

## Lost Opportunities: The Case of a Chinese Merchant of Late Colonial Sydney

© 2019 Darryl Low Choy

**Abstract:** This paper provides an insight into the life and times of a Chinese merchant in the Australian colonies during the second half of the nineteenth century. Having served as a non-commissioned officer in the Ever Victorious Army under Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) Charles “Chinese” Gordon during the Taiping Rebellion, Kum Tiy arrived in Sydney around 1864–1865. With a number of partners, he immediately set up the merchant business of Sun Kum Tiy & Company in Lower George Street in the Rocks, Sydney. In time, his merchant empire was expanded to include some thirteen branches in New South Wales, fifteen in Victoria, two in Queensland, nine in New Zealand and one in the Pacific Islands, including a trading vessel. He was to become one of Sydney’s and New South Wales’s wealthiest and most influential merchants of the late colonial period.

The Sun Kum Tiy Australian story provides further insight into the business of Chinese merchants operating in an overseas location during the nineteenth century. It acknowledges the connections of the merchant class with clan and district/county based associations, their entrepreneurial activities, their philanthropic activities, their leadership in the local Chinese diaspora and their standing within the wider European community. The paper concludes with a consideration of the motives that led Kum Tiy to abandon his financial and social successes in New South Wales during the late 1880s and early 1890s and return to China, which, on all accounts, represented opportunities lost, both for him and his would-be adopted country of twenty-five years.

**Keywords:** Chinese merchants, late colonial era, Sydney, Ever Victorious Army, branch stores

### Introduction

During the nineteenth century in Australia, Chinese merchants were highly regarded by their countrymen from both an economic and a social standpoint. They were well respected by the European community for their business acumen, honesty and scrupulous regard for their obligations.<sup>1</sup> It was Chinese merchants who underpinned overseas and Australian trading networks, particularly during the gold-rush period leading into the second half of the 1800s. They acted as banking agents and loan creditors, mediated in bureaucratic procedure, and offered transport, food, lodgings, employment and working equipment to Chinese people entering the Australian colonies during those times.<sup>2</sup>

The important role played by Chinese merchants within their diaspora in colonial Sydney forms the foundation theme for this paper. The paper focuses on a specific case study of a Chinese merchant set in the local geographical setting of Sydney during the late colonial era. The temporal focus of this paper covers a period subsequent to the peak of the gold rushes in New South Wales and Victoria and before the major reforms experienced by the Chinese merchant class in these colonies leading to and through Federation.<sup>3</sup> In both colonies, this period

---

<sup>1</sup> Yong, C.F., *The New Gold Mountain: the Chinese in Australia 1901–1921* (Richmond: Raphael Arts Pty Ltd, 1977), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Bowen, A., “The Merchants: Chinese Social Organisation in Colonial Australia”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 42(1) (2011): p. 37; Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the notable research and writings of Chinese merchants in colonial Australia has concentrated on periods immediately before and, in particular, after the temporal focus of this paper, hence this paper attempts to contribute to an improved understanding of this paper’s focal period – the 1860s through to the 1890s.

witnessed a decline in the rural-based Chinese mining population and a corresponding concentration in the cities, namely Sydney and Melbourne. It also was a time of expansion of the mining front in Northern Queensland. These trends led to significant changes to the economic pattern of the Chinese in Australia.<sup>4</sup> It was also a period where the Victorian and New South Wales trade with Hong Kong and China was dominated by the Chinese merchants.<sup>5</sup> In the specific case of the Sydney Chinese commercial elite, Mei-fen Kuo characterises the turn of the twentieth century as a time that witnessed “a process that invoked a distinctively modern sense of time, space, and the unfolding of history ... (that) .... played an important role in the evolution of the diasporic identity of the Chinese in ‘White-Australia’”.<sup>6</sup>

An understanding of Chinese merchant activities during the second half of the nineteenth century in colonial Australia needs to be cognisant of the long-held desire of the British and various colonial governments to establish trade with China. Shirley Fitzgerald has postulated that an increased interest in the China trade was one of the contributing factors behind Britain’s primary reason for deciding to alleviate the overcrowding of convict accommodation in London through the establishment of the first settlement in Australia – a closer geographic location to China.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent trading relations were built upon these early foundations and, as C.F. Yong notes, the Chinese merchants played a critical role in the achievement of these overarching goals and came to dominate the trade between the colonies (namely New South Wales and Victoria) and Hong Kong and China during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Within the context of these economic circumstances, this paper will highlight the merchant’s paramount importance to the early Chinese social system in Australia, specifically New South Wales, during this core period leading up to the turn of the twentieth century and Federation.

### **Sun Kum Tiy: A Sydney Merchant of the Late 1800s**

This paper examines the important role played by Chinese merchants within their diaspora in late colonial Sydney through the lens of the economic, social and cultural activities of the Sydney merchant firm of Sun Kum Tiy.<sup>9</sup>

Typical of western newspaper reports of this period, accounts in the Australian colonial press invariably incorrectly gave the name of the firm of Sun Kum Tiy as the name of an individual in circumstances when they were reporting on the individual. This lack of attention to detail, a misunderstanding or ignorance of Chinese customs and traditions, and diverse attempts at romanising Chinese (especially Cantonese) words, has led to various degrees of confusion and uncertainty when attempting to reconstruct past events from the written records, especially newspapers. This is particularly so in the case of Sun Kum Tiy.

A 1879 article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* provides some early clues about the firm of Sun Kum Tiy and its Australian-based partners.<sup>10</sup> It reports an interview with an unidentified Sydney

<sup>4</sup> Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Kuo, Mei-fen, “The Making of a Diasporic Identity: The Case of the Sydney Chinese Commercial Elite, 1890s–1900s”, in *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 5 (2009), pp. 336–363, p. 336.

<sup>7</sup> Fitzgerald, S., *Red Tape Gold Scissors: the Story of Sydney’s Chinese*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Halstead Press, 2008), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> A number of English spelling variations and combinations of this name exist in the literature and the written records, including: Sun / Sum – Kum / Cum – Tiy / Ti / Tie / Tye.

<sup>10</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

merchant whose firm owned a branch store in Young comprising a large brick building that cost £3400. These were the exact same details for the new premises of the Young firm of Sun Kum Hang, which was opened on 19 May 1875<sup>11</sup> and owned by Sun Kum Tiy.<sup>12</sup> As to the unidentified merchant, the article cites some personal details which point to a person by the name of Chun Soy who represented the firm of Sun Kum Tiy in a number of later events.<sup>13</sup> Consistent with information forthcoming in the interview, Chun Soy came to Australia in 1861;<sup>14</sup> owned land in country New South Wales, for example in Parkes;<sup>15</sup> and would have had a young family as described in the newspaper article. The interview points to him being one of the two Australian-based partners in the firm of Sun Kum Tiy & Company.

The interview revealed that there were four partners, two in Sydney and two in China. As to the name of the second Australian-based partner, there are a number of possibilities, namely:

- the firm may have taken its name from his personal name, in full or in part, especially if he was the senior partner;<sup>16</sup>
- he may have adopted the name of his firm as his own personal name, as so many did from this era; or
- he may have had an entirely different name which to date has not been brought to light from the records examined.

The available evidence suggests it was either of the first two options.<sup>17</sup>

This preliminary conclusion centres around some known and inferred personal attributes of a person who I will call Kum Tiy. Some of his personal attributes can be derived from those of a Susan Kum Tiy, who was born in 1852 in China and is believed to be his daughter. On various official records her name was recorded as: Sue See; Suse; Soos; Suzanna Kum Ty and Susan Kum Tiy.<sup>18</sup> She married Lee Liy<sup>19</sup> in Sydney on 19 February 1874.<sup>20</sup> Lee Liy at this time was a

<sup>11</sup> *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 19 May 1875, page 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Burrangong Argus*, 11 June 1887, page 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 1879, page 7.

<sup>14</sup> State Records Authority of New South Wales; Kingswood, New South Wales, Australia; Series: Certificates of Naturalization, 1849-1874; Series Number: NRS 1039; Roll: 2699.

<sup>15</sup> New South Wales Government Gazette, Assorted volumes, 1853–1899, Sydney, Australia: New South Wales State Records Authority, 1853–1899.

<sup>16</sup> Noting that Bowen, "The Merchants: Chinese Social Organisation in Colonial Australia" p. 38, points out: "Chinese merchants often had their names recorded properly and are better represented in historical records".

<sup>17</sup> The evidence does not support the notion that Chun Soy and Kum Tiy were the same person. Both travelled independently between Sydney and Melbourne under their respective names, in one case, less than two months apart. Chun Soy was too young to fit the emerging profile of Kum Tiy. Both are listed as partners in two Queensland branch stores (*Townsville Herald*, 13 December 1879, no page; *Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser*, 13 January 1880, p. 3.) and both were independent signatures to Government petitions – for example, Petition Presented to the Legislative Council of NSW, 21 March 1879, LCTP 1879 85-237\_116\_NSW Parliamentary Archives, Parliament House, Sydney; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 1879, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Harry Lee Liy's death certificate: mother shown as Suzanna Kum Ty (Queensland Historical Death Certificate, 1945/C1551); William Lee Liy's birth certificate: mother show as Susan Kum Ti (Ancestry Australian Birth Index, 1788–1922, 1889, registration no. 002435, p. 8710).

<sup>19</sup> Lee Liy travelled from Cape Cleveland to Sydney on the *Wonga Wonga* as a cabin passenger on 15 February 1874 (Mariners and Ships in Australian Waters: *Wonga Wonga*, State Records Authority of New South Wales: Shipping Master's Office; Passengers Arriving 1855–1922; NRS 13278, [X29-130] Reel 429). The cabin passage list for the *Wonga Wonga* on its return trip on 19 March 1874 list a Mrs Lee Liy and Lee Liy (*Australian Town and Country Journal*, 28 March 1874).

partner in the firm Wing On and the manager of their store in Millchester, North Queensland.<sup>21</sup> By all accounts, they were Christians as their first born infant, Milly (died aged 3 months), was buried in the Church of England section of the Charters Towers cemetery and not in the Chinese cemetery at Millchester where the family then resided.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent burials of this family in the Cooktown cemetery were also in the Christian sections.

