogeneity. Still, none operated for more than two years: they arrived and departed in rapid succession.

In the 20th century, Bo On, Joe Wah Gow (周華久), the Dion siblings and Henry and Stanley Young also ran mixed businesses, in addition to the bus company in the Dions' case. Unlike their predecessors, the focus of these traders was on everyday necessities rather than "fancy goods". Bo On opened in 1901 and sold "drapery, groceries, fruit, and boots and shoes".<sup>91</sup> Joe Wah Gow, who was in business from 1913, sold foodstuffs, including fruit and vegetables, along with other essential items such as men's and women's clothing, underwear and linen.<sup>92</sup> From the 1920s, the Dion siblings – and brothers Henry and Stanley Young – dealt in iconic Australian brand-name products.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Chinese mixed business in Wollongong depended entirely on non-Chinese customers, which was uncommon in larger centres of Chinese population, and competed against non-Chinese proprietors.<sup>94</sup> All these enterprises also had shops in prime locations within the town centre, and each involved at least five partners. Later Chinese mixed businesses were more successful than earlier ones, operating for long periods.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, Joe Wah Gow had an estimated turnover of £25,000 in 1929, which made his one of the most prosperous Chinese enterprises in Australia.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>84</sup> "Wollongong Agricultural Show", *SMH*, 2 February 1912.

<sup>85</sup> "Brick Works Started", *IM*, 7 November 1924.

<sup>86</sup> "Gardens Abandoned", *IM*, 4 March 1932.

<sup>87</sup> NSW Alien Returns, 1939, NAA SP11/25.

<sup>88</sup> See Frost, "Migrants and Technological Transfer", 122.

<sup>89</sup> "Chinese Store", *IM*, 19 December 1876, 6 February 1877; "Court of Petty Sessions", *IM*, 31 July 1877.

<sup>90</sup> WC Assessment Rolls, 1880-1, 12; 1887-8, 8; 1889-90, 15; WC Municipal Lists, 1889-90, 1; "A Series of Fires", *ATCJ*, 31 August 1895.

<sup>91</sup> "Bo On", *IM*, 21 December 1901; "To the Council Clerk", WC Correspondence, WCLA, 25 May 1901.

<sup>92</sup> NSW Register of Firms 1903-22, NSWSR 12961/2/8526-53, 24406; "New Premises", *IM*, 30 March 1917; "Joe Wah Gow and Co.", *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus (SCT)*, 4 January 1918.

<sup>93</sup> "Stock in Trade Contained in the Premises Keira Street Wollongong", Annie Dion Deceased Estate File, NSWSR Probate Packet 4/364406; Invoices, Henry Percy and Stanley Herbert Young (trading as Jow Wah Gow and Co.) Bankruptcy File A, NAA SP219/1 1285.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Joe Wah Gow and Co., taken over by the Young brothers in 1929, went bankrupt in 1939: see Henry Percy and Stanley Herbert Young (trading as Jow Wah Gow and Co.) Bankruptcy File A.

<sup>96</sup> Gum Chong (application by Low Cor for admission of his cousin, Gum Chong, into the Commonwealth), NAA SP42/1 C1929/8020.

The 20th-century mixed businesses were operated largely by Australia-born Chinese. While four of the six partners involved in Joe Wah Gow's venture, including Gow himself, came from Longdu (隆都), Xiangshan, two – Charles and Peter Ung Quay (劉衍慶 and 劉衍苗) – were born and raised in Australia.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, all the children of Thomas Dion were born and grew up in Australia. Henry and Stanley Young, too, were Australia-born Chinese, sons of China-born Percy Young, who owned and operated the Kwong Sing and Co. chain of stores throughout northwest New South Wales.<sup>98</sup> Unlike the gardeners, Chinese mixed business proprietors competed directly with “whites” and succeeded, it appears, through a combination of hard work and shrewd business acumen.

