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CHAPTER 2

Chinese Political Values in Colonial Victoria: Lowe Kong Meng and the Legacy of the July 1880 Election

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Abstract

Lowe Kong Meng, pre-eminent merchant and community leader of goldrush Melbourne, was active in Australian politics, self-regarded as a British subject yet engaged with the Qing dynasty, and was likely the first overseas Chinese awarded rank in the Chinese imperial service. Victoria's mid-1880 election was a watershed: the immediate aftermath was the re-introduction of regulations penalising Chinese, after over 15 years of free immigration and no official discrimination. After the election it was claimed that Lowe Kong Meng persuaded Victoria's Chinese to vote for the government, but was it in his interests to do so? This chapter examines the nature of Lowe Kong Meng's engagement in European and Chinese political activity in the colony, as well as the extent of his leadership in Chinese colonial and diasporic life. It further explores how much Lowe Kong Meng could have used that leadership to influence electoral outcomes. The chapter also examines how Lowe Kong Meng and the wider Chinese population of the colony brought changing political agendas to Victoria and developed these agendas through their colonial experiences.

Keywords

Chinese in Australia – Chinese political activity – colonial Victoria

Several members of the House are reported to have been indebted to the Celestial vote at the late contest. Kong Meng, in gratitude for having been made an Exhibition Commissioner, helped to distribute circulars written in Chinese denouncing the Liberal party, and used his influence with the same object, so that his countrymen throughout the Colony polled to a man wherever they could for the party of 'law and order'.

"Atticus" in the *Leader*, 1880 (reprinted in the *Grey River Argus*, 10 September 1880: 2)

This account in the Melbourne *Leader* claimed that the Chinese merchant Lowe Kong Meng (劉光明 *Liu Guangming* 1831–1888) was able to sway the entire 13,000 Chinese community in Victoria to vote in the July 1880 election for the conservative government led by James Service, against the radical Liberal party led by Graham Berry (Figure 2.1).¹ Atticus' claim came a year and a half after Lowe Kong Meng—along with Cheong Cheok Hong (張卓雄 *Zhang Zhuoxiong* 1851–1928) and Louis Ah Mouy (雷亞妹 *Lei Yamo* 1825–1918)—made headlines by publishing an influential pro-Chinese political tract, *The Chinese Question in Australia, 1878–79*, in Victoria (Lowe Kong Meng et al. 1879). Though there were only 13,000 Chinese in the colony at this time, public anti-Chinese agitation had resurfaced in a campaign in December 1878 directed against attempts by the Australasian Steam and Navigation Company to employ Chinese seamen. Lowe Kong Meng's lead in publishing the pamphlet as a counter to this agitation ensured him a high profile among the anti-Chinese campaigners.

The Chinese presence in Victoria in 1880 was not a major issue in that election, although the topic did get some airing in the electoral discourse. Of greater concern was debate over electoral reform of the upper house, the Legislative Council, about which there had been three years of political “agitation and turmoil in the colony” (*Argus*, 8 July 1880: 6). There was no anti-Chinese legislation on the Liberal Opposition's agenda during the July 1880 election, nor was James Service's five-month-long conservative Ministerial government of early 1880 promoting a pro-Chinese stance.²

Atticus' article appears to be the only claim published in the press of the day stating that Lowe Kong Meng was involved in the election campaign, so we should be cautious at taking the claim at face value. If Lowe Kong Meng did act as Atticus said, then the Melbourne Chinese merchant had a major role in Victorian colonial politics. This chapter attempts to assess the veracity and import of the story, by exploring Lowe Kong Meng's political views, activity and leadership during his life in Melbourne.

Lowe Kong Meng appears to have been unique among Chinese merchants in Melbourne's goldrush era in that he was equally at home among the British and European citizens that made up Victoria's colonial elite as among the Chinese merchant community. His business, political and civic activities

1 Chinese characters have been included where known to the author. However, some of the Chinese people referred to in this chapter are only known about, at this stage, through mentions in English-language newspapers.

2 This summary of the issues and parties in the July 1880 election is based on a review of articles, election reports and parliamentary debates published in the Melbourne press over the course of July, August and September 1880.



FIGURE 2.1 *Lowe Kong Meng, aged 33, Melbourne, 1863.*
THOMAS BRADLEY HARRIS PHOTO ALBUM, [HTTP://WWW.THE-EASTERN-WINDOW.COM/HARRIS27.HTML](http://www.the-eastern-window.com/harris27.html)

indicate that he was well aware of, and an active participant in, non-Chinese political life in Victoria and understood the new forms of political understanding and structures that were developing in Victoria, then one of the world leaders in the progress of democracy, open government and open society.

Lowe Kong Meng was no ordinary merchant. He rapidly rose to being the pre-eminent Chinese figure in Victoria after his arrival in Melbourne at the age of 23 in 1853. Within six years, he was importing, in today's figures, £6 million worth of supplies per ship for the 45,000 Chinese miners in the colony, and he came to dominate the import trade from Hong Kong. By the early 1860s, he was being hailed in the Melbourne press as a global trader on a gigantic scale, with few men in Melbourne wealthier than him (Macgregor 2012).