Lee Liy was from Chungshan (Zhongshan).<sup>23</sup> The manager of the Sun Kum Tiy branch store at Young (Sun Kum Hang & Co.) was W.R.G. Lee, who later became a partner in the Sydney store of On Yik Lee & Co., an established Chungshan store.<sup>24</sup> While it is highly probable that these two Lees are related, the fact remains that both were very closely connected to Kum Tiy and both were from Chungshan. This matter is explored in further detail below.

Based on the evidence provided by his daughter's marriage in Australia, it is likely that Kum Tiy was born around the mid to late 1820s. He would have been in his late twenties or early thirties when his daughter Susan was born, in his early to mid thirties during his service with the Ever Victorious Army (see below), and around his mid thirties or early forties when he arrived in Sydney in late 1864 or early 1865.

This brief snapshot suggests that Kum Tiy (the man) may have been a Christian, that he was born in the mid to late 1820s and that he was a native of Chungshan county. To avoid confusion and to continue this story in the face of some uncertainty, all references to the firm in this article will be as "Sun Kum Tiy & Co." and where the reference is clearly to a person, "Kum Tiy" will be used. In cases where the term "Sun Kum Tiy" has been used in sources without specifying if it was the firm or the individual being referred to, then the original reference has been retained: "Sun Kum Tiy".

#### *Establishing the Business*

Kum Tiy was typical of Chinese merchants operating in a foreign land. The nature of his business organisation and dealings, his leadership within the Chinese community, his representation of the Chinese community to the colonial government, his support for local and Chinese causes, and his general standing within the Chinese and European communities attest to this. Hence, it would be informative to understand how his wealth, influence and standing were established and accumulated.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* of February 1879 highlighted the large amount of capital required to establish a merchant business in the colonies during the second half of the nineteenth century, reporting: "We started with a capital of £37,000, a Chinese merchant observed to us during a visit to his establishment in Lower George Street".<sup>25</sup> As previously noted, the firm being

<sup>20</sup> Birth certificate of their first born: Milly Lee Liy, (Queensland Historical Death Certificate, 1875/C2837), District of Ravenswood, 3 February 1875).

<sup>21</sup> Rains, K, "Intersections: The Overseas Chinese Social Landscape Of Cooktown, 1873–1935", PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2005, p 96; Rains, K, "Webs of Association: Examining the Overseas Chinese Social Landscape of Early Cooktown", in *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 6 (2013), p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> Wallis, L. & Hodgkinson, *Charters Towers and District Pioneer Cemetery Burials and Monumental Inscriptions, 1872–1895* (Charters Towers and Dalrymple Family History Association, 1994), p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Rains, K, "Webs of Association: Examining the Overseas Chinese Social Landscape of Early Cooktown", p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, M., "Chinese Settlement in NSW: A Thematic History", report for the NSW Heritage Office of NSW, 1999, p. 67.

<sup>25</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7. £37,000 in 1865 was worth \$4,098,000 in 2018 (<https://www.thomblake.com.au/secondary/hisdata/calculate.php>).

discussed here was Sun Kum Tiy & Co. What were the source/s of Kum Tiy's capital that allowed him to establish himself as a partner in this merchant firm in the heart of Sydney at Lower George Street within a year of his arrival in the colony? Additionally, as a bilingual merchant, where did he acquire his command of the English language?

The answer to these questions lies in a minor personal notice that appeared on page 10 of the *Bulletin* of 2 February 1893. It read: "Sun Kum Tiy, the Sydney Chinese Merchant, was a non-commissioned officer under 'Chinese' Gordon".

"Chinese" Gordon is a reference to Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) Charles "Chinese" Gordon CB, who history also records by the names of Gordon Pasha and Gordon of Khartoum. The common element that substantiates the *Bulletin's* link between Sun Kum Tiy and Gordon is the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864). Considered to be one the bloodiest wars of pre-twentieth-century times, the Taiping Rebellion witnessed the introduction of industrial weapons of mass destruction, which led to the destruction of more than half of China's one thousand prospering cities and resulted in an estimated loss of life for 15 to 20 million people.<sup>26</sup>

In response to the successful campaigns of the Taiping rebel forces, which saw them advance on Shanghai, that city's merchants and bankers, supported by the Western powers, financed the establishment of a Western-trained and equipped local force which in time became known as the Ever Victorious Army. It would serve as part of the Imperial Army in the service of the Qing Dynasty against the rebels of the Taiping Rebellion. The Ever Victorious Army (EVA) was a brigade-size force that fluctuated between 3000 to 5000 Chinese troops led by an American and English officer corps. Armed with the best available modern weaponry, they were trained in western military techniques, tactics and strategy, and responded to western bugle calls and verbal commands in English.<sup>27</sup> Although the EVA was only active from 1860 to 1864, it played an influential part in putting down the Taiping Rebellion. Its last commander was "Chinese" Gordon (1863–1864). With the decline of the Taiping forces, the EVA was officially disbanded on 1 June 1864.

The *Bulletin's* revelation of Kum Tiy's membership of the EVA provides a seamless precursor to his arrival in New South Wales, sometime between his discharge from the EVA in mid 1864 and the first evidence of his merchant activities in May 1865.<sup>28</sup> His service in the EVA explains his command of the English language and his ability to write in cursive script, as demonstrated by his signature that appears on a number of colonial petitions and memorials (see Figure 1).

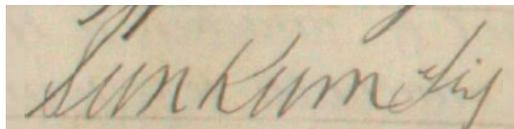


Figure 1: Sun Kum Tiy's signature (LCTP 1879 85-237\_116\_NSW Parliamentary Archives)

<sup>26</sup> Danko, C.J., *Foreign Devils and God-Worshippers: Western Mercenaries and Cross-Cultural Realism During the Taiping Rebellion* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2017), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, R.J., *Mercenaries and Mandarins: The Ever Victorious Army in Nineteenth Century China* (New York: KTO Press, 1978), pp. 81–91.

<sup>28</sup> *Sydney Mail*, 27 May 1865, p.10.

Kum Tiy's military service also provides a plausible explanation for his accumulation of finances that allowed him to establish a merchant business with his partners immediately upon his arrival in Sydney. The EVA's Chinese soldiers were extremely well paid. They were remunerated regularly at rates well in excess of soldiers of other military organisation in China (for example, a sergeant was paid £3 per month).<sup>29</sup> This was done on the insistence of Gordon, a devout Christian, who wanted to stop the common practice of plunder of a defeated city. In the early years, EVA members were also paid a substantial bonus for each victory and recapture of cities occupied by the Taipings (upwards to a five figure sum for each victory). On the disbandment of the EVA, the Chinese provincial administration paid a substantial gratuity to the officers and men upon their discharge.<sup>30</sup> Evidence provided at the 1891–92 Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality in Sydney revealed that Kum Tiy had a "deformed limb".<sup>31</sup> If his deformity was the result of a wound sustained from warfighting during the Taiping Rebellion, which is highly likely given that he would not have been enlisted with a deformity, then, as a member of the EVA, he would also have been entitled to additional severance pay for injuries sustained while in service.

The first indication of Sun Kum Tiy's business activities in Sydney are provided by the shipping gazette of the *Sydney Mail* on 27 May 1865, when it listed ten boxes of opium and twenty packages of tea being imported from Melbourne.<sup>32</sup> That same notice also listed 1,000 sovereigns being sent by Sun Kum Tiy to Point de Galle (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka) on the *Madras*. Later in the year, the commercial section of the *Empire* newspaper listed thirteen cases of Chinese goods being imported by Sun Kum Tiy.<sup>33</sup> In the same year, the *Sydney Mail* carried an article concerning a customs seizure of eighty jars of dutiable wine listed as Chinese pickles which were consigned to Sun Kum Tiy from Melbourne.<sup>34</sup> The firm Sun Kum Tiy & Co, Chinese merchant, of 199 George Street was first listed in the *Sands Street Index* in 1866, suggesting it was set up in this location in the previous year.<sup>35</sup>

### *Getting on with Business*

The 1879 *Sydney Morning Herald* interview also revealed that the firm had eight branches in New South Wales, four in Queensland and one in the Islands including a "trading vessel".<sup>36</sup> It further revealed that the firm had an annual turnover of £100,000 (compared to £120,000 three years previous). Annual profits were likewise down from £8,000 to £10,000 to £1,000 to £2,000 (then around 3 to 3.5 percent). Annual reported outlays are tabulated below:

<sup>29</sup> £1 in 1860 is equivalent to \$100 in 2019 (<https://www.thomblake.com.au/secondary/hisdata/calculate.php>).

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, A., *The "Ever-Victorious Army" – A History of the Chinese Campaign under Lt.-Col. C. G. Gordon, C.B. R.E. and the Suppression Of The Tai-Ping Rebellion* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1868), pp. 244–245.

<sup>31</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> *Sydney Mail*, 27 May 1865, p.10.

<sup>33</sup> *Empire*, 1 November 1865, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Sydney Mail*, 26 August 1865, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Sands Street Index*, 1866, part 4, p. 327.

