

TWO

LIFE IN THE “NEW GOLD MOUNTAIN”

The Unwelcoming of Chinese Workers

British colonisation of Australia began in the late eighteenth century. The first colony to be established was New South Wales in 1788, followed by Tasmania in 1825, Western Australia in 1829, and South Australia in 1836. Victoria was separated from New South Wales to become an independent colony in 1851 and Queensland was established as a colony in 1859. Each colony had its own governor and its own legislature until 1901, when the six colonies joined together to form the Federation of Australia to become a country independent of Britain. In 1911 the Northern Territory was separated from South Australia.

When Lam Woo arrived in Melbourne in 1884, the inpouring of Chinese emigrants had led to a surge of anti-Chinese sentiments in Australian cities. After the transportation of convicts from England ceased in the 1840s, increasing demand for labour brought many Chinese men, mostly from Fujian province, to work as contract labourers in Sydney and as shepherds or as workers on irrigation projects for private landowners and for the Australian Agricultural Company. In addition, emigration was eased by a reciprocal agreement that the British had made with the Qing

government that the Chinese could not be excluded from residing in Australian colonies.¹ The reciprocity allowed the British to reside in treaty ports that had opened after the Opium Wars, and the Chinese to immigrate to Australia.

During the decade following the discovery of gold in Australia (1851 to 1860), around 40,000 Chinese, mostly men from Guangdong Province, had fled to Australia to escape the devastation of the Taiping Rebellion and problems associated with over-population at home. Some had become diggers while others worked in industries other than mining. Miners and politicians in New South Wales were alarmed by the large influx of Chinese. Although the Chinese came from a hotbed of anti-Qing rebellion, ironically many European miners believed that as they were “fanatically loyal to a despotic foreign emperor who could order them to rise up at any moment...”, they posed a security risk.²

In an effort to restrict Chinese immigration, in 1855 the Victorian government in Australia passed the Immigration Restriction Act, forcing those who entered Victoria to pay a £10 head tax and limiting the number of Chinese travellers per tonnage of shipping. This Restriction Act effectively reduced the number of Chinese arriving in Victoria ports in subsequent years, but the number of Chinese working in Victorian goldfields kept rising. Not wishing to lose the lucrative business of emigration, the shipping industry found a way to circumvent the payment of the head tax by landing thousands of Chinese in the port of Adelaide of South Australia between 1855 and 1857, then letting them hike an overland route to the Victorian goldfields.³

As anti-Chinese sentiment grew among European miners, in 1855 the Victorian parliament installed Chinese protectors in an attempt to organise and segregate the Chinese into camps around the goldfields. Riots against the Chinese began to break out, including those in the Buckland in 1857 and in the Lambing Flat in 1860–1861. After the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s in Victoria and New South Wales, the number of Chinese declined for a while, but the discovery of gold in Queensland in the early 1870s brought another rush of both Europeans and Chinese emigrants.

When the gold rush was finally over, the majority of the Chinese left although some stayed in Queensland where they helped to establish the banana trade.⁴

Between 1879 and 1890, 32,926 Chinese, mostly men with very few women and children, entered Australia from Hong Kong, and 28,535 left Australia for Hong Kong, which had become the port for emigration of Chinese⁵ (Table 2.1). Chinese women did not want to leave home and the governments of colonies did not allow Chinese women to enter the country. Lam was fortunate to arrive in Australia in 1884 because, after 1888, all colonies passed legislation to squeeze out Chinese immigration. Only those who had the right of abode—around 30,000—were allowed to reenter. By 1940, there were no more than 15,000 Chinese left in Australia.

Table 2.1 Number of emigrants leaving and arriving from Australia through Hong Kong

Year	Leaving for Australia	Arriving from Australia
1879	3031	2345
1880	4932	2068
1881	4345	2513
1882	1933	2359
1883	3623	1800
1884	2294	2661
1885	2336	3349
1886	2613	2186
1887	5921	2502
1888	1867	1525
1889	0	3021
1890	0	2206

Note: Data derived from Harbour Master Annual Reports, Hong Kong Sessional Papers, 1879 to 1890.

