

## Tenacity in the Tropics: Chinese Overland Migration in Northeast Australia during the Nineteenth Century

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**Abstract:** Discussion of lengthy overland travels by Chinese immigrants within colonial Australia have traditionally focused on the walk from Robe in South Australia to the Victorian goldfields, about 500 kilometres, between 1857 and 1862 involving around 16,500 migrants. Over a longer period (c. 1880–1901), small groups and individuals walked and occasionally rode from the Top End of the Northern Territory into North Queensland, about 1,500 kilometres. Travellers on this route faced diverse challenges including lack of water, Aboriginal attacks, ill-defined routes, lack of supplies and services, and the risk of arrest as illegal migrants as they crossed into Queensland. The northern trek has received little attention, despite being longer, in use for a greater period, and more hazardous than the Robe walk. Unlike their southern counterparts, only a few in the north used guides as they travelled through remote and unforgiving terrain. It is a migration that exemplifies the tenacity of both the Chinese and of those who were charged with enforcing the legislation of the times. This paper describes the general route, provides selected case studies associated with different routes used by these intrepid travellers, and examines the possible motivations for undertaking such a risky journey.

**Keywords:** Chinese, illegal migration, Northern Territory, northeast Queensland, police, border, prison, employment, drought, poll tax, economics

### Introduction

Successive colonial governments implemented, repealed and revised crippling restrictions on the entry of Chinese into Australia and on movement between the colonies in the decades leading up to Australia's Federation. The harsh penalties and charges imposed deterred Chinese migration, although ways of evading the restrictive laws, including alternative migration routes, were quickly identified. The best known of these alternative routes are the Robe to Ballarat and Bendigo migrations between 1857 and 1862.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, Barry McGowan drew attention to the challenges for those who attempted cross-border travel between New South Wales and Victoria in the late nineteenth century, using case studies from the Riverina as examples.<sup>2</sup> Similar incidents are recorded of Chinese being arrested for crossing the land border between New South Wales and Queensland.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast to these population movements in the southeast of Australia, overland Chinese migration from the Northern Territory's Top End into Queensland is a virtual unknown.

Some years ago, the late Neil Leelong, a second-generation Chinese Australian, casually mentioned that his father, Lee Leong, had walked from Darwin to Cairns in the 1890s. It both fascinated and surprised me that anyone would consider a 2,000 kilometre walk when the north was only in its early stages of colonial development and that such remarkable feats were not

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<sup>1</sup> Fiona Ritchie, *Guichen Bay to Canton Lead: The Chinese Trek to Gold* (District Council of Robe, 2004) and Cash Brown, "The Treks from Robe", *Many Roads, Stories of the Chinese on the Goldfields of Victoria*, Culture Victoria, 2017, <http://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/immigrants-and-emigrants/many-roads-chinese-on-the-goldfields/walking-to-the-diggings/the-treks-from-robe>, accessed 6 October 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Barry McGowan, "Transnational Lives: Colonial Immigration Restrictions and the White Australia Policy in the Riverina District of New South Wales", *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 6 (2013): 45–63.

<sup>3</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 20 June 1898, p. 4.

entrenched in the historical record. Even now, movement through the region is challenging, although at least there are now rudimentary roads and even a few shops en route. Neil's story encouraged me to investigate this fascinating aspect of our past that had slipped quietly from wider knowledge. What I subsequently established was that Lee Leong was but one of many who tackled outback, tropical Australia with only a few meagre possessions and a dream.

No one can denigrate the hardships faced by those who walked over 500 kilometres from South Australia to the Victorian goldfields, often completed with the help of guides and taking a month or more of hard slogging through temperate woodlands and ranges. But decades later, Chinese migrants in North Australia followed routes across nearly half the continent, which wound across expansive tropical savanna woodland and vast tracts of open grasslands; they were also dogged by a lack of supply points and the tropical climate. From Pine Creek, 220 kilometres south of Darwin, to the "border" towns of Burketown, Camooweal and Urandangi in Queensland, two main routes were favoured.<sup>4</sup> The northerly route, the "Coast Road", skirted the Gulf of Carpentaria while a more southerly route initially used the Overland Telegraph and then crossed the grasslands of the Barkly Tablelands (Figure 1). Once within Queensland, the routes diversified and became less precisely defined, with several family histories recounting travellers who ended up settling in Far North Queensland and some even heading as far as Sydney.

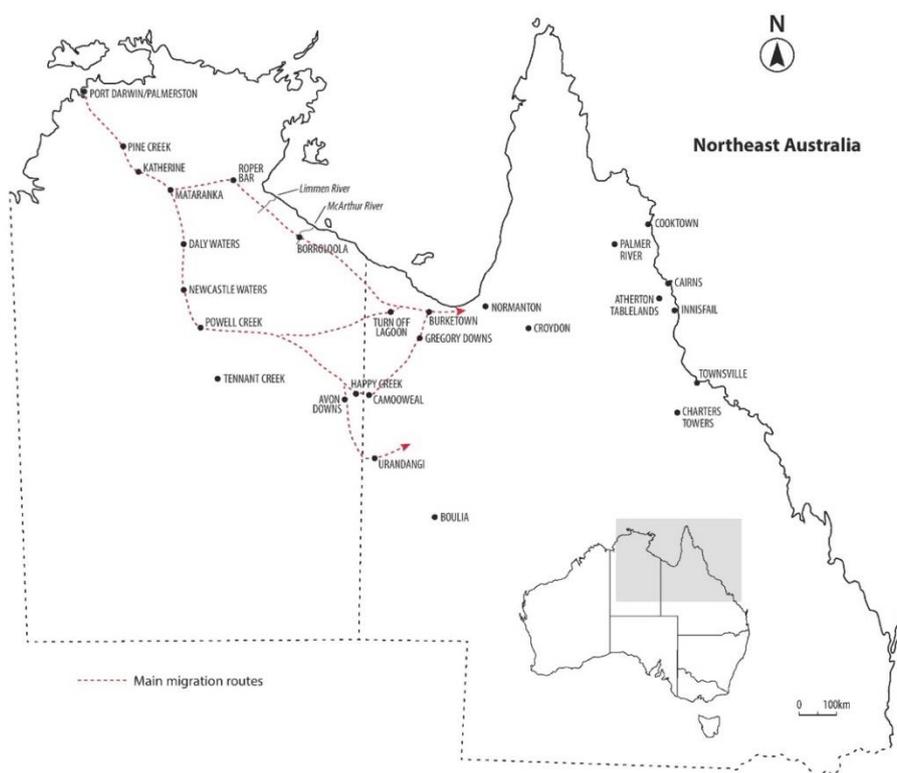


Figure 1. Map of northeast Australia. By the author and Nettie O'Connell

<sup>4</sup> The term "border town" has always been loosely applied. Camooweal has the best claim to this title at 10 kilometres east of the border, Burketown is over 150 kilometres east, while Turn Off Lagoon and Urandangi are about 30 kilometres east.

This paper is focused on providing an overview of the use of these routes by migrating Chinese in the period 1880 to 1901 and does so drawing on a wide range of case studies. Some are extensive, while the majority are limited due to a lack of source material. The paper incorporates a range of personal accounts gleaned from family histories or from archival sources. In the concluding sections discussion turns to the motivation that drove men (no women are recorded) to attempt this demanding overland track and what became of some of them and their descendants.