<sup>36</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

**Table 1. Estimates of annual outlays of Sun Kum Tiy & Co. (1879)**

Item	Amount
Freight	£ 6,000
Bonded storage	£ 800
Cartage	£ 350
Railway freight	£ 4,000
Insurance	£ 1,000
House rent and taxes	£ 320
Household expenses, storeman etc	£ 2,700

Source: Sydney Morning Herald, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

The above itemised outlays provides some insight into the firm's integrated use of the colony's infrastructure. The *Sydney Morning Herald* interview merely identified "a very large sum for duty" paid to the government without specifying an amount. However, from a later interview with Kum Tiy it was revealed that: "As an example of his business transactions we hear that he is a large contributor to the revenues of the colony, having paid during the tea season as much as £1000 duties in the course of a day".<sup>37</sup> The available newspaper records list sizeable amounts of tea being imported at certain times (for example, in 1869 they imported some 52,200 kg or 52 tonnes of tea and, in their last year of trading, 1895, they were still importing sizeable quantities – 20,213 kg).<sup>38</sup>

Sun Kum Tiy & Co. traded in European and Chinese goods. They imported a variety of goods directly from China and, as they did not have an agent in London during the early years, it was reported that they used a source in Australia.<sup>39</sup>

**Table 2. Selected sample of Sun Kum Tiy & Co. imports (1865–1895)**

Commodity	Origin
Rice, beans, sugar, tea, oil, Chinese goods	Hong Kong (China)
Tea, rice, opium	China
Beche-de-mer	Fiji
Tea, opium, Chinese goods, fish, sugar	Melbourne
Shrimps	Honolulu
Tea, Chinese goods, rice, tobacco, sugar, preserves, oil, cakes, opium, matting	Not disclosed in customs records

Source: Various Australian newspaper reports (1865 to 1895)

Sun Kum Tiy & Co. was by far the largest Chinese merchant importer in Sydney, closely followed by On Chong & Co. Table 2 tabulates a selected sample of Sun Kum Tiy & Co.'s imports for some years between 1865 and 1895. Their early years of trading focussed on imports from China / Hong Kong, with the major imports being large quantities of rice, tea and sugar. For example, from seven known shipments during 1869, the firm imported some 108,402

<sup>37</sup> *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, 30 September 1876, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> See for example: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 1869, p. 6, and *Daily Commercial News and Shipping List*, 19 August 1895, page 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7. It is possible that this unidentified Australian source for the importation of goods from London was the Melbourne merchant Lowe Kong Meng. This is explored in further detail below.

kg (108 tonnes) of tea; 1,820 bags of sugar and 3,266 bags of rice. Quantities of opium and tobacco were also imported throughout the years. Their imports of beche-de-mer (sourced from South Sea Islands, particularly Fiji) and other marine products were merely transhipped through Sydney before being transported onto Hong Kong and China.

A selected sample of Sun Kum Tiy & Co. exports for most of the years between 1865 and 1873 is shown in Table 3.<sup>40</sup>

**Table 3. Selected sample of Sun Kum Tiy & Co. exports (1865–1873)**

Commodity	Destination
Sovereigns, (one recorded shipment included pounds and dollars )	Point de Galle
Gold, lead, old metal, nails, copper, glass, horseshoes, old iron, beche-de-mer, fish, sandalwood, fungus	Hong Kong (China)
Chinese goods, fish, oranges	Melbourne
Rice	South Sea Islands
Opium, rice	Rockhampton

Source: Various Australian newspaper reports (1865 to 1873)

During their establishment years, the firm focused on exporting some very basic commodities to China such as lead, old metal, nails, copper, glass, horseshoes and old iron. Clearly there were profits to be made through the sale of scrap metal in a non-industrialised country such as China. The firm ran a series of newspaper advertisements in the Sydney press seeking these commodities with horse shoes being an interesting inclusion.<sup>41</sup>

Sun Kum Tiy & Co were also quick to become involved in the much sought after beche-de-mer trade. They were importing beche-de-mer from the Pacific Islands where, as previously noted, they had a branch store and a trading vessel. This was supplemented with other popular products sought by Chinese markets, including fish, fungus and sandalwood. In return, Sun Kum Tiy & Co were also supplying the South Sea Islands with rice.

The shipping exports lists record a quantity of “packages” (undisclosed contents) along with declared amounts of gold. These items suggest that Sun Kum Tiy & Co. could have been acting as a banking agent and possibly as a county or clan “bank”.<sup>42</sup>

The stand-out export was very large quantities of sovereigns being sent on a regular basis to Point de Galle (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka). Shipping records suggest that Point de Galle played a very important role in Sun Kum Tiy & Co.’s business. During their first year of trading, the available records show they sent 3,900 sovereigns to Point de Galle.<sup>43</sup> During 1869 this had increased to 8,767 sovereigns and to 8,980 sovereigns in 1872. At this time, Point de Galle was an important trading and transshipping port, given its strategic location between Europe via Suez/Cape of Good Hope, Asia and Australia and the Pacific. A number of Point de Galle agency houses were successfully trading in Europe and local merchants were extensively

<sup>40</sup> It appears that from the mid 1870s onwards, shipping lists did not list individual exporters by name and thus it is not possible to see what Sun Kum Tiy & Co. was exporting during this latter part of their tenure here in Australia.

<sup>41</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 July 1866, p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> Bowen, “The Merchants: Chinese Social Organisation in Colonial Australia”, p. 37; Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 3; Fitzgerald, *Red Tape Gold Scissors*, p. 64; Williams, “Chinese Settlement in NSW”, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> *Sydney Mail*, 27 May 1865, p. 10; 29 July 1865, p. 10; 28 October 1865, p. 10.

involved in the international export trade, especially tea. Point de Galle was also used to connect passengers and mail between the Australian colonies and Britain, and it was the connecting port for the major mail run to England, while also linking to Hong Kong. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Point de Galle would be surpassed by Colombo, which started to develop as an international financial centre with many of the major banks establishing a presence there.

Commenting on the Melbourne merchant Lowe Kong Meng's activities during the 1860s, Paul Macgregor speculates: "It is unclear why he was sending gold to Ceylon if most of his imports were from Hong Kong – perhaps the gold was transhipped from Ceylon to Hong Kong, or perhaps was payment for Indian rice".<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, Sun Kum Tiy & Co. was sending larger amounts of money to Point de Galle than other Sydney Chinese merchants, indicating they were importing a greater value of products into the colonies. It could be speculated that their purpose was one or a combination of reasons, such as:

- transshipping funds to Hong Kong (and China) for goods being imported;
- transshipping funds to China (via Hong Kong) as part of their district/county or clan banking system;
- transshipping funds to Europe / Britain for goods being imported; and/or
- payment for local Ceylonese or Indian goods such as rice and tea which were gaining in importance around this time.

Sun Kum Tiy & Co.'s import and export details attest to their well-developed international trading networks stretching north to China and Hong Kong, east into the Pacific to places such as Honolulu and Fiji, and west into the Indian Ocean to Point de Galle (Ceylon) and then to Europe and Britain.

To complement their international and interstate trading activities, Sun Kum Tiy & Co. acted as shipping agents for the transport of people and freight between Sydney and Hong Kong and the South Sea Islands. The firm acted as shipping agents for vessels such as the clipper ships *Marquis of Argyle* and *Mindanao* on the Sydney to Hong Kong run and the schooner *Dauntless* on the Sydney to Fiji run.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Life at the Rocks*

All of these trading activities were directed from Sun Kum Tiy's Sydney base, which was initially established at 199 George Street in the Rocks in the mid 1860s.<sup>46</sup> By early 1867, the firm had relocated to 207 (later redesignated 225) Lower George Street which was to become its headquarters for the remainder of its thirty years' existence in Australia. The owner of this property was the well-known horse-racing identity, William A. Long, a member of the Bar and a Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly (later appointed to the Legislative Council). Long represented the electorate of Central Cumberland and for a short time was the NSW Colonial

<sup>44</sup> Macgregor, P., "Lowe Kong Meng and Chinese Engagement in the International Trade of Colonial Victoria", in *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, 11 (2012), p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 1874, p. 1 and 27 February 1877, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Sands Street Index*, 1866, part 4, p. 327.

Treasurer in Sir John Robertson's administration of 1877.<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to speculate if this association favoured Kum Tiy in individual and/or community dealings with the colonial government.

The Rocks area was a location of choice for merchants given its strategic location in relation to the port and shipping, and to the then existing road system through the city. From the 1860s to the late 1880s, the Sydney Chinese community established its centre here on the harbour foreshore.<sup>48</sup> Shirley Fitzgerald notes the role of the Rocks in the development of Sydney as an international trade centre and the role of, and impact on, the Chinese community in this regard.<sup>49</sup> The area was a bustling centre, with Chinese agents and merchants providing shipping and transport services within and between Australia and China.

During the 1870s, the area became a Chinese quarter dominated with landing services for arriving and departing Chinese and with retail establishments characterised by Chinese cuisine and Chinese imports, including tea, clothes, silk fabric, traditional medicines and porcelain. As Sydney's Chinese merchants built up their businesses in the Rocks by trading locally with their countrymen, they also contributed to the growth in import and export trade between Australia, Hong Kong and China.<sup>50</sup> Sydney's Chinese merchants in the Rocks also drew on their connections with clan and native-place societies to establish their leadership positions.<sup>51</sup> The business firms also opened public meeting halls for native-place associations.

The Chinese dominance of the Rocks as one of the city's most cosmopolitan precincts reached its zenith during the 1880s but then, owing to a shift in shipping westwards into Darling Harbour and later, towards the turn of the century, with the land resumptions across the area, this part of Australian history was changed forever.

Sun Kum Tiy & Co.'s 225 Lower George Street location was a substantial building, described as: "Stone with slate roof comprising three floors with ten rooms".<sup>52</sup> In 1879, it was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that a partner in Sun Kum Tiy & Co (who it has been established was Chun Soy), along with his wife, two small children and a lady's maid, resided above the shop in what was described as a well-furnished set of rooms with English and Chinese furniture and decor.<sup>53</sup> By 1882, this building had been considerably improved with an additional floor now providing some fourteen rooms plus some additional separate buildings. Evidence from the Inspection Report accompanying the 1891–1892 Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling documented the premises as accommodating six workers in seven bedrooms containing nine beds. The premise was clean and all rooms were in good condition and well ventilated. The property contained one brick closet (in good condition) and a shed (also in good

<sup>47</sup> Bede Nairn, 'Long, William Alexander (1839–1915)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/long-william-alexander-4035/text6411>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online 25 October 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Kuo, Mei-fen, "The Making of a Diasporic Identity: The Case of the Sydney Chinese Commercial Elite, 1890s–1900s" in *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 5 (2009), pp. 336–363, p. 339.

<sup>49</sup> Fitzgerald, *Red Tape Gold Scissors*, p. 90.

<sup>50</sup> Kuo, "The Making of a Diasporic Identity", quoting Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 262, and Crawford, *Notes by Mr. Crawford on Chinese Immigration in the Australian Colonies*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>51</sup> Kuo, "The Making of a Diasporic Identity", p. 339.