Fitting in Melbourne—Working Hard and Giving Up the Queue

In 1884 when Lam Woo reached Melbourne, the city built on the banks of the Yarra River held just under 250,000 people, and was already modern. Cable trams rattled through the city streets, and telephones and electric lights were no longer a novelty. Until 1851 Melbourne had been the main town of a large pastoral and agricultural district, but with the discovery of gold, it had become a lively, eclectic place. For a while it had seemed that almost all the men in the city had disappeared into the goldfields, but soon a huge floating population descended on the city. Shops lined the streets, stacked with spades, picks, ropes and buckets, tents and tinware for the diggers arriving from China and Europe. By 1852, almost 100,000 migrants had arrived, not all with the intention of prospecting gold. A sizable number were businessmen and middle class families who had come intending to make Melbourne into a great industrial and commercial centre.⁶

Melbourne's City Council, having the challenge of coping with the city's rapid growth during the gold rush years, established different municipalities during this period. Supplied with more than 6 million ounces of gold brought safely from the diggings to the Treasury of Melbourne, the city was able to develop much needed public amenities, including gas and water supplies; to build new bridges across the Yarra River, as well as imposing public buildings.

The supply post for new Chinese immigrants and gold prospectors was Melbourne's Chinatown, which was located at the section of Little Bourke Street between Swanston Street and Spring Street, and established in 1854 when Chinese immigrants arrived during the gold rush. When the gold rush eventually waned, the Chinese who stayed in Chinatown established themselves as storekeepers, importers, furniture-makers, herbalists, and wholesalers of fruits and vegetable. At the time of Lam's arrival, Chinatown was a thriving hub.

When Lam began working as an assistant in a general store in Chinatown, he quickly proved his worth to his employer Zengzi (曾子), who,

like other Chinese merchants, lived with his family on the floor above the store. He gave Lam a bed space at the back of the store, no doubt wondering at first whether he had been wise to hire this 14 year old boy who was short for his age. However, he soon found that Lam, having been accustomed to carrying pigs to the market in the village, was strong and industrious. After rising at five every morning, Lam went to the nearby vegetable market gardens or farms run by Chinese farmers to get huge loads of fresh vegetables and fruits. He would then arrange and lay them out in attractive displays in front of the store before Zengzi opened it for business.

It seems that market gardening was the only trade that Australians had not been able to master. As a result, there had been no trade restriction for Chinese market gardeners or farmers up to that time. The Chinese, mostly peasants from Guangdong, were excellent land cultivators who grew healthy looking leafy green vegetables, fertilizing them with human excreta which they carefully collected and allowed to mature before applying to the soil. They also regularly consulted the Chinese Almanac (Tung Shing, 通勝) which, among many other things, gives the dates according to the lunar calendar for climatic conditions which affect farmers such as the optimal time to sow the seeds and the time to harvest. Although the seasons are reversed in Australia, the farmers compensated by simply reversing their activities according to the season.

The general store where Lam worked had all kinds of goods to serve people in the community. At the back of the store, there were goods for the Chinese: bags of rice, sweetmeats, dried shrimps, dried mushrooms, preserved eggs, salted fish, Chinese medicine, brushes, fly whisks, Chinese sandals, lacquer pillows, and many other goods brought in from China. At the end of the day, Lam would follow his employer's instructions to ensure that all the goods were put back inside the store, the store was cleared of garbage and the floor watered down before closing.

Soon his employer found that he had hired a responsible young man who worked hard, respectful to him, courteous to customers, and extremely honest. Lam learned to use the abacus, quickly becoming familiar with each product and its price. His employer then added more

to his duties. Lam was asked to ensure that everything was in order at the end of the day, and to make a tally of the goods sold and the amount of cash in the cash register. After a couple of years, seeing how Lam had learned the trade of running a general store from the inside out—where to order goods, and how to deal with difficult customers—Zengzi wished that he had a filial, efficient son like Lam to pass on the business.

Shortly after arrival, Lam showed his ability to adapt and his courage by deciding to have his queue (pigtail) cut off. The hair forming the queue came only from the crown of the head, with the scalp surrounding it clean shaven. The custom of wearing queues was actually a symbol of subjugation imposed on Chinese men by the Manchus who had conquered China in 1644. The penalty for not complying was execution for treason. This custom, not abolished until the founding of the Chinese Republic in 1911, was mandatory for all Chinese men as a sign of allegiance to Manchu rule.