As studies of northeast Australia are relatively limited, it is appropriate to prelude discussion by summarising both the relevant legislation and providing geographical and historical contexts. In this paper I use the term “migration” and its derivatives to describe the often poorly planned but intentional movement of people between two broad regions primarily for economic gain. This is consistent with the more formal definition: ‘the process of a person or people travelling to a new place or country, usually in order to find work and to live there temporarily or permanently’.<sup>5</sup>

### Legislation

Legislation aimed at restricting Chinese immigration into the Australasian colonies dates from 1855, when Victoria passed *An Act to Make Provision for Certain Immigrants*. This Act was the prime motivation for Chinese to take passage to South Australia and then enter Victoria overland from Robe and other South Australian ports.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, the remaining Australasian colonies progressively effected similar laws. Greater uniformity occurred progressively after Queensland passed the controversial *Chinese Immigrants Regulation Act of 1877* (amended in 1884). This was the legislation that made it illegal for those who initially attempted to enter Queensland overland from the Northern Territory during the 1880s. Victoria, South Australia (excluding the Northern Territory), New South Wales and New Zealand passed similar legislation in 1881; Western Australia in 1886; and Tasmania in 1887.<sup>7</sup> The Northern Territory was not affected until an 1888 amendment of the South Australian legislation.<sup>8</sup> It was largely brought about by increased uniformity of anti-Chinese immigration legislation as a key result of the 1881 and 1888 inter-colonial governments meetings.<sup>9</sup> This was to be the basis of what was to become the “White Australia Policy” of Federation with similar, but not identical, legislation being introduced in all colonies, although Queensland’s additional restrictions were delayed assent by the Imperial Government until February 1890.<sup>10</sup> Section 9 of that Act stated:

Any Chinese who enters this Colony by land without first obtaining a permit in writing from some person appointed by the Governor in Council to grant the same, shall be

<sup>5</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/migration>, accessed 19 July 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Charles A. Price, *The Great White Walls are Built: Restrictive Immigration to Northern Australia and Australasia 1836–1888* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974); Pamie Fung, “The Significance of the First Anti-Chinese Legislation in Australia”, *Peril*, 12 June 2015, <https://peril.com.au/topics/politics/anti-chinese-legislation-in-australia>, accessed 19 August 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Lee, “Anti Chinese Legislation in Australasia”, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 3, no. 2 (Jan 1889): 218–224.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, “The Chinese Question”, in *1925 Year Book Australia* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra), <http://www.abs.gov.au>, accessed 19 August 2019. See also *Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1888* (SA).

<sup>9</sup> *Intercolonial Conference: Minutes of Proceedings of the Intercolonial Conference held at Sydney, January 1881* (Melbourne: Robt. S. Brain, Acting Government Printer, 1881), pp. 16–17. See also: Ian H. Welch, “Alien Son: The Life and Times of Cheok Hong Cheong, (Zhang Zhuoxiong) 1851–1928”, PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2003, pp. 267–296, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/49261/42/12chapter10.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> *Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1890* (Qld) and *Chinese Immigration Restriction Act Amendment Act 1890* (Qld).

liable to a penalty of fifty pounds, the amount whereof shall not be reduced by the justices, and in default of payment shall be liable to be imprisoned, with or without hard labour, for the period of six months, and shall further be liable, pursuant to any warrant or order of the justices, to be removed or deported to the colony from which he has come.<sup>11</sup>

### Environmental Issues

The region crossed by Chinese into northern Queensland lies entirely within tropical savanna and open grasslands. The more northerly areas around Pine Creek, east towards the Gulf of Carpentaria, feature “monsoon tallgrass” and “midgrass savanna”.<sup>12</sup> The open woodlands comprise mid-height eucalypt trees with understorey grass reaching upwards of 1.8 metres in the wet season, drying out in the dry season (winter) and becoming prone to wildfires induced by humans or lightning strikes. This grass cover proved invaluable to local Aboriginal warriors when attacking invaders/travellers.

Along the “Coast Road” (now known as the “Savannah Way”), the terrain skirts and frequently traverses craggy, eroded ranges clad in open woodland cut by seasonal streams with areas of scrubby shrubs among a predominantly midgrass understorey. Once again, it is terrain that affords good protection for attackers. For the knowing, it is also an area of wide-ranging natural food sources. To the unknowing, it provides little more than good firewood and relatively good water supplies, except late in the dry season. As one nears the Northern Territory/Queensland border, coastal floodplains and northward flowing, meandering rivers that flood extensively in good, but variable, wet seasons add seasonal challenges for the unwary.

Heading south from around Daly Waters towards Newcastle Waters and across to the Camooweal area on the Northern Territory/Queensland border, the tree cover thins markedly to the point where calf-high tussock grassland extends as far as the eye can see across the extensive, gently rolling Barkly Tablelands. It is broken only by occasional patches of shrubby vegetation and offers limited shade and little in the way of firewood. Watercourses are broad, seasonal and shallow. Lagoons dot the landscape but give little warning of their presence beyond increasing signs of wildlife.

The Pine Creek area, south to about Daly Waters and along the coastal strip of the Gulf of Carpentaria, lies within a savanna climatic zone. Across the Barkly Tablelands a hot semi-arid climate prevails.<sup>13</sup>

This technical classification to some extent belies the climatic variations across the region. The relatively broad definitions of wet and dry seasons are invaluable when defining periods of greatest challenge for pastoralists, miners and travellers. The wet season, November to March, and the dry season, April to October, are convenient, simplistic descriptors. Aboriginal names are more precise (Table 1).

<sup>11</sup> *Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1890* (Qld) s.9.

<sup>12</sup> J.J. Mott, J. Williams, M.H. Andrew and A.N. Gillison, “Australian Savanna Ecosystems”, in *Ecology and Management of World Savannas* (Canberra: Australian Academy of Science, 1985), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Köppen Aw and BSh on the Köppen-Geiger climate map of the world; Murray C. Peel, “Updated Köppen-Geiger climate map of the world,” Murray Peel’s Homepage, University of Melbourne, <https://people.eng.unimelb.edu.au/mpeel/koppen.html>, accessed 30 June 2019.

Table 1: Indigenous Climate Categories

Clan	Season name	Period	Weather
Jawoyn Katherine area south of Pine Creek	<i>Jiorrk</i>	January – February	Heavy rain
	<i>Bungarung</i>	March – April	Last rains
	<i>Jungalk</i>	April – May	“Early, hot. Early dry”
	<i>Malaparr</i>	June – August	Dry season cold weather
	<i>Worropmi</i>	September – October	Pre-monsoonal, increasing humidity
	<i>Walkaringding</i>	November – December	“Build up” with steamy weather and storm development
Yanuwa/Yanulla Gulf Country	<i>Wunthuru</i>	January – February	<i>Warkungarnarra</i> – wet season, cyclones
	<i>Lhabayi</i>	March – May	Heavy rains with cyclone risk
	<i>Rra-mardu</i>	June – July	Cool dry weather
	<i>Ngardaru</i>	August – September	Warming up with early rains
	<i>Na-yinarrambaba</i>	October – December	First of the wet season rains, cyclones

Source: “Indigenous Weather Knowledge”, Bureau of Meteorology, <http://www.bom.gov.au/iwk/index.shtml>, accessed 2 March 2019

In some years the rains come late and may come with a rare ferocity causing extensive flooding. In other years the rain may not arrive at all. Drought is commonplace, as it was too in the late nineteenth century; for example, 1892 saw major issues for stock movement and town water supplies. Police patrols were curtailed and travel all but ceased. One report noted, “Mailmen have to dig holes in the sand to procure a drink”.<sup>14</sup>

The optimal travel period across this terrain is between April and August. Only the foolhardy or the poorly informed – and there were plenty of the latter, as will be shown – might travel between November and March facing prospects of torrential rain and swollen watercourses. July and August can be exceptionally cold overnight with temperatures often dipping below freezing but climbing to the twenties during the day. On the open grasslands of the Barkly Tablelands the winds blow freely, often described as the “laziest of winds” as they “blow through you, not around”. Ill-equipped walkers regularly faced such conditions. By the end of August the day temperatures increase markedly but available water sources are scarcer.