Wollongong also had Chinese grocery shops: over 20 in fact. Yun Hop (元合) was the first “greengrocer”, as listed in the *Sands Business Directory*, opening in 1898.<sup>99</sup> Others were C. Ying, Hop Kee and Co., Yee War and Co., Wing Hing and Co., Tommy King, Tommy Tinn, George Young (養門), Muey Sing, Tommy Gunn, Arthur Kee Chong (其章) and John Loo.<sup>100</sup> These merchants specialised in selling fresh produce sourced from local Chinese gardens, and Yee War and Co. – comprising partners and former gardeners Charlie Ching Won, Jimmy Mann Hong (洪晚) and Choy War – also sold confectionary.<sup>101</sup> Grocery shops involved produce hawkers, too, including Ah Wing, Ah Chew, Mar Li and Gee Get, to name a few.<sup>102</sup> Generally, while they were twice as numerous, Chinese grocery operations involved fewer stakeholders, smaller premises, less money and shorter periods of trading than Chinese mixed businesses. Yun Hop, George Young, Arthur Kee Chong (the only Australia-born Chinese) and John Loo were the most successful grocers. Hop and Young operated in the town centre for 15 and 12 years respectively. Chong operated north of Wollongong, in Woonona, for 11 years and Loo traded for 25 years in Port Kembla, south of the town centre.<sup>103</sup> Most of the others, though, were in business for less than three years and none seems to have been especially prosperous. Even Yun Hop, the 15-year veteran, was gaoled in Singapore for stabbing someone on a ship bound for China: hardly the situation a well-to-do merchant would have encountered.<sup>104</sup> Tommy Tinn was also apparently involved in the opium trade.<sup>105</sup> In contrast, a number of Chinese grocers in Sydney, such as Wing On and Co., were highly successful, both in Australia and internationally.<sup>106</sup>

There were at least four Chinese drapery shops in Wollongong as well. It is almost certain that the earliest Chinese mixed businesses sold fabric, but the first specialist, Ah War, opened in 1904. He traded in a remote part of Wollongong, Otford, some 30km north of the town centre, where he must have relied on the patronage of a handful of customers. Ah War operated there for five years.<sup>107</sup> Another draper was Goon Jack, who arrived in Wollongong at the turn of the century and worked as a shop assistant at an unspecified location before launching a drapery venture in the town centre in 1913. Almost immediately after opening, however, the shop burnt down and he received a £400 insurance payout.<sup>108</sup> Further, Harry Young – no relation to Henry and Stanley Young – was a draper next to the

<sup>97</sup> Peter Ung Quay Immigration File, NAA SP244/2 N1950/2/10175.

<sup>98</sup> Wilton, *Golden Threads*, p. 23, 74.

<sup>99</sup> WC Assessment Rolls, 1898-9, 33; *Sands Business Directory*, 1902, 903; Yun Hop Immigration File, NAA SP42/1 1923/4176.

<sup>100</sup> *Sands Business Directory*, 1902, 903; 1903, 240A; 1921, 416A; NSW Register of Firms 1903-22, 12665, 13790; WC Assessment Rolls, 1905-6, 48; WC Municipal Rolls, WCLA SLR352-WOL, 1905-6, 14; “Debts Due to the Estate”, Charlie Ching Won and Jimmy Mann Hong Bankruptcy File; CIC Rate Books, 1931, 328.

<sup>101</sup> Charlie Ching Won's Expense Book, Charlie Ching Won and Jimmy Mann Hong Bankruptcy File.

<sup>102</sup> *Sands Business Directory*, 1911, 74A; Ah Chew Immigration File, NAA ST84/1 13/217; “Debts Due to the Estate”, Charlie Ching Won and Jimmy Mann Hong Bankruptcy File.

<sup>103</sup> Yun Hop Immigration File; *Sands Business Directory*, 1912, 247A – 1932, 387A; Florance, *Tracing Chinese Footsteps on the South Coast of NSW*, 40; Notice of Change of Abode for John Loo, 21 September 1945, John Loo Alien Registration File, NAA SP11/2 CHINESE/LOO QUINYUEN.

<sup>104</sup> “The Searchlight”, *IM*, 19 April 1907.

<sup>105</sup> “Week by Week”, *SCT*, 21 March 1908.

<sup>106</sup> See John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*.

<sup>107</sup> *Sands Business Directory*, 1904, 145A; 1905, 154A; 1906, 134C; 1907, 139A; 1908, 152A.

<sup>108</sup> “Fire”, *IM*, 1 April 1913; “Shops Destroyed”, *SMH*, 2 April 1913.

Dions' mixed business during the 1920s. According to advertisements, he sold uncut silk and fine silk clothing, some of which was of the Japanese Fuji variety, but the majority of which was Chinese silk, or crepe-de-Chine.<sup>109</sup> George Hong, another draper, operated in the town centre between 1912 and 1915, though nothing else is known about him.<sup>110</sup> Silk was a major item of Chinese trade over the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>111</sup>