<sup>52</sup> *SCC City Assessment Books, Gipps Ward* (Book 123, p. 7, record 17/6/15).

<sup>53</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

condition) in a 450 sq ft yard that was well drained.<sup>54</sup> A further insight into the firm's Sydney base operations can be gleaned from the previously referenced 1879 *Sydney Morning Herald* article where staff (including their salaries) were identified as: "Chief clerk, £3/10s; shipping clerk, £2; foreman storekeeper, £1/15s; and other storekeepers, 30s".<sup>55</sup> Board and food were supplied, with the latter comprising: "Rice, pork, fowls, sometimes mutton and beef, and vegetables. Spirits they get once every Saturday and every Sunday".<sup>56</sup>

This part of the Rocks rose to the public's attention on 25 May 1881, with a reported outbreak of smallpox involving the small son of On Chong, the immediate neighbour to Sun Kum Tiy & Co's 225 Lower George Street premises.<sup>57</sup> This event not only threw the firm, its owners and employees into turmoil, but it also reignited the smouldering anti-Chinese feeling within the colony that had come to a head in 1861 in the Young district with the now infamous Lambing Flat anti-Chinese riots.<sup>58</sup> On 20 June 1881, the premises adjoining On Chong's were closed, including the shop and warehouse of Sun Kum Tiy & Co.<sup>59</sup> Nine people who were living above the shop at the time were taken into custody and quarantined for eight weeks because an infected person had slept in the house.

The quarantining of premises and the legality of detaining people who may have come into contact with smallpox sufferers were hotly debated in the Legislative Assembly in the following months,<sup>60</sup> including attempts to release the premises of On Chong & Co. and Sun Kum Tiy & Co. from quarantine.<sup>61</sup> It should be recalled that the owners of these properties were both influential politicians, Fredrick Clissold,<sup>62</sup> a Councillor on the Ashfield Council (On Chong & Co.) and William A. Long MLA (Sun Kum Tiy & Co.). Sun Kym Tiy & Co.'s premises were finally released from quarantine on 13 August 1881,<sup>63</sup> resulting in nearly two months' loss of business.

The effects of the smallpox outbreak and subsequent quarantine on the Chinese population has been documented by P.H. Curson who concludes: "the epidemic caused a degree of suffering and human tragedy out of all proportion to the numbers actually involved".<sup>64</sup> He cites the example of the cleansing and scavenging operation ordered by the Mayor, stating: "The Chinese, never well treated at the best of times, had a hard time of it. Their houses and shops were subjected to more drastic measures than the general population".<sup>65</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 487.

<sup>55</sup> No reference was made to the frequency of payment, but it can be assumed that these amounts were monthly payments.

<sup>56</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Curson, P.H., *Times of Crisis: Epidemics in Sydney 1788–1900* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1985), pp. 90–119.

<sup>58</sup> Those riots led directly to the colonial government passing Chinese immigration restriction legislation – the first of a number of such attempts to restrict the entry of Chinese immigrants into New South Wales.

<sup>59</sup> *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 1881, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 3 September 1881, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 25 July 1881, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Fredrick Clissold (1831–1892) – wool merchant, businessman and developer, reputed to be wealthiest citizen of Ashfield in late nineteenth century; "Clissold, Frederick", *Dictionary of Sydney*, [https://dictionaryofsydney.org/person/clissold\\_frederick](https://dictionaryofsydney.org/person/clissold_frederick), and *WikiTree*, <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Clissold-17>, accessed 16 April 2019.

<sup>63</sup> *Evening News*, 15 August 1881, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Curson, P., *Times of Crisis: Epidemics in Sydney 1788–1900*, p. 90.

<sup>65</sup> Curson, P., *Times of Crisis: Epidemics in Sydney 1788–1900*, p. 107.

Three years on, the NSW government agreed to pay compensation to those detained in quarantine (but not loss of business, it appears). It was reported that Sun Kum Tiy & Co. received £305, as part of a total of £9,912 11s 5d for all properties detained,<sup>66</sup> and yet the firm had been prevented from trading for almost two months as a result of the official response to the smallpox outbreak. They would also have had to endure the personal stigma of belonging to the Chinese community who were vilified and blamed (wrongly) for the outbreak of the epidemic, especially as their establishment was next door to the location where the outbreak was originally thought to have occurred.

#### *A Growing Business*

In the thirty years that the firm operated in Sydney (1865 to 1895) Sun Kum Tiy & Co grew to be one of the largest Chinese merchant firms in the country and, along with On Chong & Co., they were the largest in New South Wales. This was certainly the view of the general public at that time, as evidenced by a number of newspaper articles. For example, the Sydney-based *Australian Town and Country Journal* for a number of years included a feature titled “Answers to Correspondents”, where subscribers sent in questions to be answered by the journal. In 1878 the following answer appeared: “There are numerous Chinese storekeepers in Sydney. Sun Kum Tiy and On Chong, Lower George-street, are some of the principal”.<sup>67</sup> In 1880 another reader asked: “Give name and address of firm (Chinese) which has been established for twenty years or so in Sydney, and have many large stores in country towns in New South Wales?” The printed reply nominated Sun Kum On and Sum Kum Tiy.<sup>68</sup>

The 1879 interview of Chun Soy revealed that the firm had eight branches in New South Wales, four in Queensland and one in the Islands including a “trading vessel”.<sup>69</sup> Earlier, in an interview given by Kum Tiy, he revealed that he himself had thirteen branches in New South Wales, fifteen in Victoria, two in Queensland and nine in New Zealand.<sup>70</sup> This difference in branch stores over the three-year interval between the newspaper reports might be an indication of the fluidity of merchant activities associated with a fast moving mining frontier across the Australian colonies and New Zealand at that time. Alternatively, as the two interviews were from two different individuals, the different statistics quoted may be an indication of their individual personal investments – in other words, they may not always have acted corporately as the parent firm of Sun Kum Tiy & Co in staking and establishing branch stores; rather, they may have had separate individual investments in branch stores.

The 1879 article identified the cost of establishing a branch store as between £600 to £1,200 each and sometimes more, with an average cost being £1,500 each. It also noted that their Young branch store, a large brick building, cost them £3,400.<sup>71</sup> Table 4 lists the currently confirmed branch stores in which Sun Kum Tiy had an interest.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 May 1883, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 31 August 1878, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 5 June 1880, p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, 30 September 1876, p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> This list is still a work in progress.

Table 4: Selected Sun Kum Tiy branch stores

Store name	Town	Start (or earliest mention)	Finish (or latest mention)	Source
<b>New South Wales</b>				
Kum Hang Long & Co.	(Upper) Adelong: Campbell Street	Jun 1872		<i>Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser</i> , 15 Jun 1872, p. 3
			29 Jul 1876	<i>SMH</i> , 7 Nov 1876, p. 3
Kum Hang Long & Co.	Tumut (branch of Adelong store): Fitzroy Street	8 May 1874		<i>Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser</i> , 9 May 1874, p. 3
			29 Jul 1876	<i>SMH</i> , 7 Nov 1876, p. 3
Sun Kum Yee	Tambaroora: Mudgee Road	Before 1873		Pers coms: Daphne Shead (Hill End Family History)
			29 Jul 1876	<i>SMH</i> , 7 Nov 1876, p. 3
Mudgee warehouse	Mudgee	1881		<i>Riverine Grazier</i> , 21 Dec 1881, p. 4
Sun Kum Hang & Co.	Young: Main Street	Before 1868		<i>Burrangong Argus</i> , 10 Oct 1868, p. 3
			Jun 1887	<i>Burrangong Argus</i> , 11 Jun 1887, p. 3
Tong Chong & Co.	Grenfell: George Street	30 Sep 1876		<i>Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser</i> , 30 Sep 1876, p. 3
			1883?	<i>Burrangong Argus</i> , 25 Jun 1887 p 3
Sun Tong Lee (Sydney Branch Store) <sup>73</sup>	Gulgong: Herbert Street	21 Jun 1872		<i>New South Wales Government Gazette</i> , 21 Jun 1872 (No.172), p. 1596
			24 Mar 1883	<i>SMH</i> , 24 Mar 1883, p. 12
<b>Queensland</b>				
Sun Yon Lee & Co.	Millchester	Nov 1875		<i>Northern Miner</i> , 6 Nov 1875, p. 2.
			Beyond Dec 1879	<i>The Townsville Herald</i> , 13 December 1879; <i>Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser</i> , 13 Jan 1880, p. 3.
Sun Kum Toon & Co.	Townsville: Flinders Street	Sep 1869		<i>Rockhampton Bulletin and Central Queensland Advertiser</i> , 21 Sep 1869, p. 2.
			Dec 1885	<i>Brisbane Courier</i> , 9 Dec 1885, p. 3.
<b>Victoria</b>				
Sun Kum Cheong & Co. <sup>74</sup>	Bendigo: Bridge Street	Nov 1880		<i>Bendigo Advertiser</i> , 13 Nov 1880, p. 2.
			unknown	

<sup>73</sup> This store was made famous by Henry Lawson when he penned *The Ghosts of Many Christmases* writing: "Santa Claus as a Chinaman (Sun Tong Lee & Co. Storekeepers), with strange, delicious sweets that melted in our mouths, and rum toys and Chinese dolls for the children." See Cronin, E. (ed), *A Fantasy of Man: Henry Lawson Complete Works, 1901–1922* (Lansdowne, Sydney, 1984), p. 119.

<sup>74</sup> Jointly owned by Sun Kum Tiy and Lowe Kong Meng through the latter's Melbourne firm, Sun Kum Lee (see McKinnon, L., *Places Associated with Bendigo's Historic Chinese Community* (Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo, 2015), p. 67; *The Bendigo Advertiser*, 20 June 1884, p. 9).

