

**Wading 10,000 li to seek their fortune**東華新報 - *Tung Wah News* selections 1898-1901

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In 1898, a notice appeared informing relatives of a man from Dou Tou, a village of Xiangshan County in the Pearl River Delta, who had killed himself, that they could claim money he left behind, £45 with his boss and over £10 at a letter shop. The following year, in the same county but in the village of Nanshan, the Chen and Zhang families began a marriage related dispute and after 20 days fighting soldiers had to be sent for. Rises in the price of both average and high grade rice were reported at Shekki, the capital of Xiangshan County in 1898 and the following year it was reported that tin prices in Tingha, NSW had improved. In 1900, a ship departing Sydney was reported to have 17 people 'returning home with glory' and to be carrying over £13,000 in its strong boxes.<sup>1</sup> These seemingly separate events and circumstances, occurring in the late Qing Dynasty and around the time of Australia's Federation, were in fact closely related. All were published by the Sydney based *Tung Wah News* and all were matters of concern and relevance to Chinese people living in Australia.

Such details are readily available to researchers thanks to the index to the *Tung Wah News* now available through the Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation website.<sup>2</sup> Here it is proposed to discuss the value of the *Tung Wah News* using articles selected using this index for the years 1898 to 1901.<sup>3</sup> The criteria employed was a search for articles related to the Pearl River Delta county of Xiangshan (later called Zhongshan) and one of its districts, Long Du.<sup>4</sup> The result was a fascinating range of material that provides insights not only into the activities, concerns and history of Chinese people in Australia but also into local conditions in China, as well as circumstances in the Chinese communities of Hawaii and the United States. In fact the relative lack of

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<sup>1</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 16/7/1898, p.4, notice to relatives; 16/9/1899, p.3, feud in Nanshan; 16/9/1899, p.2, tin prices; 26/10/1898, rice prices; 11/8/1900, p.3, ship details.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au/tungwah.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> The writer was assisted in reading and translating these selections by Chen Mei-Su to which he wishes to express his appreciation.

<sup>4</sup> A map of the Pearl River Delta and its counties can be found on the NSW Heritage Office website under Multicultural Heritage, Thematic Histories: <http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/>

similar materials in China, makes the *Tung Wah News* a valuable source not only of Australian Chinese history but also of Chinese local history.

The *Tung Wah News* provides that rare thing in Australian Chinese history, the voice of Chinese people, as well as that other rarity, the voice of ordinary people. Prices, jobs, what's happening in the villages and numerous references to people unknown to other sources, give the opportunity to investigate elements in the history of Chinese Australia about which little is known. The *Tung Wah News* provides information about the concerns of Chinese people living in Australia, including for their relatives and homes in the villages. In particular there is much evidence of ongoing relationships with the home villages that are often overlooked in research and discussion of people who, in the *Tung Wah News* sometimes refer to themselves as 'travelers' (旅, *lu*).<sup>5</sup>

The prime value of the *Tung Wah News* is that it is a source created by Chinese people themselves and as such it tells us about things of concern to Chinese people. Big things but just as importantly little things. Shipping timetables, the price of passage for those who so often traveled back to their homes in China and notices concerning the collection of letters, are all indications of the significance of links with the villages.<sup>6</sup> An example of this significance is the fact that the *Tung Wah News* often carried information on Guangdong grain prices. Such prices would have been a matter of some importance for those whose families either depended on the sale of rice for income, or who were close enough to the poverty line that a rising price of rice could mean going short of food.<sup>7</sup>

Earnings for those families in the villages often came by market or vegetable gardening in Sydney and elsewhere and so the *Tung Wah News* regularly carried local vegetable prices.<sup>8</sup> An appeal for the formation of a Chinese Vegetable Growers association made in 1899 claimed that there were 5,000 market gardeners in NSW and

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<sup>5</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 19/7/1899, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 24/8/1898, p.4 and 20/7/1898, p.4 for timetables; 20/10/1901 for prices, p.3 and 7/9/1898, p.4 for letter collection.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 24/8/1898, p.2; 14/1/1899, p.3; 22/2/1899, p.3 and 16/9/1899, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 31/8/1898, p.4; 13/7/1898, p.4 and 17/9/1898, p.4.