In 1912, 862 Chinese cabinetmakers worked in New South Wales, and only one – Charlie Ah Woy – was in Wollongong.<sup>112</sup> Charlie Ah Woy first appeared as the proprietor of a workshop in the town centre in 1895. He began his Wollongong life as a market gardener in 1893 and had interests in both gardening and his workshop simultaneously for several years after that.<sup>113</sup> According to the 1901 census, he worked alone as a cabinetmaker.<sup>114</sup> His output was prolific and included glass-doored cabinets, kitchen tables, wardrobes, tiled washstands, stepladders and photo frames.<sup>115</sup> He was also a photographer.<sup>116</sup> Yet, Charlie Ah Woy's operation was not worth much money. He paid just £13 in rates in 1907, so his workshop was modest.<sup>117</sup> In 1914, when it was levelled by fire, his uninsured loss in tools and photographic equipment was just £100.<sup>118</sup> Charlie Ah Woy had £60 when he died in 1945: a small sum for a lifetime of toil in Wollongong.<sup>119</sup> The furniture trade in other locales of the Chinese southern diaspora is practically unexplored.<sup>120</sup>

Choy War was a refreshment rooms proprietor. Formerly a partner in grocery outfit Yee War and Co., he opened his beverage establishment in 1908 with two or three partners. He probably served tea in the manner of Quong Tart, whose tea rooms in Sydney were very popular at the time.<sup>121</sup> His premises were substantial. According to testimony by Thomas Marshall in 1908, the shop had two front rooms for customers, with a counter and space for tables and chairs, and a back room obscured behind a curtain where gambling took place.<sup>122</sup> Choy War also loaned money to people, which suggests a strong financial position.<sup>123</sup> He never advertised his establishment in newspapers, but some of his competitors – Mrs. Inch and Messrs. Cook and Cornforth – often advertised, indicating that Choy War kept a low profile.<sup>124</sup> He seems to have operated for just two years.<sup>125</sup>

Dressmaker Rose Loo had a shop next to her husband John's grocery shop through the 1920s and 1930s. She appears to have been the only Chinese dressmaker in Wollongong and the only Chinese woman to operate her own business. She advertised its opening in local newspapers in 1927, so she hardly kept a low profile.<sup>126</sup> A man allegedly stole a 35/- kimono from her shop in 1932, which is evidence that her stock was expensive.<sup>127</sup> Rose Loo was a dressmaker locally until she died in 1937.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>109</sup> "New Cash Drapery Shop", *IM*, 2 March 1923.

<sup>110</sup> *Sands Business Directory*, 1912, 246A; 1913, 220A; 1914, 210A.

<sup>111</sup> On the Chinese silk trade in Singapore, for instance, see Jason Lim, "Chinese Merchants in Singapore and the China Trade, 1819-1959", *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 5 (2011-2), 79-115.

<sup>112</sup> "Decline of Chinese Cabinetmakers" (澳洲華人木業工者已銳減), *TWT*, 11 May 1929.

<sup>113</sup> WC Assessment Rolls, 1893-4, 27; 1895-6, 44; "Donations", *IM*, 24 January 1911.

<sup>114</sup> Census of NSW, 1901, District 38, Sub-District U20, 8.

<sup>115</sup> "A., H. & I. Association Bazaar", *IM*, 2 June 1900; "Unreserved Clearance Sale", *IM*, 20 March 1914; "New Locally Manufactured Furniture", *IM*, 24 January 1919; "High-Class Furniture", *IM*, 7 February 1919.

<sup>116</sup> "The Searchlight", *IM*, 16 January 1914.

<sup>117</sup> WC Assessment Rolls, 1906-7, 51.

<sup>118</sup> "The Searchlight", *IM*, 16 January 1914; "Week by Week", *SCT*, 16 January 1914.

<sup>119</sup> "Stamp Office Affidavit", Charlie Ah Woy Deceased Estate File, NSWSA Probate Packet 4/30244.

<sup>120</sup> Yong Ching Fatt, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia, 1901-1921* (Adelaide: Raphael Arts, 1977), 41-5.

<sup>121</sup> Refer to Mrs. Quong Tart, *The Life of Quong Tart, or, How a Foreigner Succeeded in a British Community* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2004). <http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/id/fed0048>

<sup>122</sup> "Wollongong Police Court", *SCT*, 5 September 1908.

<sup>123</sup> "Quarter Sessions", *SCT*, 3 July 1909.

<sup>124</sup> "Mrs. H. A. Inch", *SCT*, 1 May 1909; "Ices! Ices! Ices!", *IM*, 5 July 1913.

<sup>125</sup> *Sands Business Directory*, 1908, 198A; 1909, 219A.

<sup>126</sup> "Dressmaking", *IM*, 25 February 1927.

<sup>127</sup> "Bail Forfeited", *IM*, 27 May 1932.