*Insight into the Branch Store*

The example of Sun Kum Hang & Co. on Main Street, Young serves as a useful case study to gain further insight into branch stores of this era. The firm's advertisements during 1868 testify to its existence by this date.<sup>75</sup> In October 1873, they called tenders for the construction of new premises comprising a shop, warehouse and dwelling that had been designed by Mansfield Brothers, a Sydney-based architectural firm. It was previously noted from the 1879 interview that this two-storey brick and stuccoed building cost £3,400. Upon its completion it was reported: "The building will be an ornament, and presents a pleasing contrast to some of the miserable, unsightly, and inflammable hovels which cumber the town in various directions".<sup>76</sup> The new premises were officially opened on 18 May 1875 at a special function for over 100 invited guests. Interestingly, the formalities included the traditional toast to the British monarch but, on this occasion, there was also a second toast to the "young Emperor of China", "in deference to the nationality of the host".<sup>77</sup> This building became a well-recognised landmark in Young, often cited as a locational marker in relation to other businesses in their advertisements (for example, opposite / down the street from Sun Kum Hang).

Sun Kum Hang & Co. was managed along traditional line of Chinese merchants enterprises at that time, including a staff of compatriot clan/district members led by a trustworthy manager as exemplified by the employment of Willian R.G. Lee during the 1870s.<sup>78</sup>

Like many Chinese stores in country towns throughout New South Wales and elsewhere, Sun Kum Hang & Co. did not exclusively cater for a local Chinese community.<sup>79</sup> In fact, as evidenced by its advertisements in local newspapers (see Figure 2), it catered for the whole of Young and district population, trading in both Chinese and European goods.<sup>80</sup>

Sun Kum Hang & Co. was very much engaged with the local agricultural industry of the Young district – it was not just supporting the mining industry; the area around Young was said "to be amongst the finest wheat lands of New South Wales".<sup>81</sup> In response to opportunities provided by its local environment, the firm sold implements to support these industries; for example, at its closing down sale in 1890 it had chaff cutters and bailers listed for auction.<sup>82</sup> It was also licenced to store and sell explosives under the *Gunpowder and Explosive Consolidation Act of 1876*.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>75</sup> *Burrangong Argus*, 10 October 1868, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Burrangong Argus*, 28 April 1875, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 26 May 1875, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> W.R.G. Lee was naturalised at Young, New South Wales (Certificate No. 206, 18 September 1875). He later became a partner in On Yik Lee of 189–191 Lower George Street. He would be described as "a very good English and Chinese scholar .... highly esteemed amongst the Europeans and Chinese .... a very intellectual man and well read .... a great opponent to the opium trade" (*Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 479). Lee formed the Lin Yick Tong (Chinese Commercial Association) in 1892. It comprised a number of prominent Chinese merchants in Sydney at that time and included Sun Kum Tiy.

<sup>79</sup> Wilton, J., "Different Sights: Immigrants in New England" (NSW Migration Heritage Centre, Sydney, 2009), pp. 59–64; Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 47.

<sup>80</sup> Note the statement in small print half way down the advertisement which reads: "Purchased expressly for this Establishment by Mr. SUN KUM TIY from the leading firms in Sydney and Melbourne".

<sup>81</sup> Christison, R., *Thematic History of Young Shire* (NSW Heritage Office, 2008), p. 20.

<sup>82</sup> *Burrangong Argus*, 22 November 1890, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> See for example, *New South Wales Government Gazette*, No. 29, 31 January 1879, p. 405.

**IMPORTANT PUBLIC NOTICE.**

**Sun Kum Hang & Company**

ARE NOW IN RECEIPT OF THE WHOLE OF THEIR  
**SUMMER GOODS,**

CONSISTING OF

Eighty-four (84) Cases, Packages, and Cartons,  
or

**CHOICEST NEW & FASHIONABLE GOODS,**

Purchased expressly for this Establishment by Mr Sun Kum  
Tay from the leading firms in Sydney and Melbourne.

**PRINTS! PRINTS! PRINTS!**

New colors, patterns, and designs in Hoyle's, Lilliards', and  
Sheriff's best qualities. Warranted fast.  
Diaper and rich Chintz Paper.

**Dresses! Dresses! Dresses!**

The best textures and newest designs for the season. Lin-  
tries in every shade; Breasted Puff-bodices; Luneta Cloths;  
Jubalabad Figures; Victoria Tops; Norwich and Real  
French Plain and Brocaded Balmaines; French Liams; Nor-  
wich Crapes; and Chinese Silks, &c., &c.

Ladies' Shawls in all kinds; Ladies' Jackets in all the new  
shapes; Stays, Corsets, and Underclothing; Hats, Millinery,  
Flowers, Feather, Saxony, Maltese, and real Yak Laces;  
Ruffles, Ties, Ribbons, Parasutes, Umbrellas, &c., &c.

**Hosiery in the Best and Most Approved Makes.**

Family Linens, Table Damask, Coentepeano, Toilet Mar-  
cells, and Patent Terry Quilts, Plain and Damask Cloths,  
Dimity, Toweling, Sheetings, Irish Linen, Brussels Hollands,  
Plain and Fancy Drills, Horrockses' Long Cloth, Imperial and  
Double Warp Sheetings, Lace and Swiss Embroidered Cur-  
tains, Coloured Damask, Victoria, and French Cloth Covers,  
Swiss Muslin, Check Stripes &c., &c.

**BOOTS! BOOTS! BOOTS!**

For children, either for school or best wear, in all sizes.  
Ladies' best French Lasting, and other sorts, heavy and light,  
in every description.  
Boys' and Youths' Elastic-sides, Lace-ups, and Bladders, in  
all sizes.  
Gents' Elastic-sides, Lace-ups, Half-Wellingtons, and Strong  
Working Boots, &c., &c.

**Grocery, Ironmongery, Glass, Crockery,  
Furniture, and**

**THE BEST CHINESE TEA.**

The whole of the above having been marked at a small advance on original cost, will  
be justly so in asserting that on inspection they will be found the CHEAPEST  
QUALITY, and BEST ASSORTED STOCK ever offered in the Colonies.

**Sun Kum Hang & Company,**  
Sydney Branch Store,  
**MAIN STREET, YOUNG.**

Figure 2. Sun Kum Hang & Co. advertisement (*Burrangong Argus*, 2 February 1876, p. 1)

Sun Kum Hang & Co. displayed a high degree of integration into the local community as evidenced by their many civic-minded efforts and support for the town of Young over the twenty plus years they operated there. The firm, as a freeholder in the town, was a petitioner calling on the NSW colonial government to declare the Municipality of Young.<sup>84</sup> It was a regular financial subscriber to the town's hospital fund, it supported the call for the establishment of a fire brigade, and it supported later calls for financial support for the brigade. The firm was also involved in local politics, supporting certain candidates at local municipal elections.<sup>85</sup> These experiences of Sun Kum Hang & Co. are consistent with the establishment and operation of Chinese branch stores in country towns elsewhere in the Australian colonies during the period in question.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>84</sup> *New South Wales Government Gazette*, No. 112, 14 March 1882 [Supplement], p. 1465.

<sup>85</sup> *Burrangong Argus*, 19 March 1884, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 47; Williams, "Chinese Settlement in NSW", p. 20.

Noteworthy was the firm's attempt to be part of the broader community and to be fully integrated with the fortunes and future aspirations of that community. The example of Sun Kum Hang & Co. supports Janis Wilton's observation of rural Chinese stores in a post-mining phase extending their customer base to include the wider local community.<sup>87</sup> Sun Kum Hang & Co. also demonstrates the ability of these country stores (as part of a much larger organisation) to adapt to changing environmental, economic and political circumstances as Young and district evolved from a transient mining community and economy to a more stable agricultural one. Possible reasons for the firm's departure will be discussed later in relation to the overall Sun Kum Tiy account.

### *Business Partnerships*

It is clear that there was a business relationship between the Melbourne merchant Lowe Kong Meng and Sun Kum Tiy – they were, for example, joint owners of the Bendigo store of Sun Kum Cheong & Co.<sup>88</sup> Shipping records show movements of Chun Soy and Kum Tiy to Melbourne on a number of occasions, with the latter spending up to one month in Melbourne at a time. Sun Kum Tiy & Co. were involved in regular movement of goods to and from Sydney and Melbourne, particularly with Sun Kum Lee, a business controlled by Lowe Kong Meng.

During the 1870s, it was reported that Sun Kum Tiy was using an Australian source for the importation of good from London, as at that stage they did not have an agent in London.<sup>89</sup> It is highly likely that this unidentified source was Lowe Kong Meng who had a branch in London from the early 1860s.<sup>90</sup>

Drawing on a range of sources,<sup>91</sup> it is possible to identify a number of points of similarity in terms of their commercial activity, namely:

- both were sending very large amounts of money (gold sovereigns) to Point de Galle;<sup>92</sup>
- both used the Cantonese word “Kum” (meaning gold) in names of many of their branch stores;
- both were shipping agents linking ports in Hong Kong / China and the Pacific, although Lowe Kong Meng was clearly operating on a much larger scale;
- both had extensive trading networks stretching east across the Pacific to the United States / Fiji, north to China / Hong Kong, and west to India / Ceylon and onto Europe;
- both traded in Chinese as well as European goods; and
- both were significant importers of tea, although the scale of Sun Kum Tiy's imports appears to outweigh those of Lowe Kong Meng.

<sup>87</sup> Wilton, J., “Different Sights”, pp. 59–64.

<sup>88</sup> McKinnon, *Places Associate with Bendigo's Historic Chinese Community*, p. 67; *The Bendigo Advertiser*, 20 June 1884, p. 9.

<sup>89</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> Macgregor, “Lowe Kong Meng and Chinese Engagement in the International Trade of Colonial Victoria”, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7; *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, 30 September 1876, p. 2; Macgregor, “Lowe Kong Meng and Chinese Engagement in the International Trade of Colonial Victoria”, pp. 1–43; Macgregor, “Chinese Political Values in Colonial Victoria”, pp. 1–97.

<sup>92</sup> The shipping records throughout this period reveal that a number of large Sydney-based Chinese merchant firms were doing likewise.

This business relationship – which appears to have dominated Chinese merchant activities across at least three Australian colonies, New Zealand and Pacific Islands for some twenty-five years in the late colonial period – requires much more detailed investigation that is beyond the scope of this paper. Coupled with the nature of these business collaborations are associated questions involving the role of the clan and native place associations and the politics (Australian and Chinese) of the individuals concerned.