2,000 in Sydney.<sup>9</sup> This same item also gave many interesting details about the day to day concerns of these gardeners. Such a gardener was advised that he should get a certificate for his horse which will make it easier to find if it gets lost. He should also tie up his cart so the horse doesn't run away or he is liable to be criticised by the police and he should not ride an injured horse or he might be fined. Gardeners are also advised that any lease they sign should include the size of the land, who pays the rates, the amount of rent and should not make the tenant responsible for repairs. If this is the first time the land has been cultivated it may be possible to get a period rent free. A final piece of advice given to market gardeners is not to smoke when entering people's homes.<sup>10</sup>

Like most newspapers the *Tung Wah News* printed sensational or tragic stories and these provide glimpses of people usually missed by more formal records. A not uncommon example is an appeal for a missing son, named Ging from Lishantou village in Xinning County, placed after his mother had written to a cousin in Australia asking for news.<sup>11</sup> The *Tung Wah News* also informs about people after they left Australia, such as Hung Mei of Liang Du (another Xiangshan County district), who after working 20 years in Australia as a carpenter had been home only a year when he lost most of his savings to a monk swindler.<sup>12</sup>

More harrowing is an item describing the 'English' wife of a market gardener, married for 12 years who, after giving birth to her seventh daughter, kissed all her children goodbye before shooting herself.<sup>13</sup> Lin Xinyi from Antang village of Long Du, living in Brisbane and making paper bags for a store, also committed suicide after losing £10 from his home and Fang Yaping hanged himself after having been sick for two years according to another report.<sup>14</sup> Accounts of suicides often appear in the *Tung Wah News* and while bad news is always given more prominence, such stories are a reminder that not everyone was a successful merchant or even managed to return to their village.

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<sup>9</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 19/7/1899, p.2.

<sup>10</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 19/7/1899, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 7/11/1900, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 23/8/1899, p.3.

<sup>13</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 31/7/1901, p.3.

<sup>14</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 24/12/1898, p.2 and 14/1/1899, p.3.

Much Chinese Australian history naturally focuses on events within the political borders of the colonial states and the Commonwealth. However Chinese people in Australia around the time of Federation considered themselves to be earning income for families in the villages, and communication and links with those villages were of great importance, colouring much of their activities while in Australia. The *Tung Wah News* carried a great deal of information about local conditions in the villages and districts from which Chinese people came. This information is evidence not only of what was of interest to Chinese people in Australia but about their ongoing links and motivations for coming to Australia in the first place. In addition, due to the scarcity of comparable material in China, reports about conditions in China makes the *Tung Wah News* a valuable source for local history in China itself, at least of the Pearl River Delta and Guangdong Province.

The reporting of local affairs sometimes took the form of articles under which were grouped a variety of news items from a specific county.<sup>15</sup> Such a grouping might contain snippets of information about grain prices, weather, charity institutions, bandit attacks, official actions or feuds.<sup>16</sup> Other articles tell us something about the workings of the late Qing Dynasty, an empire gradually coming to grips with a modern capitalist world, a process of great interest to those living overseas. Thus when grain prices rose and shortages threatened the response was to prohibit the export of grain from a local district and to protect the production of fields near the city to ensure supply.<sup>17</sup> Those with poorer families probably appreciated this official intervention but when the same officials demanded payments merchants would complain. In 1899, an essay appeared in the *Tung Wah News* lamenting the hardship of doing business in China as a result of the impositions of officials. Merchants, according to the essay didn't dare to complain when goods were destroyed and schedules interfered with. If disputes were taken to court the risk was that the magistrate would 'pick the fat one to sink his teeth into'. 'Those separated from family by wading 10,000 li to seek their fortune encounter great bitterness and sorrow.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Guangdong Province (one of 18 in the Qing Empire) was divided into 90 *xian* (縣) or counties and about ten counties around the Pearl River Delta were the origins of most Chinese people in Australia.

<sup>16</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 'Xiangshan news', 12/7/1899, p.4.

<sup>17</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 24/8/1898, p.2.

<sup>18</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 6/9/1899, p.2.