<sup>128</sup> Florance, *Tracing Chinese Footsteps on the South Coast of NSW*, 40.

## **Restaurants**

There were at least two Chinese restaurants in the Wollongong in the early 1950s. As reported in a local newspaper, the first Chinese restaurant in the area – the Canton Cafe – opened in the town centre in 1950. Run by the Australia-born Shing family, consisting of Mrs. Lindale Shing and her two children, Richard and Jill, it offered 300 different dishes: a mixture of Chinese and English cuisine. On the restaurant's opening day, it was brought to a standstill by an unexpected "avalanche of customers".<sup>129</sup> The other restaurant, the Mei Ch'un Cafe opened close by around the same time. William Mock, a cook, was injured when a stove exploded there in 1951.<sup>130</sup> The restaurant still seems to have been open in 1953, run by a Chinese man from New Guinea, Seeto Ung, but it is unclear if Ung ran it in 1951.<sup>131</sup> Exactly when these restaurants ceased trading is also unclear; nevertheless, it is clear that they were successful, buoyed by an interest in Chinese food – both locally and throughout Australia – in the 1950s, despite fears of "Red China".<sup>132</sup>

Chinese cooks worked in several Wollongong hotels in the early 20th century as well, but as employees instead of independent operators. Kee Hoy was noted by council assessors working in the Freemasons Hotel in 1895.<sup>133</sup> Census collectors similarly noted a Chinese cook, unnamed, working in the Royal Alfred Hotel in 1901.<sup>134</sup> There were at least six other such cooks working in hotels in the Wollongong town centre in the early 1900s.<sup>135</sup> In the 1920s, there was also a Chinese cook, Abil, in Bulli Hotel, to Wollongong's north.<sup>136</sup> Chinese cooks were common in hotels in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>137</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Chinese commerce in Wollongong from the 1850s to the 1950s was distinct in many respects. Dion's Bus Service, the only one its kind apparent in the history of the Chinese southern diaspora thus far, was the most successful Chinese business, tapping into local "white" working-class demand for cheap and efficient transport. Chinese dairy farms, the earliest Chinese enterprises in Wollongong, are similarly unprecedented. "Coolies" from Amoy gained skills in dairy work under contract, then they started their own farms, helping pioneer a new local industry. Chinese fishermen, tobacco planters, market gardeners, shopkeepers and restaurateurs were also seen locally. These were seen elsewhere, certainly, though rarely has close scrutiny of their operations been feasible. In Wollongong, detailed analysis of all these Chinese commercial ventures reveals a particularly close relationship between Chinese business people and non-Chinese – specifically "white" – customers. This close relationship, facilitated by the town's demographic and economic characteristics, and people's hard work, sustained numerous and varied interests, despite the small Chinese population and racism of "White Australia".

The Wollongong case highlights the utility of fine-grained local research in Chinese southern diasporic history. Not only can such research complement broader studies, providing detail which may be absent from colonial/national and transcolonial/transnational histories, but it can also challenge preconceptions, in this case that Chinese commercial diversity and prosperity was restricted to major population centres with much larger Chinese communities. Indeed, the unexpected findings in Wollongong suggest the possibility of more

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<sup>129</sup> "Chop Suey, Chicken Prawns and Long Soup", *SCT*, 13 April 1950; "Announcement", *Illawarra Daily Mercury (IDM)*, 6 September 1950.

<sup>130</sup> "Cafe Worker Burned in Stove Explosion", *IDM*, 12 May 1951.

<sup>131</sup> "Chinese Restaurant Owner Fined for Having Unclean Kitchne", *IDM*, 16 September 1953; "Chinese Fined £20 for Dirty Kitchen in Café", *SCT*, 17 September 1953.

<sup>132</sup> "Make it a Chinese Dinner", *SCT*, 6 December 1949; "Chinese Not in Pot", *SCT*, 21 June 1951; "Chinese Cookery in the Australian Home", *SCT*, 7, 12, 29 January 1912; "Have You Tried Growing Wom-Bok?", *SCT*, 10 May 1954.

<sup>133</sup> WC Assessment Rolls, 1894-5, p. 19.

<sup>134</sup> Census of NSW, 1901, District 38, Sub-District T21, 10.

<sup>135</sup> Census of NSW, 1901, District 38, Sub-Districts T21, 10-12.

<sup>136</sup> Jack Devitt, "Reminiscences of Jack Devitt", 119.

<sup>137</sup> Williams, "Destination Qiaoxiang", 162.

widespread and varied Chinese commercial operations than might be supposed and thus provide justification for similar research in other locales.