Things were different in the culture of this “New Gold Mountain”. Lam found that the queue attracted ridicule besides the inconvenience of carrying it around as he worked in the store. He had noticed that some Chinese immigrants, particularly those who had stayed in the “New Gold Mountain” for a long time, wore no queues. Mei Quong Tart (梅光達), a native of Taishan and a well-known leader and spokesman of the Chinese community, well-connected with the local political and social elite, had adopted the hairstyle, dress and manners of an English gentleman,⁷ and had advocated the rights of Chinese Australians. An admirer of Mei Quong Tart, Lam had his queue cut off and began to wear Western clothes. At once he felt not only a sense of freedom, but also more comfortable at work. Less conspicuous in his new look, he began to wander out of Chinatown during Sundays, the only day of rest, to explore the rest of the city of Melbourne.

When many people were still in bed on Sunday mornings, Lam would go on foot to explore the grid of the city centre’s straight, wide streets. He would walk slowly along what was then Melbourne.⁸ He would gaze at the magnificent public buildings of the city—a legacy of

the wealth acquired during the Victorian gold rush years. Over the years he would commit the elegance of the lines and grandeur of these buildings to his memory and heart. Before the end of his stay in Melbourne, he knew in his heart what he would like to be—a builder.



Figure 2.1 Victoria State Parliament Building in Melbourne⁹

Lam would walk toward east from the general store on Bourke Street where the street sweeps up to the noble façade of the city’s first public building—the Parliament House—completed in stages between 1856 and 1929 and considered by many, even today, to be one of the finest civic buildings in the world (Figure 2.1). At the height of the great boom during the gold rush years, the addition of a classical colonnade and portico facing Spring Street conferred on it a monumental character. It was while Lam was there that the huge nine Doric fluted columns of the portico with their broad flight of forty steps of 42.6 meters wide leading up to

them were being constructed. He was intrigued by the process of building of these massive columns, especially the use of lighter colour stones to construct the columns compared to the darker ones for the foundation of the building to generate a sense of solemn stability.

Lam would pause and admire another impressive building on the south of the Parliament Building—the Old Treasury Building—constructed to house the state gold vaults. Built in Italian Renaissance style, this distinctive building has a very handsome exterior, with balustrades of carved freestones of balconies and graceful windows.



Figure 2.2 Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne¹⁰

At times Lam would stroll toward a different direction toward the Royal Exhibition Building (Figure 2.2), located in Carlton Gardens, at the north-eastern edge of the central district. Built to host the Melbourne International Exhibition in 1881, it consisted of a mammoth great hall of 1,114.8 square meters and wings and annexes. Like most people at this

time, Lam was awed by the sheer size of the building, which years later, in 1901, would house the opening of Australia’s first Federal Parliament.



Figure 2.3 Law Courts of Victoria in Melbourne (www.walkingmelbourne.com)

The Law Courts (Figure 2.3), situated on the hill at the corner of Lonsdale and William Streets, with a splendid tower 8.4 square meters at its base, rose to a height of approximately 30.5 meters to a circular colonnade of 20 Ionic columns surmounted by a fine copper-covered dome. Lam wondered how such a circular dome could be built without collapsing.

The State Library (Figure 2.4), which occupies the whole city block in the northern part of the central business district of Victoria, was another favorite haunt of Lam. The library, opened in 1856, featured an inviting grassy lawn in front of its grand entrance on Swanston Street. Lam would admire the pair of bronze lions that graced the park then.¹¹



Figure 2.4 The State Library in Melbourne¹²

Coming from a small farming village of southern China, Lam was struck by the contrast between these solid-looking, stately buildings constructed with huge stones and the small village huts he knew at home. Built of mud or bricks and wood, the huts and even the ancestral hall commonly burned down, or collapsed during heavy rain. The blue-stones in Australia's buildings came from quarries throughout the northern suburbs of the city and were used in most public buildings such as the Old Melbourne Goal, Victoria Barracks, and even the St. Patrick's Cathedral.¹³

In later years when Lam became a contractor in Hong Kong, he liked to use the tough, hard granite, which could be found locally, as building material. He would obtain a licence from the Hong Kong government to quarry granite from Quarry Bay and even had granite shipped to Shanghai for building.¹⁴