Another article complained of too many tolls, 20 taels levied at each customs point, not always official ones, on goods transported by water.<sup>19</sup> Such transport by water was essential in the Pearl River Delta counties, particularly in Xiangshan before the building of good roads in the late 1920s and 1930s. Such transport, however, was vulnerable to more than the tolls of officials. One of the common features of life in the Pearl River Delta at this time, as it was in the republican period, were bandits and attacking boats was a favourite method of such bandits, even attacking boats tied up at the Shekki jetty itself.<sup>20</sup> Often bandits simply practiced a form of extortion, forcing passing boats to pay money, at one point taking so much from the boats transporting fish that the city fish shops were forced to close.<sup>21</sup>

The *Tung Wah News* has numerous reports of bandits operating in the Pearl River Delta but these were not always a case of helpless villagers waiting in fear to be attacked.<sup>22</sup> Guns were seemingly plentiful, as when bandits in 1898 killed the Liu's, husband and wife, despite their both being armed.<sup>23</sup> Guns were also used by villagers later that same year to drive off bandits after they made a second attack in two nights on Bailigang village in Xiangshan.<sup>24</sup> Villagers could call on soldiers to help and when these came, villagers would join with them to attack the bandits in their mountain locations.<sup>25</sup> Bandit life was a dangerous one, as when officials and villages pursued a group who had robbed a boat in the early months of the new Australian Commonwealth, they killed 21 and captured another 9 after a one day battle.<sup>26</sup>

Bandits were not the only source of unrest for the villages and the families of those working in Australia. China at this time had significant numbers of people not attached to the land, some of which were known as 'liu min' (流民) or 'wandering

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<sup>19</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 4/4/1900, p.2.

<sup>20</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 21/1/1899, p.2.

<sup>21</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 20/9/1899, p.3.

<sup>22</sup> See for example *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 6/7/1898, p.2; 24/8/1898, p.3; 21/1/1899, p.2; 20/9/1899, p.3; 16/6/1900, p.2 and 6/2/1901, p.3.

<sup>23</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 14/12/1898, p.2.

<sup>24</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 6/7/1898, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 24/8/1898, p.3.

<sup>26</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 27/2/1901, p.3.

people'.<sup>27</sup> These appear, as their name suggests, to have been people always on the move and willing to take what they could get. A former Hawaiian consul found his house under siege by such a group who continued to try and enter the house even after they had been given \$20 in silver.<sup>28</sup> Within the villages themselves disputes could turn violent, as in that between the Chen and Zhang families of Nanshan village referred to at the beginning of this article. Feuds could include people of whole counties such as in 1898 when severe fighting broke out between the Siyi and Sanyi peoples, involving 'swords and guns' and disrupting business.<sup>29</sup> This is a dispute that may have begun among their fellows in America, in any case they were closely enough involved that an official was sent to explain to those in the United States about the need to live peacefully.<sup>30</sup>

The concern with the villages of origin revealed in the pages of the *Tung Wah News* was not merely homesickness but was part of the lifestyle of most Chinese men in Australia at this time and of how they thought of themselves. The word 'sojourner' is often used to translate the Chinese word *huaqiao* (華僑) which was itself often used by late Qing officials and even more by the Kuomintang, to describe the 'overseas Chinese' (which is another way to translate the word *huaqiao*).<sup>31</sup> However in the *Tung Wah News* it is interesting to observe that people could describe themselves as 'travelers' (*lu*, 旅).<sup>32</sup> This is an aspect of Chinese overseas history worth further exploration, especially as the term 'sojourner' itself faces controversy in some areas.

The return of such travelers to their villages was a longed for event and when some did so the *Tung Wah News* announced the fact by referring to their 'returning home with glory' and 'returning home with honour'.<sup>33</sup> The numbers returning and the

<sup>27</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 16/11/1901, p.2. In the 1930s, 6% of the Chinese population were estimated to be 'vagabonds' or bandits, see Fukuda Shozo, *With Sweat and Abacus. Economic Roles of Southeast Asian Chinese on the Eve of WWII* (Singapore: Select Books, [1939] 1995), pp.6-7.

<sup>28</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 16/11/1901, p.2.

<sup>29</sup> The Siyi, 'Four Counties' and Sanyi, 'Three Counties' were groups of counties that often organised together when overseas.

<sup>30</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 16/7/1898, p.4.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the term *huaqiao* see Wang Gungwu, "South China perspective's on overseas Chinese" *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* No.13 1984, pp.69-84.

<sup>32</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 19/7/1899, p.2.