Whether heading through the savanna woodland of the northern route or across the grasslands of the Barkly Tablelands, early travellers were fortunate that tracks made by cattle drovers were relatively easy to follow. To leave them was to court disaster as Jack Tye experienced when he “separated from the party on the road for a necessary purpose ... and although search was made for him during three days was never again seen”.<sup>15</sup> He may have been attacked by Aborigines or simply become disorientated. Even those who left the track while crossing the Barkly Tablelands

<sup>14</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 4 August 1892, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Northern Territory Archives Service [hereafter NTAS]: File 2086/P2, NT Police Journal 22/3/99 TO 1/7/05 Day Journals.

could find themselves in trouble, as Lum Sou San and his group discovered after walking in a circle all night.<sup>16</sup>

## Colonial History

### *Northern Territory*

Port Darwin and the adjacent town of Palmerston were the main settled areas in the Top End by the late nineteenth century. The remote port settlement had been established in 1869 after several earlier failures: Port Essington, Fort Dundas, Melville Island (1824) and Escape Cliffs (1864).

In February 1869, George Goyder selected what was to become Darwin, which came to prominence once South Australia won an audacious proposal to link southeast Australia with the world via the Overland Telegraph. Even with the concurrent discovery of gold around Pine Creek in the early 1870s, Darwin's actual development was slow. Harriet Douglas, eldest daughter of the first Government Resident, Bloomfield Douglas, described Palmerston in cautious terms that:

did not tend to raise our spirits to any very exalted elevation .... Looking straight through the gully, away over the roofs of the buildings, one beheld a long stretch of water, bounded like other parts of the harbour by a mass of densely wooded and uninhabited country. We realised, too, that no hope of regular communication with the outside world could be looked for, as the settlement had not become sufficiently important to induce a line of steamers to call there.<sup>17</sup>

For the lucky few, mining offered excellent short-term prospects, but this was the tropics where manual labouring by Europeans was something of an anomaly. It was a widely held belief at that time that Europeans were poorly suited to manual work in the tropics. In other British colonies the indigenous populations had provided that resource, although not always willingly.

Chinese labour was available in the Northern Territory and, for the most part, Europeans considered Chinese to be industrious, willing workers and accepting of low wages. As Timothy Jones notes, the Chinese "had continually shown themselves able to endure long hours of hard labour under the most adverse conditions which the average European could not or would not accept".<sup>18</sup>

For several years there were protracted negotiations underway to bring "coolie" (mainly Chinese) labour to the Northern Territory. Several key players in developing the north had long been advocating the importation of Chinese labour. Douglas was at the forefront. Eventually, in 1874, he was despatched to Singapore to recruit men to assist in the labour-strapped mining industry. Any surplus men were to undertake a range of public works. One hundred and eighty-six Chinese (there was one death en route) arrived in Darwin on 5 August 1874.<sup>19</sup> The government employed twenty-four and the rest were placed with mines in the Pine Creek area. It was an arrangement that was to have variable consequences. Many of the recruits were inexperienced but industrious. Some of the employers were less than scrupulous. Despite the pitfalls, many of the recruits decided to stay in the Territory when their contracts expired in 1876. They also used the opportunity to seek higher wages. The lure of gold combined with completion of the Overland

<sup>16</sup> Emily Field, "The Lum Sou San Saga", no date (post-1991), p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Dominic D. Daly [Harriet Douglas], *Digging, Squatting and Pioneering Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia 1887* (Victoria Park, W.A.: Hesperian Press, 1984), pp. 44–46.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory* (Darwin, NT: University Press, 1997, revised edition), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, *Chinese in the Northern Territory*, p. 5.

Telegraph fired enthusiasm for construction of a rail link south. Enthusiasts waxed lyrical about linking Port Darwin to Adelaide. They were decades ahead of themselves, for that link was not completed until 2004, although a start was made in 1884 when the Port Darwin to Pine Creek line commenced.

By the mid-1880s Pine Creek was a sprawling mining area. Further gold deposits had boosted Chinese immigration to the region. Word quickly spread that a few rich strikes had been made, including one reported by Government Resident Edward W. Price, of a Chinese miner hauling a nugget weighing “nearly twenty pounds” from a Margaret River lease.<sup>20</sup> This helped fuel concerns that the dramatic influx of labour from China would cause major socio-economic problems.

The railway line was constructed by C. & E. Millar, a Melbourne-based company that relied heavily on Chinese construction gangs, and was completed in 1888, with an official opening the following September. As was the case with many nineteenth-century railway projects, construction came a few years late, for the gold resources were of decreasing importance. Nonetheless its construction was a stimulus for Chinese immigration. “The railway was built entirely by Asian labour, with European overseers”.<sup>21</sup> Nearly 3,000 men were employed on the construction and is reflected in the Chinese population increase “from 3,237 in 1886 to 5,837 in 1887 and 6,122” a year later.<sup>22</sup>

Diminishing gold resources and the lack of any new employment initiatives contributed to a dramatic decline in economic expansion with little else to sustain such a large, and significantly seasonal, workforce. The 1890s were dominated by economic downturns that echoed around the world. In the Northern Territory there was a thirty percent drop in the number of pastoral holdings in the decade 1889 to 1898.<sup>23</sup> This affected the numbers of Chinese heading to North Australia and placed pressure on those already resident in the Top End to meet their accumulating debts. There were, of course, the options of returning to China or moving to another colony. Queensland was the closest, but it was also feeling the effects of the recession and zealously pursued policies of racial intolerance.

Getting to Queensland was the biggest challenge. A regular steamer service operated to Australian east coast ports and onwards to Adelaide, but a fare to Townsville, the nearest major port, cost £5. Together with the £10 poll tax, these were substantial hurdles for near destitute Territory Chinese.<sup>24</sup> The other option was to travel overland to Camooweal or Burketown. The “coastal” route was well established by the late 1880s. It followed the Overland Telegraph south to near Mataranka, from where it struck east to Roper Bar and then southeast around the Gulf of Carpentaria. Other routes headed further south along the telegraph line to Powell Creek before turning east across the Barkly Tablelands to Camooweal (Figure 1).

The whole issue of undertaking such an arduous trek begs the question: What was north Queensland offering that made the move worth considering?

<sup>20</sup> State Records of South Australia [hereafter SRSA]: GRS 8/5, 1 July 1880, NT Telegrams Received 1876–1880.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *Chinese in the Northern Territory*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, *Chinese in the Northern Territory*, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982), p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> Frequent reference was made to destitution of Chinese residents, over a lengthy period, by successive Government Residents. For example: SRSA: GRS8/4, “Northern Territory Telegrams Received by the Controlling Office Sept 1886–Jan 1889”, Telegrams 150a, 151a, 153a.

*North Queensland*

Gold had been the initial attractant in the far north of the colony of Queensland. Chinese miners had flocked to the Palmer, inland from Cooktown, from 1873 and most came direct from Hong Kong and Guangdong. By 1877, an estimated 18,000 Chinese and around 3,000 Europeans worked the Palmer gold.<sup>25</sup> Irrespective of race, everyone on the Palmer faced similar risks and opportunities. Dysentery and fever were frequent killers; and they killed swiftly and indiscriminately.

In 1876, gold was found on the Hodgkinson River, 120 kilometres southeast of the Palmer. A closer port access was needed, and when tin was discovered near Herberton, in 1880, the race was on. Cairns finally assumed that role and cemented it by the early 1890s when a railway linked Cairns to the fertile Atherton Tablelands. Timber, maize, tin, copper and gold were soon heading down the range railway. As the Tablelands were cleared of their vast rainforests, farmers took over. Many Chinese were afforded opportunities to develop their skills as timber cutters and farmers. Along the coastal plains rice and sugar were the crops of choice and these were well suited to Chinese settlers.

Further south, the thriving port of Townsville, founded by Robert Black in 1865 and heavily financed by Robert Towns, was servicing pastoral lands to the west and was soon to add mining services to its economic base when gold was discovered around Charters Towers in 1872 and copper around Cloncurry in the 1880s.<sup>26</sup>

Australia's northeast was forging an enviable reputation, although at times there was an extraordinary time lag in receiving knowledge of its changing circumstances reaching the Northern Territory. For example, several family histories describe forebears who headed east ostensibly heading to the Palmer River but fifteen to twenty years after the gold mining had slowed significantly. In most cases they turned to commerce or market gardening.

