

On Barry McGowan

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With this issue on Australian Chinese history, we celebrate the life and work of Barry McGowan OAM. Australian Chinese history was a field dear to Barry's heart and on which he made unique contributions. Barry would be proud of this rich issue, contributed by his colleagues and friends – some of them he guided, and most of them he collaborated with over many years. We celebrate Barry and the humanism that Barry believed in, to which he devoted his whole life.

I came to know Barry in 2006 when I became the director of the Centre for Studies of the Chinese Southern Diaspora (CSCSD), then under the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. My research background is Southeast Asian history and I was ignorant about Australian Chinese history. Yet, as we stated in our focus of the CSCSD:

As a center based in Australia, we are inevitably interested in the studies of the Australian Chinese Community, particularly in the location of their history within the larger narrative of the Chinese southern diaspora. The conventional narrative on Chinese diaspora has been filtered, consciously or unconsciously, so as to conform to a common story that tells the tale of a unique "Chineseness" manifesting at different times and places. *A regional and geographical approach is one way to liberate the study of overseas Chinese from its nationalist straight jacket and to challenge the invented tradition of a unified essence of Chinese.*

It was at this lucky junction that I met Barry, who had participated in the "Tracing the Dragon" project. At that time he was saddened to have just lost his friend Lindsay Smith, who was, like Barry, devoted to the history of Australian Chinese. Lindsay died of cancer almost as soon as he finished his PhD, "Hidden Dragons: The Archaeology of Mid- to Late-Nineteenth-Century Chinese Communities in South-eastern New South Wales". Barry introduced me to Lindsay's work and to his own work. His enthusiasm about Australian Chinese history touched me, and his regional and geographical approach and new way of building the history of the Australian Chinese was exactly what the Centre needed as its guiding principle. As soon as my colleague Nola Cooke and I started the e-journal, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, in 2007, Barry worked with us closely to publish issue no. 2, on Australian Chinese history in 2008. Since then Barry was my guide, opening the door to Australian history. He became a Visiting Fellow of the Centre, remaining a close and valued colleague until he passed away in 2018.

Barry never spoke Chinese, but he was the one who collected most of the letters, photos, documents and artefacts kept by Chinese families in regional New South Wales. The Chinese families trusted him because he was a genuine man with an open and sympathetic heart. They dug into their garages, archives and albums for him and told him stories that they had thought that nobody cared about. Barry was particularly keen on finding the stories that connected kind "white" Australians and the Chinese during the harsh years of the White

Australia policy. The “very strong and genuine relationships” between human beings always attracted him. This is one of those stories that Barry dug out:

One of the most heart-warming stories concerns a Wagga Wagga based market gardener, Charlie Wong Hing. His origins in Australia are mysterious. The most likely story is that he jumped ship at Sydney Heads sometime in the late 1800s and made his way to the Riverina district, where he later assumed the identity of a deceased Chinese man. He went back to China at some stage, for he had a son there but left before the boy was born. In Wagga he took up market gardening, often plying his trade along Fitzmaurice Street with his horse and cart. One of Charlie’s customers was Eric Roberts, the founder of Wagga’s first radio station, 2WG. In the early 1930s Eric had very little money left after expenses and Charlie often gave him his vegetables for free. Later, when Charlie’s horse died Eric bought him another one. After that the two men were inseparable.¹

Barry was keen to dig out those stories of genuine and generous Australians buried in the conventional history of unrelenting animosity towards Chinese in the pre-Federation period. When he discussed the restrictions on Chinese travel between New South Wales and Victoria in the late 1880s, he condemned this “deep-seated fear of a resurgent China and racial xenophobia”, and quoted the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* that “there is something extremely unmanly in this sort of persecution of colour”. Barry searched many regional NSW newspapers and found, no doubt to his delight, that “by the mid-1890s much of the Riverina press had become impatient with the absurdity of it”.² These views were also expressed in such local newspapers as the *Corowa Free Press*, *Albury Banner*, *Riverine Grazier*, and *Narrandera Ensign*. Barry excavated and rescued all of such rational voices, with hundreds of hours spent in the libraries and archives. If he was not in the library he was in the field. He seemed to be always on his way to some regional areas in New South Wales, driving his old car and eating simple foods. He always had something new to show to me when he came back. As such, his works are nuanced studies on race relations in Australia. For Barry, nationalism was an alien concept; he was above the fear and hatred agitated by different parties at both sides of the national border.

Barry was idealistic. He carried with him the hope of the 1980s, when Australia reimagined itself as open, confident and liberal, when multiculturalism was in the air and began to be embraced by many. There was almost a naïve enthusiasm in him when he met people from different ethnic background with their cultures. He never questioned their geniality and always treated them with respect and regarded them as equal. That was the spirit of the Australia in the 1980s.

Goodbye, Barry, dear colleague and friend. You did not speak the language of the people you studied, but excelled in the common language to all, the language of humanity.

¹ See Li Tana and Barry McGowan, “Charlie Wong Hing and the Son He Never Met”, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 6 (2013): 166–171.

² Barry McGowan, “Transnational Lives: Colonial Immigration Restrictions and the White Australia Policy in the Riverina District of New South Wales, 1860–1960”, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 6 (2013): 50, 53.