<sup>33</sup> A number of phrases are used with a similar meaning.

amounts in gold going with them on each ship were also listed.<sup>34</sup> Such ships leaving Sydney around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century carried 'gold boxes' with amounts ranging from £300 to £4,000 to nearly £7,000 per ship and on at least one occasion £13,000.<sup>35</sup> The money belonged to merchants or were remittances carried by them destined for the families in the villages of those working in Australia.

For those who could not 'return home with glory' that is, who were too old, poor or sick, various arrangements, well reported in the *Tung Wah News*, were made to assist them to do so. The provision of such assistance was common among Chinese people in Australia and when the Chinese Vegetable Growers Association was proposed, its rules provided for sick members to be assisted to return to their villages.<sup>36</sup> The most organised assistance, however, for those needing help returning to their villages by the time of Federation was through the Sydney Lin Yik Tong (a merchant organisation formed in 1896). The Lin Yik Tong organised discount tickets with shipping companies for people who required two guarantors of eligibility and were liable for a £20 fine if fraud was discovered, such discovery being encouraged by offering a £10 reward.<sup>37</sup> How common fraud in this matter was is difficult to say, but the demand for discount passages was high enough that Chinese merchants in 1901 wrote to the shipping companies to request that one passage in four be allowed for such tickets.<sup>38</sup>

Racism and discrimination against Chinese people would have done nothing to discourage a desire to return to the village and the *Tung Wah News* certainly provides much evidence of what people had to face in the new Commonwealth. There are many reports about changes to restrictive immigration laws, how new arrivals fared at the ports, who was let in, who was not and which ports were easier.<sup>39</sup> Chinese people could expected to be treated badly and the *Tung Wah News* reported such incidents to its readers as that of a farmer whipping a Chinese person until he fainted, the farmer

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<sup>34</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 7/9/1899, p.4; 18/10/1899, p.3 and 11/8/1900, p.3.

<sup>35</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 7/9/1898, p.4; 18/10/1899, p.3; 11/8/1900, p.3, 7/11/1900, p.3 and 3/3/1900, p.3.

<sup>36</sup> Though membership would not be returned on departure to China nor would assistance with legal fees be given. *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 19/7/1899, p.2.

<sup>37</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 12/9/1900, p.3.

<sup>38</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 31/7/1901, p.3.

<sup>39</sup> See for example, *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 18/4/1900, p.2; 31/8/1898, p.4 and 19/10/1901, p.2.

was fined £5.<sup>40</sup> However, demand for labour and willingness to work hard often meant that Chinese workers were indispensable, as on the Queensland cane fields when despite reluctance on the part of white employers, Chinese were employed during the busy harvest season.<sup>41</sup>

Naturally most of the information in the Sydney based *Tung Wah News* concerns Australia but people at this time knew many fellow villagers and county members living in places such as Hawaii and San Francisco. The *Tung Wah News* therefore occasionally carries articles related to these places, such as an account of the treatment the Chinese received at the time of the Honolulu plague scare.<sup>42</sup> There are also articles detailing the history of the Chinese in Hawaii, as well as describing the taxes and naturalisation laws relevant to Chinese there.<sup>43</sup> Concerning the United States there is, for example, a report of a dispute over license fees charged when the health authorities of San Diego attempted to levy a \$1.05 license fee per body exhumed. Local Chinese people refused to pay and instead stored the bones and hired a solicitor to fight what was seen as 'cruel grasping at the dead'.<sup>44</sup>

The foregoing has been based on a sampling of articles using the excellent index available on the CHAF website. The initial interest had been Xiangshan County and the district of Long Du, yet despite this narrow selection method covering only three years of publication a great deal of fascinating material was obtained. Material concerning the activities of Chinese people in Australia, local conditions in the Pearl River Delta, as well as references to the Chinese communities of Hawaii and the United States. Undoubtedly much of great interest and value is waiting to be discovered through research of a wider ranging type. Research that would be able to claim to have escaped the dependence upon non-Chinese observers around which much of Australian Chinese history is built and to allow the voice of Chinese people themselves, their concerns, interests and values to be heard.

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<sup>40</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 15/11/1899, p.3.

<sup>41</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 13/8/1898, p.3.

<sup>42</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 21/4/1900, p.2 and 25/4/1900, p.2.

<sup>43</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 7/8/1901, p.2 and 4/12/1901, p.2.

<sup>44</sup> *Tung Wah News*, 東華新報, 27/2/1901, p.3.