**Numbers**

One of the first questions to be asked is, "How many Chinese headed overland into colonial Queensland?" Comprehensive statistics are unavailable. Emotion-charged press reports, incomplete government records and the challenges of remoteness faced by Queensland's minimal "Border Force" makes it impossible to give an accurate figure. The *Brisbane Courier*, 30 July 1896, does, however, quote the following Colonial Office figures:

1890: 1  
 1891: 11  
 1892: 46  
 1893: 3  
 1894: 26  
 1895: 20  
 1896: 38 (to June).<sup>27</sup>

There are no specific, extant statistics for the 1880s, nor are there any for the 1897–1900 period. These modest figures are in stark contrast to general news reports, which consistently over-

<sup>25</sup> Noreen Kirkman, "The Palmer River Goldfield 1873–1883," BA Hons thesis, James Cook University, 1984, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Cloncurry was the main town in the northeast mineral province until discovery and development of the Mt Isa lead and copper deposits in 1920s.

<sup>27</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 30 July 1896.

emphasised the situation. The extant official records, scattered across three state and territory archives, are factual but piecemeal resources.

By way of example, in 1887, 500 men were reportedly heading to the border. In early October, Inspector Fitzgerald, temporarily in charge of Georgetown police district, telegraphed the Queensland Commissioner of Police:

B Wareham, Aplin Brown Co. Manager, Pt Darwin, informs me four Chinese with stolen horses passed Roper fortnight ago for Croydon. Police in pursuit. 500 Chinese trying to get somebody to pilot them across border. Only travel coast route. No water. My informants thoroughly reliable I have wired (Police Inspector) Lamond to be vigilant, also Burketown police.<sup>28</sup>

News of this possible influx quickly spread to the corridors of power. On 18 October, Edward Palmer raised the matter in the Queensland Parliament noting that Croydon miners were convinced at least 500 Chinese were heading in their direction spurred on by stories of rich finds on the new goldfield. Questions were asked about the steps being taken to prevent the “Chinese coming overland via the Nicholson River across the north-west border of Queensland” from entering the colony.<sup>29</sup>

Fellow parliamentarian Charles Lumley Hill pursued the discussion suggesting the Coast Road was relatively easy going, particularly for Chinese!

The route from Port Darwin to Burketown is by no means a difficult road for Chinamen to travel. They ... can travel along in a way that would astonish white people. The Chinese are not affected by the heat or the malarious nature of the country in the same way that white people are, and they can carry large supplies of food with them.<sup>30</sup>

Palmer suggested they could easily replenish supplies at Borroloola “where there is a pretty large depot”. This unrealistic statement was clearly aimed at alarming Queenslanders. The town may have been able to provision a few itinerant Chinese, but whether many of them could afford those supplies, let alone carry them, is conjectural. The idea of large numbers of travellers being able to re-stock at the Borroloola store and to locate sufficient water each day towards the end of the dry season runs completely contrary to the contemporaneous views of the police and residents.

In October the *Brisbane Courier* took Palmer to task noting:

Such a large band as 500 could not pass unnoticed even in these Northern wilds. Their progress must have been slow; they must, if they existed, have been seen by the border patrol, and information of the fact would necessarily have been received by the Government or the Press before it could have reached the chairman of the Croydon Progress Association. Previous dolorous complaints of a Chinese incursion

<sup>28</sup> Queensland State Archives [hereafter QSA]: ID 7162, 9 Oct 1887, “Correspondence, Reports etc re Restriction of Chinese”.

<sup>29</sup> Queensland Parliamentary Proceedings, 18 October 1887, p. 1088.

<sup>30</sup> Queensland Parliamentary Proceedings, 18 October 1887, p. 1089.

from the Northern Territory resulted in the discovery of a single peripatetic Mongolian cook.<sup>31</sup>

The Premier had commented a few days earlier that the 500 illegal immigrants were actually the “peregrinations of a single Chinese cook travelling in search of work between Burketown and Camooweal on a road which continually crossed and recrossed the border”.<sup>32</sup> It is incredulous that the wanderings of one cook could have caused so much consternation. The nameless cook certainly gained a deal of publicity, for on 29 October 1887 the *Queenslander*, the *Northern Australian* and the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* all carried the story of how 500 illegal immigrants became one, legal, Chinese job seeker. The irony of that story is that the cook concerned actually had the necessary documentation to lawfully enter Queensland. Furthermore, Fitzgerald’s telegram had merely stated that 500 men were trying to get “somebody to pilot them across the border”, not that they were actually on the way!

In another incident it was reported that 14,000 Chinese “in a state of destitution” intended to “flock into Queensland”.<sup>33</sup> In the light of such stories, estimating actual numbers with any statistical reliability is clearly a daunting task. The selected case studies described below will further support that assessment.

One of the other problems with building any statistical validity into the story is that names were rarely given. Time and again there are reports of a number of men heading to Queensland, being charged or being sent back to the Northern Territory but, without mentioning their names, the reports could repeatedly refer to the same group. Noteworthy exceptions are the trio arrested near Gregory Downs in 1891 and twenty-seven men who were arrested near Camooweal in 1898. The latter are fortuitously known simply because copies of the court records are extant in the collection of the Northern Territory Archives Service.

The long-standing issue of the Anglicisation of names, where they are recorded, also puts further doubt into the equation. For example, Ah Egg, an uncommon name, was arrested near Camooweal on 16 July 1898, jailed and then repatriated to Darwin in January 1899 along with twenty-six countrymen.<sup>34</sup> A person with the same name was arrested early in August 1899 and sentenced to mandatory imprisonment.<sup>35</sup> Did Ah Egg make two efforts to get to Queensland or were there two Ah Eggs?

### *Heading East*

The first intimation that Chinese were overlanding into Queensland along the Coast Road, and had possibly done so previously, comes from a telegram dated 3 November 1881, from South Australia’s Premier to the Colonial Secretary for Queensland:

Station Master at Katherine reports with exception of ... Chinese said to be going to the Macarthur none have passed here nor have I heard of any bound for Queensland.

<sup>31</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 19 October 1887, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> *Queenslander*, 22 October 1887.

<sup>33</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 13 June 1892, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Queensland Police Gazette*, Vol. 35, No. 42.

<sup>35</sup> *Queensland Police Gazette*, Vol. 36, No. 51.

All Chinese travelling to Queensland from Pt Darwin must pass the Katherine and the statements made in Queensland of Chinese immigration are erroneous.<sup>36</sup>

Through 1882 and 1883, overland Chinese were able to keep out of the watchful eye of the media but, on 18 April 1884, an advertisement in the *North Australian* announced:

Chinese going overland to Queensland can procure an Englishman as “Mandor” perfectly conversant with the route. Apply to H. J. Masson, Twelve Mile.<sup>37</sup>

Henry Masson was the Publican at the Pioneer Hotel, Twelve Mile at the time.<sup>38</sup> His success as a guide is undocumented, although he was working as a drover by 1887.<sup>39</sup> He apparently saw himself as emulating the efforts of Robe locals who, in the 1850s, had guided teams of Chinese in their perambulations from Robe to Ballarat and Bendigo – or was it opportunistic advertising on his part? The advertisement infers there was already a well-established movement into Queensland although the media and official records are silent on the matter. In the modern context Masson might well be facing court as a people smuggler. The difference is that acting as a guide, or ‘mandor’, was not illegal, provided those he ferried across the border had permits in place consistent with the legislation. Masson was doing little more than acting as a mobile immigration agent. Nonetheless, with or without permits in place, he would have been unpopular among many Queenslanders.

In 1884, the *Brisbane Courier* made veiled suggestions that the “back door” was used to bring Chinese into the Northern Territory from where they could then head to Queensland and on to the southern colonies.<sup>40</sup> The media, at least, were keeping an eye open for illegal immigrants and, the terminology suggests, were well aware of activities by Masson and, possibly, others. For most Territory Chinese during the early 1880s, however, migrating over the border was not high on the agenda, for the Northern Territory continued to offer diverse business opportunities.