#### *Settler or Sojourner*

Returning to the paper's main focus of Kum Tiy, it is informative to consider whether he was an intended settler or sojourner. Did he, for example, intend to make Australia his home after leaving a tumultuous China wrecked by rebellion and famine and governed by a declining dynasty, all of which characterised his homeland at the time of his departure? It is also conceivable that his intentions may have changed over time as the second half of the nineteenth century progressed with changing circumstances in both Australia and China. Perhaps he was a true sojourner and merely saw Australia in terms of its economic opportunities.

This issue can first be approached through consideration of the nature of his financial investments in the colony, particularly his (and his firm's) land acquisitions. He and his firm owned (or partnered in) many branch stores throughout New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and New Zealand and a number of these premises were on land that they held in fee simple. Others, such as their main establishment in Lower George Street, the Rocks, were held on long-term leases. As previously noted, individual partners and the firm of Sun Kum Tiy & Co were registered as the freehold land owner for a number of the branch store and warehouse locations. The matter of land acquisition was taken very seriously by the merchant class. Are such actions those of someone who intended to stay or merely to take advantage of circumstances for financial gain with indifference to the issues of settlement?

A second indicator of possible settlement intentions can be examined through the nature and level of his engagement with the colonial administration, especially on matters that influenced and impacted on his (and his countrymen's) standing in a future community and country of residence. The records provide some excellent indications in this regard and include a number of significant petitions, memorials and pledges, as well as deputations that now form part of the history of this country. Sun Kum Tiy is a prominent signatory on the examples listed in Table 5. In the case of the petitions to the 1888 Intercolonial Conference on the Chinese Question, he was one of the six prominent Chinese merchants that signed "on behalf of the Chinese residents of Australia and New Zealand".

Were these the actions of someone seeking a secure and equitable society in which to reside? Were they a demonstration of personal and community loyalty and respect for the authorities of an intended new country of residence?

Table 5: Formal engagements with colonial administration involving Sun Kum Tiy

Date	Formal engagement with colonial administration	Source
March 1868	Pledge of loyalty and support for HRH Prince Albert from the Chinese community of New South Wales	<i>New South Wales Government Gazette</i> , No 79, 31 March 1868
August 1878	Letter to Editor of Sydney Morning Herald rebutting anti-Chinese movements for restricted Chinese immigration into the colony	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> , 5 August 1878, p. 6
February 1879	Petition from Chinese residents in NSW to Legislative Assembly protesting against proposed legislation to discriminate against Chinese immigrants entering the colony	Petition Presented to Legislative Council of NSW, 21 March 1879, LCTP 1879 85-237_116_NSW Parliamentary Archives, Parliament House, Sydney; <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> , 18 February 1879, p. 3
June 1887	Address signed by 32 of Sydney's leading merchants and the two visiting Imperial Chinese Commissioners presented to the Governor for forwarding to Queen Victoria to commemorate her jubilee	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> , 14 June 1887, p. 6
June 1888	Memorial (Petition) to the Intercolonial Conference on the Chinese Question	<i>Daily Telegraph</i> , 13 June 1888, p. 5; NSW LC, <i>Conference on Chinese Question</i> (Government Printer, Sydney, 1888), p. 13
June 1888	Second Memorial to Intercolonial Conference on the Chinese Question	NSW LC, <i>Conference on Chinese Question</i> (Government Printer, Sydney, 1888), p. 14
October 1890	Farewell Address from leading Chinese residents of Sydney to Lord Charles Carrington	Quong Tart & Family Papers, 1831–1940, ML MSS 5094; ML 1527/64, State Library of NSW; <i>Evening News</i> , 31 October 1890, p. 5
March 1893	Petition of Appreciation from the NSW Chinese community to Earl of Jersey, retiring Governor	Quong Tart & Family Papers, 1831–1940, ML MSS 5094; ML 1527/64, State Library of NSW; <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> , 6 March 1893, p. 3
March 1893	Petition from Chinese community of NSW to Sir Robert Duff on assuming governorship	Quong Tart & Family Papers, 1831–1940, ML MSS 5094; ML 1527/64, State Library of NSW
March 1895	Petition from the NSW Chinese community to Lady Duff on the death of her husband, the Governor Sir Robert Duff	<i>Australian Star</i> , 18 March 1895, p. 2

A third indicator of possible settlement intentions relates to his philanthropic activities. Leaders of overseas Chinese communities were expected to undertake a high degree of charity that would demonstrate their leadership status.<sup>93</sup> This was evident in the case of Sun Kum Tiy. His philanthropic activities at the local Sydney / colony scale started during the very first year that he was domicile in the colony (1865) and extended through to 1896 – the year Sun Kum Tiy & Co. closed their business in New South Wales. These examples demonstrate a diversity of beneficiaries, with the Prince Alfred Hospital Fund being the recipient of consistent subscriptions over a number of years. There appears to be a preference for hospitals, benevolent societies and institutions that provided support for the needy. It could be concluded that he was favouring those organisations that supported his fellow countrymen who were impoverished, sick or injured.

At the international level, the scale and nature of his philanthropic activities were no different. For example, between 1876 and 1879, one of the most severe droughts ever resulted in the Northern Chinese Famine with estimates of upwards to thirteen million deaths. The local

<sup>93</sup> Macgregor, Paul, "Chinese Political Values in Colonial Victoria: Lowe Kong Meng and the Legacy of the July 1880 Election", in Couchman, S. & Bagnall, K. (eds), *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 79, quoting Yong, C.F., "Chinese Leadership in Nineteenth Century Singapore", *Journal of the Island Society* (Department of Chinese Studies, University of Singapore, 1967), pp. 1–6.

Sydney response from its Chinese merchants and residents was to establish the Chinese Famine Fund to offer relief to those affected in their homeland. It was subsequently reported that a committee of nine was appointed to raise subscriptions for this fund. Sun Kum Tiy & Co. was appointed to this committee, and along with On Chong & Co., was designated treasurer of the fund.<sup>94</sup>

In February 1888, a meeting of Chinese merchants and residents of Sydney resolved to open subscriptions to provide relief to victims of the disastrous Yellow River Floods. Sun Kum Tiy was appointed one of the four treasurers to oversee the fund.<sup>95</sup> Both of these activities demonstrate what Paul Macgregor noted in similar cases in Victoria, as a “sense of pan-Chineseness, above and beyond particularist interests of district of origin, dialect and business dealings .... (demonstrating) .... an extraordinarily early involvement by overseas Chinese in a non-political, non-government campaign in China”.<sup>96</sup>

Maintaining his international benevolent focus, Sun Kum Tiy was a substantial subscriber to the 1880 Irish Distress Relief Fund.<sup>97</sup> Thus, these initiatives provided merchants like Kum Tiy with the ability to enhance their international transactions and contacts, which as noted, was crucial to the establishment and maintenance of their international trading networks.

The above level of philanthropic activities would have supported leadership claims among the local Chinese community, but they do not fit the model of a typical sojourner.

A fourth indicator of possible settlement intentions is provided by his standing within the Chinese community, in Sydney and elsewhere. Examples that suggest Kum Tiy’s standing in the local Chinese community are set out below.

Sun Kum Tiy hosted many meetings and functions at his Lower George Street premise. It was at these meetings that some significant decisions were reached affecting the Chinese community of Sydney and the colony. During the 1880s, when issues around the Chinese Question were prevalent, Sun Kum Tiy’s premise were used to convene meetings of merchants and other leading Chinese citizens to strategise and organise their responses to the anti-Chinese and government actions. Examples include the 1888 *Afghan* incident, when Chinese passengers were refused entry into the colony.<sup>98</sup>

During the Chinese New Year’s celebrations of 1890, the Chinese merchants hosted the festivities where it was reported: “The houses which were most visited were those of On Chong and Co. and Sun Kum Tiy & Co, where the decorations were on a grand scale; but on all hands guests were liberally entertained, no distinction being drawn at rank or nationality”.<sup>99</sup> During the early 1890s, Sun Kum Tiy’s premises were used to host events of the emergent Lin Yick Tong, commonly referred to as the Chinese Merchants’ Society, but more strictly, the Chinese Commercial Association.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>94</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 May 1878, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 1888, p. 12.

<sup>96</sup> Macgregor, “Chinese Political Values in Colonial Victoria”, pp. 53–97.

<sup>97</sup> *Evening News*, 22 January 1880, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 May 1888, p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 January 1890, p. 6.

<sup>100</sup> *Evening News*, 8 March 1893, p. 6.

In 1887, two Imperial Chinese commissioners, General Wong Yung-Ho and Mr U Tsing visited the Australian colonies as part of their year-long mission throughout South-East Asia ordered by the Chinese authorities, which in the case of the Australian colonies was “to ascertain the condition of the Chinese people, and the general character and trade of the colony”.<sup>101</sup> The commissioners’ New South Wales visit was hosted by six leading members of the Chinese community, namely: On Lee, Quong Tart, Sun Kum Tiy, Kum On, Yun Sat and See On.<sup>102</sup> As a member of this group, Kum Tiy played a prominent role during their nearly three-month long visit to the colony of New South Wales, including hosting functions in their honour, visits around Sydney and accompanying them on calls on the Governor and senior members of the colonial government.<sup>103</sup>

Paul Macgregor has suggested that in the case of the Victorian host and visit organiser, Lowe Kong Meng (Sun Kum Tiy’s business associate), his commitment to the visit indicated his support for the Qing government.<sup>104</sup> Can this conclusion be similarly drawn for Kum Tiy and his Sydney collaborators – after all he did serve in the EVA which, as part of the Imperial Army, was in the service of the Qing government.

During a number of interviews, General Wong Yung-Ho revealed his connection to past events in Kum Tiy’s earlier life in China. It was reported that he commented: “The ‘Ever-victorious army’ was the pride of China .... It was a distinguished army made up of good and brave men ....”.<sup>105</sup> He went on to explain his role during these times: “I spoke English, for I had learnt it as a child, that I came to meet Gordon, for I was the mediator, between him and the Commander-in-Chief, as Gordon could speak no Chinese, and Li no English”. It would be interesting to learn if General Wong Yung-Ho and Kum Tiy exchanged their personal experiences in relation to their participation in this significant event in Chinese history.