By the mid-1880s, the improved network of dray routes and evolving port settlements along the coast, together with the expanding pastoral industry, were having positive benefits for local business but placed demands on both police and customs services. Border incursions escaped media attention again until June 1886 when three men were arrested and charged in Burketown. The only surviving documentary evidence was in a telegram in October when Inspector Fitzgerald advised that no other incursions had been reported.<sup>41</sup>

In Darwin, a letter to the editor claimed “certain labour agents at Port Darwin were preparing to send across the border, into Northern Queensland, Chinese to take the place of other labourers on the sugar plantations”.<sup>42</sup> Government Resident Parsons was either unaware of the claim or did not consider it necessary to raise the issue with Adelaide.

With the establishment of additional “border” police stations, like Turn Off Lagoon, Queensland, mounted constables were able to more extensively patrol the main routes into Queensland,

<sup>36</sup> QSA: Item ID 7162, November 1881, “Correspondence, Reports etc re Restriction of Chinese”.

<sup>37</sup> *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 18 April 1884, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 5 April 1884, p. 1

<sup>39</sup> *North Australian*, 21 January 1887, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 30 July 1884.

<sup>41</sup> QSA: BF 8400, ID 7162, “Correspondence, Reports etc re Restriction of Chinese”.

<sup>42</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 June 1886, p. 6.

although the distances involved were daunting for little more than a handful of officers to cover. Those patrols were to be:

performed silently, and without any sign of preparation which can attract attention, and put ill-disposed persons on their guard .... They will not confine their attention to the mainlines of road only, but will occasionally proceed through the bush, calling at the houses of settlers to find out what is going on.<sup>43</sup>

The dry season of 1887 heralded a new wave of illegal immigration although a memo, in late May, from Camooweal storekeeper, J.J. Cronin, to the Sub-Collector of Customs in Brisbane suggests the wet season had done little to inhibit any Overlanders:

I beg to inform you that there are a great number of Chinese crossing over into this Colony from South Australia. They pass close to Camooweal. Since December 1886 to the end of April I know of 27 Chinese coming into Queensland this way. On April 22nd 3 Chinese with 11 pack horses passed Austral Downs coming from Port Darwin.

I think you should take steps to stop this state of things as the revenue must lose largely as well as honest traders have unfair competition. Please forward my letter to the Government Authorities, Brisbane.<sup>44</sup>

Cronin's final paragraph reflects some of the convoluted thinking often expressed in correspondence and the irrational fear that the Chinese would compete with existing businesses and somehow lose the colony money. The inference that there had been some border crossings during the height of the wet season is surprising.

The presence of three men and their packhorses at Austral Downs, 70 kilometres south west of Camooweal, may surprise those familiar with the present road network, but in the late nineteenth century the track into Queensland headed southeast from Avon Downs to Austral Downs and then swung northeast to Camooweal. The direct route west from Camooweal to Avon Downs was a later innovation, which gained momentum once Happy Creek was established, albeit briefly, as a Northern Territory Customs House later in the 1880s. This goes some way towards explaining why there were sometimes stories of Chinese crossing as far south as Urandangi and Boulia.

Some of Cronin's claims did materialise. On 7 June 1887, Burketown police advised that they anticipated five men were likely to cross near Camooweal and sought advice on the action to be taken. As no one expected the men to be able to pay the poll tax, the police were instructed to prosecute. On 15 June, the Sub-Collector of Customs pointed out three men had been prosecuted and would need to serve their jail terms at Cooktown, the nearest designated prison, at least 900 kilometres to the northeast by "road". The other option involved several days march to Burketown and then taking passage on a coastal trader around the Gulf to Cooktown, via Thursday Island. The ambiguous response was simply to "let the law take its course".<sup>45</sup>

Prison facilities on the border were primitive in extreme (Figure 2). Camooweal prisoners shared a six square metre cell: a cosy and, arguably, fortuitous arrangement in winter, given the shortage of blankets in near freezing weather.

<sup>43</sup> Queensland Police, *Queensland Police Manual* (Brisbane: Queensland Police, 1869), p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> QSA: Item ID 7162, 23 May 1887, "Correspondence, Reports etc re Restriction of Chinese".

<sup>45</sup> QSA: Item ID 7162, 15 June 1887, "Correspondence, Reports etc re Restriction of Chinese".

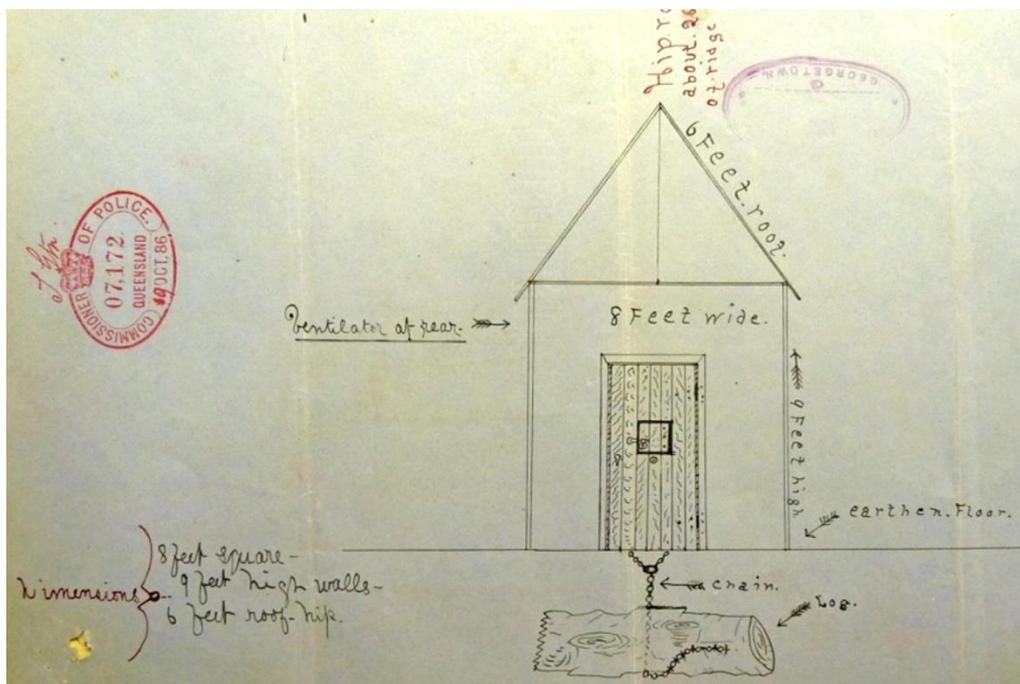


Figure 2. Camooweal jail sketch c. 1898  
Queensland State Archives: Item ID 289952

The “Camooweal correspondent” of the *Queenslander* wrote in August 1887:

About a fortnight ago I had cause to visit the police barracks very early in the morning when I found the constables in bed, and apparently perishing with cold. A new constable who arrived with the senior a fortnight ago had one pair of blankets and two flour bags cut open and sewn together, substituting another blanket or covering. When the police arrest any offenders they have to go round to the towns-people borrowing blankets for their use; and then the poor unfortunate prisoner has to sleep out in the open air, which is anything but pleasant at this time of the year; and perhaps supplied with half a blanket to cover himself.<sup>46</sup>

Senior Constable Gibson was clearly concerned by further reports of illegal immigration and on 31 July tapped out a telegram to the Colonial Secretary claiming:

I beg to report that it is almost impossible for the Police to arrest any of the Chinese who are almost daily coming over the border from the NT without paying the Poll Tax.

There are many roads in this locality by which the Chinese come into Queensland. A main road runs almost parallel with the Border and frequently crossing it from one colony to the other. Along this road should be an officer in connection with the Revenue to prevent the Chinese from entering the colony as they are doing so at present.<sup>47</sup>

A few months later Inspector Fitzgerald telegraphed the Queensland Commissioner of Police about the potential arrival of 500 migrants noted earlier.

<sup>46</sup> *Queenslander*, 27 August 1887, p. 326.

<sup>47</sup> QSA: Item ID 7162, 31 July 1887, “Correspondence, Reports etc re Restriction of Chinese”.

By the end of 1887, Parsons was advocating far tighter controls on Chinese immigration noting that the “Chinese question has reached a very acute stage in the Northern Territory” and that because the Territory alone in Australia “has no poll tax, [this] causes the immigration of a low class of coolies”. He even suggested that this loophole was “probably [encouraging] a vague idea ... that once planted in Australia, facilities would be found or created for passing territorial boundaries, and so escape paying the poll-tax”. In his annual report for 1887, Parsons claimed Chinese were most likely to bring diseases such as smallpox, leprosy and cholera with them, and “will always be a nomadic and temporary element of the population”. He concluded that:

a limited number of Chinese are useful in the Northern Territory;  
they are usually law-abiding ...;  
they make excellent gardeners ...;  
there is a merchant and storekeeping class of undoubted probity;  
the better class of coolies make good cooks, house servants and dobies  
(washermen), and the lower class are handy drudges;  
they are self reliant ...;  
... accept from 3s to 3s 6d per day ...; and,  
the artizans [sic] are fairly skilful and good copyists.<sup>48</sup>

He suggested that a continent-wide poll-tax and an annual residence tax should be instigated with numbers strictly controlled, medical tests should be undertaken for all intending migrant Chinese, women should be permitted to migrate and a suite of legislation should be imposed to control gambling, cleanliness and child protection.<sup>49</sup> To some extent Parsons was heralding a range of initiatives for which 1888 would be remembered.

The Queensland Premier telegraphed his South Australian counterpart early in April 1888:

stating that great alarm exists in that colony re the influx of Chinese into the Territory, and urges the importance of immediate restriction under present laws until the passing of measures of a more stringent character. He advises the immediate calling together of the South Australian Parliament for the purpose of dealing with the matter, pointing out that by such a course of action they will earn the gratitude of all Australia.<sup>50</sup>

A week later the *North Australian* noted the “Brisbane Central Board of Health had passed a resolution requesting the Government to have the South Australian border of Queensland patrolled with the view of preventing Chinese coming into the Colony”.<sup>51</sup> Members of the board were clearly unfamiliar with the physical and logistical challenges that faced any officers appointed to perform that daunting task.

Territory Chinese continued migrating, regardless of several isolated attacks on individual travellers, and by late May 1888 reports of Chinese moving towards the Gulf were increasing. Sixteen had passed Abrahams Billabong (about ten kilometres north-northeast of Mataranka) within the first few weeks of May.<sup>52</sup> A day later, the storekeeper at Roper, M. Kirwan, advised the

<sup>48</sup> SRSA: J. Parsons, “Government Resident’s Report on Northern Territory for the Year 1887” (Palmerston: Office of the Government Resident, 1888), pp. 13–14.

<sup>49</sup> SRSA: Parsons, “Government Resident’s Report on Northern Territory for the Year 1887”, pp. 13–14.

<sup>50</sup> *North Australian*, 7 April 1888, p.4.

<sup>51</sup> *North Australian*, 14 April 1888, p.3.

<sup>52</sup> SRSA: GRS8/4, Telegram 144a.

Government Resident that “Nine Chinamen gone to Macarthur or Limmen River. Another seven believe going same place”. Storekeepers and other travellers were relied upon for intelligence gathering in the absence of sufficient police. Given past events, the reported destination of MacArthur or Limmen River was merely a convenient way of disguising their ultimate destination further east. Although stations often employed Chinese as cooks and gardeners, the numbers involved make it hard to reconcile they were seeking work in the Territory. Queensland was quite clearly their ultimate destination but Territory Police could not arrest someone simply in the belief that they might break the law of a neighbouring colony.

On 28 May, Normanton-based Inspector Douglas reported Burketown police had been alerted that around sixty-two Chinese were about to cross the border.<sup>53</sup> Katherine-based Mounted Constable Stott advised his inspector that late in May 1888 six Chinese had arrived at Eley Station reporting one of their mates had been speared in an attack at Harts Ranges and taken to Roper store in a critical condition.<sup>54</sup> They had abandoned their attempts to head to Queensland and were returning to the Top End after being attacked by *Mangarayi* warriors intent on defending their traditional lands.

Having deposited their dying colleague at Roper and then witnessed five horses killed in an attack on the Roper store it was a tough call for the men to decide which way to head. There were enough stories of attacks and counter attacks across the western Gulf to have any traveller on edge, and more so if they had already had that experience. Heading back meant re-crossing the country that had already proved lethal but at least it was shorter. The return, no doubt undertaken in record time, was both rapid and, fortunately, without incident. They reached Katherine around 3 June but, disturbingly, reported not having passed the group of seven, on their return. Constable Stott assumed they had all been killed in a separate attack.<sup>55</sup>

In September, Ah Kit, a Burketown resident, advised the local Police Sergeant, Stephen Irwin, that 100 Chinese were heading east from McArthur River and expected to cross the border at Turn-Off Lagoon or Camooweal in October.<sup>56</sup> As with many other cases there is no further reference to this case.

In February 1889, additional Northern Territory constables were posted to the gulf region.<sup>57</sup> Days later the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* reported the additional police appointments and flagged the alleged departure from Borroloola of “a large party of Chinamen” supposedly for Queensland, concluding, “they will be very fortunate if they manage to evade the border police”.<sup>58</sup> This was either another unsubstantiated alarm or the group was far shrewder than the Queensland Police and evaded arrest. Or did they all perish en route?

During 1889, employment prospects in the Top End reached a critical level. The railway had been completed and concern raised that around 150 Chinese awaiting return to Hong Kong were likely to require government support.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup> QSA: “Correspondence, reports etc re restriction of Chinese”, 28 May 1888, Item ID 7162.

<sup>54</sup> SRSA: GRS8/4, Telegram 144a, 1 June 1888.

<sup>55</sup> SRSA: GRS8/4, Telegram 147a, 4 June 1888.

<sup>56</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 7 September 1888, p. 455.

<sup>57</sup> SRSA: GRS 8/00001-5, 4 February 1889.

<sup>58</sup> *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 2 March 1889.

<sup>59</sup> SRSA: GRS 8/00001-5, 4 March 1889.

Northern Territory constables newly appointed to the Eastern Barkly operated from Happy Creek, a purpose-built Customs House about forty kilometres west of Camooweal that now remains as an archaeological ruin (Figure 3). The stonewalled structure stuck like a pimple on the rolling grasslands of the southern Barkly Tablelands. Constables Curnow and Thorpe would have had plenty of warning of approaching drays or wandering Chinese from that windswept locale optimistically, but erroneously, described as, “a very comfortable camp. The climate is ... delightfully cool and bracing, and the country well watered, and abundantly grassed”.<sup>60</sup> Clearly they had not experienced summer when temperatures soar above 40°C for weeks at a time. The records of this remote station appear to have disappeared with its closure.



**Figure 3. The scattered remains of the Happy Creek Customs House, 2010**  
**Photograph by the author**

Whether or not the establishment of Northern Territory Police Stations at Roper River, Powell Creek and Happy Creek deterred migration in 1889 is a moot point. Whatever happened, the subject did not rate much mention in official communications or the press.

Across the border Queensland established a police presence at Urandangi, a remote border settlement south of Camooweal near the flood prone Georgina River. Although opened in November 1889, a year later, Inspector Urquhart drily noted, “no courts have been held at Urandangie [sic] as there is only one sworn JP and he is currently in Sydney”.<sup>61</sup>

The Territory’s newly appointed Government Resident, J.G. Knight, reported that drought was seriously affecting the Barkly Tablelands with several stations abandoned and destocked while mail services to Boulia had been discontinued as there was no water for the horses for nearly 200 kilometres. That suddenly changed on Boxing Day 1889 when a deluge caused widespread flooding in the border region.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 27 April 1889.

<sup>61</sup> QSA: ID 290239, 18 December 1890.