Continuing with the consideration of a fourth indicator of possible settlement intentions and Kum Tiy’s standing within the Chinese community leads to the consideration of Kum Tiy’s membership and role within various social organisations and county societies. On the matters of his county/district of origin and what associations he may have belonged to during his twenty-five years in the colony, the records are not conclusive. However, as previously noted, his very close association with William R.G. Lee (Young branch store manager of Sun Kum Hang & Co. and later partner in the Chungshan store of On Yik Lee & Co.) and his son-in-law Lee Liy (a native of Chungshan), it has been concluded that Kum Tiy was also likely to have been a native of Chungshan county.

The best estimates of the breakdown of the Sydney Chinese population into district groups throughout this period place the Chungshan proportion at 40 percent, by far the largest of any group.<sup>106</sup> This large number of fellow like-district countrymen gave Sun Kum Tiy a large group to recruit from as well as a large human catchment for patronage of his various businesses.

<sup>101</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1887, p. 4

<sup>102</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1887, p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 May 1887, p. 8; 19 May 1887, p. 7; 26 May 1887, p. 7; 13 July 1887, p. 9; and 21 July 1887, p. 7.

<sup>104</sup> Macgregor, “Chinese Political Values in Colonial Victoria”, p. 81.

<sup>105</sup> *Kerang Times and Swan Hill Gazette*, 3 June 1887, p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> Price, C.A., *The Great White Walls are Built: Restrictive Immigration to North America and Australasia, 1836–1888*, (Canberra: Australian Institute of International Affairs with ANU Press, 1974), p. 80, 218; Williams, “Chinese Settlement in NSW”, p. 90.

During the first half of its existence, the EVA contained Cantonese recruited soldiers who, along with Northerners, were considered superior troops to those from Kiangsoo and Chekiang.<sup>107</sup> A Chungshan location, in proximity to Canton and Hong Kong and the communication networks of the Pearl River Delta, would have placed Kum Tiy in an excellent geographical position to hear about events external to his local district (that is, the opportunities for recruitment in the EVA and later the opportunities provided in Australia) and to access Hong Kong for transport.

If Kum Tiy had Chungshan origins then he would likely have belonged to either or both of two native-place societies formed during the 1870s by Chungshan people in Sydney, namely: the Yam Tak Tong and the Bow On Tong.<sup>108</sup> A prominent leader of the former was William Pow Chee, who was a close friend of Way Shong, the Chinese doctor who treated Sun Kum Tiy. Pow Chee may also have managed branch stores for Sun Kum Tiy.<sup>109</sup> In the case of the Bow On Tong, it was later located in the premises of On Yik & Lee Co. when that firm was established in 1890 by W.R.G. Lee, a close associate of Kum Tiy.<sup>110</sup> Thus these personal connections link Kum Tiy closely to both societies.

As a senior merchant in the colony, it is highly likely that Kum Tiy was also a member of the Koong Yee Tong. As Mei-fen Kuo has noted, this was just not a native-place association for the Tungkun district but also served as a merchant club with its controlling power lying with the merchants.<sup>111</sup> Its 600 scattered members fit a distribution pattern of merchants and storekeepers spread out around the colony.<sup>112</sup> Kuo provides additional support for this assumption when she argues that the Koong Yee Tong was originally established in the 1860s and enlarged its scope during the mid 1870s.<sup>113</sup> This evolutionary picture fits well with the arrival of Kum Tiy and the rise of Sun Kum Tiy & Co. and their activities. The Koong Yee Tong's close connections with Hong Kong's Tung Wah Hospital provided complimentary support to Sun Kum Tiy's international trading activities networks. Yuen Tah,<sup>114</sup> a manager for Sun Kum Tiy & Co. for fifteen years<sup>115</sup> and an identified member of the Koong Yee Tong, provides additional support to the Kum Tiy – Koong Yee Tong theory.<sup>116</sup>

Kum Tiy (or his firm) must also have been one of the eight founding member of the Lin Yik Tong (Chinese Merchants' Society), founded in 1892,<sup>117</sup> as his firm hosted meetings and functions of the organisation at their 225 Lower George Street premises.<sup>118</sup> The objective of the association was to do charitable work, promote business relations among merchants, and mediate disputes

<sup>107</sup> Wilson, *The "Ever-Victorious Army"*, p. 127.

<sup>108</sup> Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 190.

<sup>109</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia*, p. 36.

<sup>111</sup> Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>112</sup> Williams, "Chinese Settlement in NSW", p. 91; *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 480.

<sup>113</sup> Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia*, pp. 16, 36.

<sup>114</sup> Yuen Tah established a furniture business at Pymont in 1891.

<sup>115</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 117.

<sup>116</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, pp. 117–119.

<sup>117</sup> Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, pp. 81–82.

<sup>118</sup> *Evening News*, 8 March 1893, p. 6.

in the Chinese community. This organisation went beyond the traditional clan or native-place associations which had dominated colonial Chinese society and serves as an early example of later Chinese-Australian corporate structuring.<sup>119</sup>

A fifth indicator of possible settlement intentions of Kum Tiy is provided by his standing within the broader community in Sydney and elsewhere. An insight into Kum Tiy's degree of social acceptance can be gained through a number of selected personal testimonials that exist on the public record. For example, a statement from Thomas Buckland,<sup>120</sup> in support of the Chinese merchants seeking an audience with the Colonial Secretary commented: "It had been charged against the Chinese that they were not sufficiently intellectual. He ventured to say that if we had a competent scholar to examine Mr Sum Kum Tiy, for instance, even that statement might be disproved".<sup>121</sup>

A further insight into his standing within the Chinese and broader communities comes from a Central Police Court event involving a trial of seven Chinese for gambling. Describing the overcrowded court, it was reported: "The court was thronged, numbers being unable to obtain admission and there were 16 magistrates on the bench. On Chong and Sum Kum Tiy, Chinese merchants, were accommodated with seats on the bench".<sup>122</sup> Consistent with the times, other newspaper editorials reported this unusual set of circumstances with indignation. Under the heading, "The Country in Danger", an editorial in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* read:

The members of the various anti-Chinese leagues would have been horrified had they attended the Central Police Court on Wednesday morning during the hearing of the Goulburn-street fan-tan cases. Two Chinese merchants, viz., Messrs. On Chong and Sum Kum Tiy, were accommodated with seats on the bench beside the magistrates. And they call this a Christian land!<sup>123</sup>

The final report of the 1891–1892 Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling provides further insight into Kum Tiy's character and standing. Testimony of R.V. Kelly, Secretary of the Anti-Chinese Gambling League and a grocer and resident of George Street, when asked to nominate "any legitimate Chinese places of business in that locality" cited Sun Kum Tiy among the few he could remember. He further stated that he could not say that gambling or opium smoking was carried out on these premises.<sup>124</sup> These views were confirmed by a host of other testimonies from: H.J. Maguire, photographer and long time resident of Lower George Street; E.R. Bowker, a carpenter and a self-confessed gambler; William Law, manager of John Gee & Company, storekeeper of Lower George Street; W. Pow Chee, school master and interpreter; Reverend P. Le Rennetel, Roman Catholic priest, St Patrick's Parish, Church Hill; and Senior Constable Beadsman. All of these witnesses nominated Sun Kum Tiy as a respectable Chinese merchant. These testimonials and other evidence were summed up in the 1891–1892 Royal

<sup>119</sup> Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*, p. 182.

<sup>120</sup> Thomas Buckland, merchant, pastoralist and banker; director of the Bank of New South Wales and Colonial Sugar Refining Co.; president of the former (1886–1894) and chairman of latter (1883 and 1891–1893). R. F. Holder, 'Buckland, Thomas (1814–1896)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/buckland-thomas-171/text4605>, published first in hardcopy 1969, accessed online 25 October 2019.

<sup>121</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 1879, p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 15 May 1880, p. 6.

<sup>123</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 14 May 1880, p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 31.

Commission's final Inspection Report which cited No. 225 Sun Cum (sic) Tiy as: "another old and wealthy firm, well respected and in good repute".<sup>125</sup>

In discussing the Chinese community of the Rocks in the nineteenth century, Jane Lydon has outlined the salient features of Chinese merchant culture including: risk-taking; the development of business organisations such as native-place organisations; a comprehensive system of welfare; and the development of philanthropy facilitated by wealth as a social strategy used to acquire status and vertical mobility.<sup>126</sup> The foregoing description of Kum Tiy's business and social activities demonstrates that he displayed a high degree of Jane Lydon's salient features of the Chinese merchant 'culture'. It is clear that in the early years, Kum Tiy and his partners took risks in establishing their Sydney-based merchant business, especially in terms of the levels of investment they were prepared to make. He also displayed a high degree of business confidence and boldness in establishing his extensive network of branch stores throughout Australasia (including the firm's South Pacific ventures). It is highly likely that he had at his disposal a number of native-place organisations to support his various charitable ventures, and to extend his influence over a large proportion of the Chinese community, which no doubt also consolidated his customer base. This would have been particularly the case during his early years in the colony until the wane of such associations in the 1890s.<sup>127</sup> By then Kum Tiy was well established both as a respected leader within the local Chinese community and as an esteemed Chinese leader by the wider European community and administration of the colony. His social status was further enhanced through his well-developed and generous philanthropic activities.

The second half of the 1870s represents the zenith of Sun Kum Tiy' & Co.'s tenure in Australia, with the 1880s reflecting a very successful era for their business ventures and for the social advancement of its partners, both within the Chinese diaspora and the wider European community. On the basis of these circumstances, it would be expected that Kum Tiy would be set for a very comfortable later life in his adopted country of twenty-five years. However, the 1891–1892 Royal Commission's report stated that all of Sun Kum Tiy & Co.'s partners were back in China and that a nephew of one of the partners was winding up the business with power of attorney from China.<sup>128</sup> The 1891 Census recorded eight males residing at the Sun Kum Tiy's premises – with the name of "Gee Kin" written against the name of "Sun Kum Tiy".<sup>129</sup> Could he have been the nephew referred to in the 1891–1892 Royal Commission's report?

<sup>125</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 479.