<sup>62</sup> SRSA: Government Resident by the Controlling Office, January 1889 – January 1892, 17 February 1890.

In June 1891, three men were arrested and, in an unusual departure from tradition, were also named in the records: Ah Hoop, Ah Nue and Ah Hoy. They had crossed the border and reached Gregory Downs, about 150 kilometres east of the border, en route to Burketown, even though they seem to have made no efforts to disguise their movements. One is left wondering if they were, like some others, unaware they were entering Queensland illegally. A brief note in the Burketown police station diary for 15 June reads, "Senior Const McGrath and Const McErlane left this station at 2pm [to] patrol along Gregory Downs Road in search of Chinaman [sic] who is crossing the Border".<sup>63</sup>

The police rode south from Burketown taking upwards of ten hours travelling along a dray track passing close to Punjaub station. Sometime in the next couple of days they met their unsuspecting quarry. When they were unable to produce entry permits, McGrath charged the trio with having "entered the colony without a permit" before escorting them north to the Burketown lockup. Ah Nue and Ah Hoy spent the next six months in Normanton jail, 230 kilometres east of Burketown, although Ah Hoop apparently paid the £50 fine, thus avoiding jail.

By July there were credible reports of "eight parties of Chinamen [sic], five in each party ... travelling from Pine Creek.... The nearest party is now fifty miles from Camooweal".<sup>64</sup> Several were apparently arrested as far south as Urandangi according to news reports late that month.<sup>65</sup> Records from Urandangi Police Station no longer exist and one has, therefore, to rely on vague media reports.

By mid-1892, the press was operating at fever pitch with stories that "the road from Anthony's Lagoon, South Australia, to the border of Queensland, is lined with Chinese making for Queensland".<sup>66</sup> In fact, eighteen were involved and they were deported, only to reoffend a week or so later. Contemporary weather reports stressed the cold dry conditions at this time and yet deportation was the futile and harsh order of the day.

The *Brisbane Courier* lifted the debate to a new level when suggesting that "all the Chinese of the Northern Territory, some 14,000 in number, intend to flock into Queensland".<sup>67</sup> The claim was ludicrous. The entire Chinese migrant population of the Northern Territory at that time was 3,714.<sup>68</sup> Territory officials did, however, concede thirty-five were expected to reach the border that month.<sup>69</sup>

Severe drought struck through 1893 to the point where the Camooweal Customs Officer was forced to "send [his] horses away to grass and water, consequently there has been no patrol this month".<sup>70</sup> The same officer had prophetically announced at the end of July 1893:

<sup>63</sup> QSA: File 703/1 516354, Police cd Diary Burketown, 1891–1894.

<sup>64</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 10 July 1891.

<sup>65</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 28 July 1891; *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 31 July 1891.

<sup>66</sup> *Adelaide Advertiser*, 7 June 1892.

<sup>67</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 13 June 1892.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, *Chinese in the Northern Territory*, p. 112.

<sup>69</sup> SRSA: File 688/1892, GRG24/6/426.

<sup>70</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 29 March 1893, p. 3; *Queenslander*, 1 April 1893, p. 620.

The roads are badly cut up in many places, and very dusty. Having made inquiries as to the state of the roads and the dry stages between here and Borrooloola, a distance of 440 miles, I am of opinion the Chinese will not trouble us this year.<sup>71</sup>

He was right and limited migration was, indeed, the order-of-the day.

Other contemporary news reports note instances where in lieu of arrest the offenders were to be escorted to the border and told to head for Borrooloola or Pine Creek. In February 1894, four prisoners were escorted to Normanton jail for immigration breaches. Two men had initially been deported but recaptured when they tried, once again, to cross the border near Camooweal. The very concept of deportation to the border is extraordinary and inhumane. In one instance, the Chinese involved begged to be shot rather than face the hardships of having to return to Pine Creek.<sup>72</sup> There is, in any event, something naïve in thinking the men would not simply wander further along the border and try crossing once more.

In 1896, cross-border migration was causing problems not simply for colonial governments but for Chinese businesses in the Northern Territory. Fifteen businessmen met with the Government Resident concerned that emigrants were leaving behind substantial debts.<sup>73</sup> Soon afterwards Territory police began to arrest absconders – not, of course, as illegal migrants but as absconding debtors.

Northern Territory Constable George Curnow had a memory lapse in 1896, belatedly reporting thirty-four Chinese had been brought before the Camooweal Magistrates “and discharged ... by orders of the Queensland government. I cannot learn any more being at present on the road. I regret omitting above from my last Journal”.<sup>74</sup> The Queensland files are missing and the media was silent on this issue. The thirty-four reported as being “discharged” were possibly escorted to the border and told to head back to Pine Creek. The likely scenario is that they took a more cautious approach along an alternative route back into Queensland. Few would have had either the stamina or the resources to return to the Top End. In August that is precisely what happened. Nine men were arrested, arraigned before a single Justice and then transported back to South Australia, “only to return and proceed uninterrupted through the colony”.<sup>75</sup>

Around this period several Australian Chinese families recount incidents of their forebears illegally entering Queensland. The easiest entry points were, of course, those locations where the key tracks and stock routes physically crossed the border and these were certainly the most favoured; however, none were manned full time. Intriguingly no informants have reported their forebears were arrested and imprisoned. Arguably this could be due to a desire to sanitise family traditions or, quite possibly, confirms that it was only an unfortunate few who were caught by Queensland police officers. Truth is elusive in this regard; records are sparse and, as noted earlier, names are either not recorded or incorrectly recorded. The stories etched in family traditions do, however, share the common themes of severe privation, risk and desperation.

Sometime around 1893, a thirty-six year old Cantonese, Lum So(u) San, sailed from Hong Kong for Port Darwin. According to the family history, he was heading to northern Australia in search of gold. The problem was that he was about a decade too late and the Territory offered few other

<sup>71</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 31 August 1893, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 22 June 1892, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> *Adelaide Advertiser*, 26 May 1896, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> SRSA: File 423/1896; NTAS: File 7120.

<sup>75</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 7 August 1896, p.7.

opportunities for a new arrival. Stories of the riches on the Palmer Goldfield were apparently still being bandied around Palmerston long after the alluvial gold that had once attracted thousands of his countrymen had all but run out. By the 1890s skilled hard rock miners, with plenty of capital to invest, were taking over the Palmer.

Family historian Emily Field suggests the Chinese preferred to travel in groups of twelve to eighteen, both for safety and the capacity to carry sufficient supplies for the trek, although the actual evidence suggests there was much greater flexibility and opportunism involved.<sup>76</sup> More comprehensive research shows the size of travelling parties was far greater. Field continues, “As raw newcomers ... they were advised and helped by the (Palmerston) Chinese, with rough ‘mud maps’ outlining many various geographical features ... to guide them on their unknown way”.<sup>77</sup>

Her subsequent suggestions that they experienced “crocodile haunted rivers ... stony arid land ... [and] jungly [sic] rainforest” do not fit with the route subsequently documented that crosses the Barkly Tablelands. Field suggests Lum Sou San, See Chun (who later returned to China) and their group travelled south to Tennant Creek before turning east to Camooweal, but it is more likely they turned east at Powell Creek, 190 kilometres north of Tennant Creek.<sup>78</sup>

The error is understandable. In the 1890s, both places were repeater stations on the Overland Telegraph but Tennant Creek’s eventual prominence as a mining town was decades into the future. In fact, at about the same time Mounted Constable George Curnow was, coincidentally, asked by his senior officers what the road was like between Happy Creek, near Camooweal, and Tennant Creek. His response pours further doubt on suggestions that the group would have travelled south to Tennant Creek:

Distance Wanardo to Tennant’s Creek direct, by plan two hundred and fifty miles. Downs country cease leaving Rankin river thence waterless desert to known country near Tennant’s Creek. Desert never crossed in this direction. Station exploratory parties driven back owing insufficient supply water in native wells. Roads in use open to Powell’s Creek north westerly to Anthony’s Lagoons thence westward all open downs to within ten miles of Powell’s. Possible to open up road to Barrows Creek [220 kilometres south of Tennant Creek] via Milne and Sandover watercourses. In ordinary season direct route to Tennant’s Creek unexplorable without camels, take four weeks reach Tennant’s via Powells.<sup>79</sup>

At that time Powell Creek was better known and was close to the junction of the Overland Telegraph and the Barkly stock route heading south east towards Camooweal across wide expanses of near treeless grasslands that even now can inspire concern among inexperienced travellers; modern road signs point out that there are no fuel stops for 500 kilometres.