<sup>126</sup> Lydon, J., "The Chinese Community in the Rocks Area of Sydney: Cultural Persistence and Exchange" in H. D. Chan, A. Curthoys, and N. Chiang (eds), *The Overseas Chinese in Australasia: History, Settlement and Interactions – Proceedings from the Symposium, Taipei, 6–7 January 2001, Monograph 3* (Canberra: Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian Nations University, 2001), p. 118.

<sup>127</sup> Kuo, "The Chinese Australian Herald and the Shaping of a Modern 'Imagined' Chinese Community in 1890s Colonial Sydney", p. 34.

<sup>128</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 479.

<sup>129</sup> New South Wales Census Collector's Book, 1891 Census, CD 81, County of Cumberland, Gipps Ward.

### Opportunities Lost

The end of an era came with the following Public Notice placed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 4 July 1896:

The Business carried on by SUN KUM TIY  
at 225 George-street North, will be CLOSED from this date.

July 4, 1896 SUN KUM TIY.<sup>130</sup>

The records show a progressive disposal of country store assets leading up to this 1896 announcement (see Table 4).

It remains to speculate why Sun Kum Tiy did not remain in Australia after consolidating his financial success, achieving high status within the Chinese community and receiving further recognition within the broader Australian community. Consideration of his decision to leave Australia and motives to return to China can be examined through a number of lenses, including:

- disincentives at play that challenged his acquired lifestyle and business aspirations;
- a changing local environment;
- the move towards federation of the Australian colonies;
- a changing world (in particular, a changing China and the emergence of modern business practices); and
- the intersection with tradition.

On the question of disincentives, these may have been constraints or perceived barriers to him that prevented the continuation of his businesses and his desired lifestyle in Australia. For example, Shirley Fitzgerald has argued that the restrictive laws of the colonies hampered investment and contributed to many Chinese firms deciding to invest back in China or in Hong Kong.<sup>131</sup> It is possible that Kum Tiy reached the same conclusion, although it was probably a combination of factors that influenced his decision to relocate back to China.

The negative economic, social and personal effects that Kum Tiy experienced as a result of the 1880s smallpox outbreak, and the government and community responses to the Chinese community and to himself and his firm, cannot be dismissed. The 1880s, the period leading up to Kum Tiy's departure, witnessed an increase in anti-Chinese sentiment throughout the colonies. In New South Wales, this anti-Chinese movement led to the passing of new legislation that limited Chinese immigration to Australia and fostered an image of Australia as an exclusively white community. These discouraging turns towards a less inclusive society would not have helped Kum Tiy to frame a positive attitude to remain in a country where he had endeavoured to make a positive economic and social contribution for some twenty-five odd years.

It is not inconceivable that Kum Tiy was also discouraged by Quong Tart's failed efforts to be fully accepted on equal terms as British "simply by adopting Australian values and adopting the

<sup>130</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 July 1896, p. 12. Presumably this was directed by the nephew with power of attorney from the partners.

<sup>131</sup> Fitzgerald, *Red Tape Gold Scissors*, pp. 66-67.

British-Australian way of life".<sup>132</sup> His very close association with Quong Tart would have provided him with first-hand witness to this exclusion.

Changing relationships with respect to business partner/s (including their return to China), or death in the 1888 case of Melbourne-based Lowe Kong Meng, could also have influenced Kum Tiy's decision to discontinue in Australia and return to China.

The increasingly restrictive immigration legislation across the colonies also negatively affected the Chinese population across Australia during the 1890s (and beyond). This corresponded with structural changes to communities across the country. Mei-Fen Kuo notes that:

clan-based organisations were losing traction in the urban environment, so too were other, previously significant, forms of Chinese organization. From the late 1890s shared native place, kinship and imperial rank were no longer sufficient to claim leadership of an increasingly 'modern' urban Chinese community.<sup>133</sup>

Judging from the 1891–1892 Royal Commission's report, Kum Tiy and his partners had decided to return to China before the inquiry and the 1892–1893 depression that followed. However, that depression was probably a cause for the lag between their initial decision to cease operations in Australia sometime before 1891 and their eventual closure in 1896.

Other changes played themselves out at the local levels during the late 1880s and early 1890s in Sydney as well as in the non-metropolitan regions of the colony. By the end of the nineteenth century, the commercial and social importance of the Rocks – which housed the majority of the city's wealthy Chinese merchants, who had relied on access to shipping, imports, and new arrivals at this harbourside end of George Street – was on the wane. Rising in importance was the Haymarket area, which now contained the Belmore Markets where growing numbers of Chinese were associated with the wholesale fruit and vegetable market.<sup>134</sup> Shirley Fitzgerald has described this move as "the changing balance between sojourning and staying".<sup>135</sup>

Major changes were also commencing at the national level, with moves towards a federation of the Australian colonies led by advocates such as the New South Wales Premier, Sir Henry Parks. This push for federation brought into focus the question as to whether there was a place in the new emerging Commonwealth of Australia for ethnic non-English minorities? While there was support for federation from some of the Chinese Australian population, for others who saw themselves as outsiders, these prospects might have been confronting and painful. After years of efforts engaged with the colonial administrations on behalf of Chinese community on such matters, it is conceivable that Kum Tiy presents as an example of those that John Fitzgerald describes: "Some of them grew tired of waiting and left".<sup>136</sup>

The end of the nineteenth century also witnessed many changes across a range of fronts, especially in China. China was showing signs of modernisation across a number of spheres, particularly in economic and political circles. Did these emerging trends in China provide

<sup>132</sup> Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>133</sup> Kuo, "The Chinese Australian Herald and the Shaping of a Modern 'Imagined' Chinese Community in 1890s Colonial Sydney", p. 36.

<sup>134</sup> Kuo, "The Chinese Australian Herald and the Shaping of a Modern 'Imagined' Chinese Community in 1890s Colonial Sydney", p. 35–36; Lydon, "The Chinese Community in the Rocks Area of Sydney", p. 118.

<sup>135</sup> Fitzgerald, *Red Tape Gold Scissors*, p. 112.

<sup>136</sup> Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*, p. viii.

encouraging and positive signs for early immigrant Chinese such as Kum Tiy to reconsider a future back in their homeland? The lead-up to the twentieth century also witnessed many changes in the business arena. For example, the dominance of the Chinese merchants in the Australia–China trade was on the wane. This period also heralded the beginning of the transformation of the traditional Chinese firm including the modernisation of business practices borrowed from the west but adapted to Chinese situations.<sup>137</sup>

Coupled with many of the previously discussed local and global changes is the issue raised by Mei-fen Kuo regarding the Sydney Chinese commercial elite.<sup>138</sup> Why was Kum Tiy unable or unwilling to make the transition to the “new urban elite”? These transformations, along with significant changes to global transport and financial systems, required a significant degree of adaptability. While Kum Tiy had demonstrated adaptability through his time in business, it remains to speculate if he was prepared to deal with these emerging mega-changes at this stage in his life when he would have been in his early 70s.

Finally, the issue of possible motives for Kum Tiy’s return to China needs to consider his possible intersections with tradition. C.F. Yong, for example, provides the dominant reasons for the return of overseas Chinese immigrants, being:

- to return home with honour and wealth; and/or
- a love for the native land – returning to where you belong (“upon the roots of the tree rests falling leaves”).<sup>139</sup>

Did these age old traditional factors weigh heavily on Kum Tiy’s mind? Yong’s latter reasons probably applied more in Kum Tiy’s case. He arrived in Sydney in 1864–1865 with sufficient financial resources to immediately commence a business partnership which was to flourish for the next twenty-five years. As with many first-generation Chinese, he was probably seeking home and comfort in his old age.<sup>140</sup> While his physical deformity is known, there is no indication of declining health being a factor leading to a return to his homeland.

Kum Tiy’s return may have been made easy if he had assets back in China, which he could have accumulated as his fortunes improved during his twenty-five years in New South Wales. In a letter to the editor of a South Australian newspaper under the heading, “Landed Chinese”, the Chinese writer nominated a number of leading merchants throughout the colonies who he claimed owned land in China. His list included Sun Kum Tiy.<sup>141</sup>

Interestingly, the irony of his leaving these shores was summed up many years before by a newspaper columnist, who after learning of the £37,000 initial investment (\$4 million plus in today’s value) required to establish their merchant business, made the following comment:

“£37,000! Rather a valuable class of colonists, we think, as we look at the merchant; and we cannot help calling to mind the oft expressed desire for immigrants with capital and the time when a new arrival in the colony with a twentieth part of the sum put into circulation by this Chinese and his partners,

<sup>137</sup> Chan, W.K.K., “The Organizational Structure of the Traditional Chinese Firm and Its Modern Reform”, *The Business History Review* 56 (2) (East Asian Business History: Summer, 1982), pp. 218–35.

<sup>138</sup> Kuo, “The Making of a Diasporic Identity”, p. 336.

<sup>139</sup> Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 3.

<sup>140</sup> Kum Tiy would have been in his 70s around the mid 1890s.

<sup>141</sup> *Evening Journal*, 2 October 1888, p. 2.

received a large grant of land and other advantages as a reward for their enterprise".<sup>142</sup>

Kum Tiy's circumstances not only highlight the irony of this conflicted policy but clearly demonstrates a case of "opportunities lost".

### Conclusion

The available evidence strongly suggest that the years either side of 1890 were the turning point for Kum Tiy's association with Australia. With the current evidence showing that he was back in China by 1891,<sup>143</sup> it must be assumed that a combination of the previously discussed lenses acted as "push" and "pull" factors to influence his return migration to China.

Kum Tiy was witness to, and a part of, some major historical events of the nineteenth century in both Australia and China. This brief account of his twenty-five-year contribution to the development of New South Wales, coming entirely from the written public record – as he left no known personal reflections nor accounts – is a testament to his legacy. It reveals a man who was not only a survivor but an entrepreneur, a leader, a well-respected citizen and a champion for his community.<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1879, p. 7.

<sup>143</sup> *Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force 1891–2*, p. 479.

<sup>144</sup> Susan Kum Tiy (Kum Tiy's daughter) did put down roots in Australia through her marriage to Lee Liy. By the mid 1890s she had borne her husband 11 children of whom 5 survived to adulthood.