Walking at night held its own dangers for travellers totally unfamiliar with the Australian bush. One evening after pausing for a meal they decided to push on into the night. Hours later as dawn was breaking they saw a fire burning in the distance. The opportunity to catch up with other travellers spurred them on. To their dismay they found they were approaching the fire they had left the evening before. They had done what many a person disorientated by the vastness of Australia’s

<sup>76</sup> Field, “The Lum Sou San Saga”, p.20.

<sup>77</sup> Field, “The Lum Sou San Saga”, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Field, “The Lum Sou San Saga”, p. 24.

<sup>79</sup> SRSA: Letter enclosure to AG 538/92, 14 July 1892.

inland has done and walked an overnight, energy-sapping loop.<sup>80</sup> Stories like this inevitably raise questions about how many others made similar mistakes but never lived to tell the tale.

Tam How Kee's reminiscences are possibly the most indicative of the naivety of both travellers and their erstwhile advisers: "We were told to follow the overland telegraph, then head east (probably along the Barkly Stock route from Powell Creek) and to turn left when we reached the big ocean".<sup>81</sup> With guidance like that it is unsurprising that so many apparently perished or welcomed the opportunity to be arrested.

Lee Leong also undertook the journey in the 1890s – no one is sure exactly when – but recounted years later to his son, Neil, some of the privations they experienced on their ill-equipped journey. Water was getting scarce when his group finally stumbled onto a withering waterhole. In the centre of the mud-cracked depression lay a shallow pool of muddy green liquid. That alone would have deterred most people, but these men were on their last legs. Even the need to pull a dead kangaroo from the waterhole in order to reach the water was no deterrent. It was a matter of either dying of dehydration or risking the consequences. In reality there was no choice. Perish or take a risk. They survived.

Contrasting with these somewhat sketchy anecdotes, comprehensive records and reports of the incarceration of twenty-seven Chinese can be traced from mid-1898. During June and July 1898, Queensland police arrested the men who straggled into Camooweal, two singly and the rest in groups of two, ten and thirteen.<sup>82</sup> Several stated they were out of water and had "no more tucker". They were arrested for entering the colony without a permit, and jailed for six months. This put a deal of pressure on Camooweal's three metre square tin shed jail and they were eventually shifted to Stewart Creek, Townsville; a logistical nightmare in itself.

On completing their sentences, in December 1898 and January 1899, they were immediately remanded in custody for deportation, en masse. There was ongoing discussion between Brisbane, Adelaide and Darwin about how these illegal immigrants in particular should be dealt with. Queensland was increasingly frustrated with the inaction of its neighbour. Bizarrely, South Australia's politicians claimed, in this particular case, there was insufficient evidence to be sure the twenty-seven were from the Territory. Queensland officials quickly pointed out they had been seen by at least two police officers crossing the border. Nonetheless, South Australia asked that each be photographed for identification purposes before their repatriation. The Queensland government ignored the request and, in January 1899, they were returned to Darwin, on the S.S. *Chingtu*, under police escort. The Government Resident, accompanied by three influential Chinese merchants, boarded the *Chingtu* when it docked in Darwin in an effort to identify the wanderers. All parties confirmed their identities as former Territorians.<sup>83</sup>

The final major incident is one in which the primary focus is not directly one of illegal Chinese migration but one that reflects on some of the challenges of remote border policing comes to the fore. In October 1900, twenty-five former Chinese miners from Wollgorang, Northern Territory, arrived in Burketown. This incident is interesting from several perspectives. First, it is the only case where there is a photographic record of the event (Figure 4). Secondly, deportation was again seen as the preferred action. Thirdly, the decision taken by the local Police Inspector,

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<sup>80</sup> Field, "The Lum Sou San Saga", p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> How Kee website quoted by Darryl Low Choy in email to author, 29 March 2010.

<sup>82</sup> NTAS: File 5/1899.

<sup>83</sup> NTAS: File 5/1899, Letter, 18 January 1899.

James Lamond, and his sergeant culminated in an internal enquiry that resulted in Acting Police Sergeant Alford's demotion and contributed to his premature demise.<sup>84</sup>



**Figure 4. Prisoners eating a meal at Burketown<sup>85</sup>**  
*Queenslander*, 27 Oct 1900, p. 876 (Photographer: A Chargois)

Soon after the group arrived in Burketown, Lamond and Alford discussed a range of options, including hiring a dray to take them back to the border. Alford's previous inspector, David Graham, held him in high regard.<sup>86</sup> Lamond did not share that same level of confidence. The investigating officer, Sergeant Well's notes "the absence of Inspector Lamond", before commenting on twenty-one charges in respect of failure to complete various reports and returns and one, for neglect of duty which were of a more or less serious nature. "Acting Sergeant Alford appears to have nothing to say in defence, which shows either great carelessness or very great absent-mindedness".

It was alleged Alford was a heavy drinker, although no evidence was presented to substantiate those claims. It is noteworthy that his wife had died suddenly on Christmas Day, 1897, leaving him to bring up their four young children at Turn Off Lagoon, one of the colony's remotest posts. Notwithstanding these points, Alford was demoted as a result of the hearing and left Burketown on the coastal steamer S.S. *Waterlily* on 3 January 1901.

Three days later, the ship returned to port with Alford's body on board. Following an autopsy by Dr McNish, it was determined Alford had died at sea of heart disease and Bright's disease (*Glomerulo nephritis*). He was buried alongside his wife in Burketown cemetery. Whether the

<sup>84</sup> *Queenslander*, 27 October 1900, p. 876.

<sup>85</sup> This photograph is widely and incorrectly attributed elsewhere as being taken at Croydon, Queensland, where the photographer lived.

<sup>86</sup> QAS: R. Alford personal file, 30 October 1897.

Chinese miners who were involved in this case ever returned to Queensland is yet another unknown part of this fascinating aspect of North Australian history.

### **Conclusion**

Controlling migration has been, and continues to be, a major concern for nations around the world. Rarely is it a process that demonstrates any level of compassion on the part of lawmakers.

For those who are forced into poverty for any number of reasons, desperation drives them into dangerous situations where they are prepared to 'risk-all' in undertaking dangerous treks in the vague hopes that life can improve... somewhere, sometime. The actions of immigrant Chinese and others in colonial Australia repeatedly demonstrated a similar level of desperation. The risk of death from starvation or thirst was ever present for those who undertook to walk from the Territory's Top End into Queensland. Men like Lee Long, Tam How Kee and Taam See Poy are known, through family histories, to have gone on to settle in eastern Australia and to have laid the foundations for their descendants to contribute in diverse fields of endeavour. Little is currently known of the many others who remain nameless statistics. Their descendants would undoubtedly be proud to honour their ancestors, if only for their perseverance under conditions few would willingly endure.

On the other side of the political divide, the police officers charged with administering the legislation generally did so with a strong sense of commitment. They lived in and operated from rudimentary facilities and were expected to undertake gruelling patrols, often in severe weather conditions. Several expressed concern about the conditions in which they had to keep prisoners indicating a sensitivity and responsibility that is often overlooked.

The tenacity of both the migrants and the police in the face of oppressive physical conditions, legal restrictions and endemic racism is remarkable, as is the fact that this aspect of Australian colonial history is so little known. Documenting this topic has reopened a fascinating aspect of the history Australia's tropics and demonstrates the opportunities that exist to research this understudied region through archival research, interviews and field exploration. It does not always need a chance remark to discover historical gems.

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