Lowe Kong Meng's career clearly illustrates that his conceptions of political jurisdiction and allegiance were imperial, transnational, multi-ethnic and multilateral in scope. Having been born in British Penang, and in his early career a trader both in the Nanyang and across the Asian seaboard, his trading from Melbourne maintained a focus on Hong Kong and the China treaty ports, India and Southeast Asia, the sugar-rich isle of Mauritius, and the colonies of Australasia. Most of the ports he dealt with were British possessions and his career developed in tandem with the growth of the British Empire in Asia and Australasia (Macgregor 2012). He also had strong relations with Chinese firms, especially in Hong Kong, and was on good terms with Qing officials. In Victoria, he was a close associate of many of the British business and political elite in the colony, and he and his English-Australian wife, Annie, were also active in elite social life. In Victoria, he was also prominent in the local Chinese community, both in terms of parochial community issues and in terms of the nascent pan-Chinese consciousness that was developing outside the political landscape of the Chinese imperial system and its opponents.

British Colonial Modernism in an Internationalist Context

Lowe Kong Meng's Penang origins provided a fertile introduction to a modernising British governance system, and this influenced his understanding of the possibilities of political activity after establishing himself in the modern British colony of Victoria. The founding of Penang as a British colony in 1786, and the encouragement by the British for Chinese to settle there, saw the implementation of methods of government and civil society that were novel to traditional Chinese society—in particular, a codified and independent legal system, practical school subjects and the publication of newspapers with free public discourse. It is likely these developments made a strong impression on

Lowe Kong Meng, who spent the first 16 years (1830–31 to 1846) of his life there. Lowe Kong Meng's business success in the English-speaking trading worlds of Australia, China and the Indian Ocean demonstrates his aptitude with using these modernist forms of civil transaction (Macgregor 2012).

Lowe Kong Meng always claimed he was a British subject, by right of birth and upbringing in a British colony (*Argus*, 24 October 1888: 16) and that this gave him the right and the capacity to engage in political debate in Victoria with other colonial Britons. His family background was one of active participation in the British governance system in Asia and support for British interests. He had an uncle who was a lawyer in the British justice system in Singapore (*Argus*, 3 June 1859: 5). His "brother was killed in the Chinese war, in the service of the East India Company" (*Argus*, 3 June 1859: 5).³ This was not unusual among the Chinese of the Straits Settlement in the 1840s and 1850s. Victor Purcell describes there being "no hint of Chinese nationalism" and "no hostility on the part of the local Chinese" in Singapore in May 1840 when "British troops intended for use in the First China War arrived and camped on the Esplanade." In 1857, at the beginning of the Second Anglo-Chinese War, there was "some ill-will towards the British . . . shown by some sections of the poorer classes." Later when Lord Elgin passed through Singapore on 6 June that year, en route to China as British High Commissioner and Plenipotentiary, he was "presented with an address by the Chinese merchants in which they referred to the great advantage the Chinese population was enjoying under British rule" (Purcell 1948: 84–85).

Lowe Kong Meng had good friends in British Calcutta, then the centre of the most up-to-date practices in the British Far East, who encouraged him to set up business in Melbourne (*Weekly Herald*, 14 August 1863: 1).⁴ His exposure to the latest practices and ideas in trade, commerce and governance also came from his ready association with a wide range of Europeans around the Asian seaboard and not just British traders. An album of 1860s photographs, collected by Yankee entrepreneur Thomas Bradley Harris, locates Lowe Kong Meng and his family in a cosmopolitan network of merchants, ships' captains, professionals and colonial officials of American, British, European and Chinese backgrounds, connecting Shanghai, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, Melbourne and New York

³ It is not specified in this news report whether this was the First Anglo-Chinese War of 1839–42 or the Second Anglo-Chinese War of 1857–60. As it is unlikely that Lowe Kong Meng had a brother old enough to take part in the First War, the Second War is the more likely event.

⁴ British Calcutta was seen as the leading city in Britain's Asian and Australasian possessions. One letter to the *Argus* stated, "What Calcutta says today, all other intelligent cities will say some day" (*Argus*, 20 May 1861: 5).

(Eastern Window 2014). This indicates that Lowe Kong Meng's understanding of modern British trade and governance in the region in the mid-19th century was that it relied upon a multinational network of agency—people who collaborated as well as competed to further their personal and national interests.

His relationships in the East and exposure to modernist forms of civil discourse did not, however, rely solely upon direct communication and personal travel. Educated in the first British school in the Far East, the Penang Free School (*Australian News for Home Readers*, 20 September 1866: 4; *Argus*, 24 October 1888: 16; Wade 2002: 27–28), and becoming fluent in English and French, he also grew up with one of the earliest modern newspapers in the Far East, the *Penang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* (Wade 2002: 30). By the time Lowe Kong Meng was an adult, hundreds of newspapers were published in English across Asia and Australasia, and the main titles were exchanged by ship, systematically and frequently, with articles often copied verbatim from one to another, or summarised, on a regular basis.⁵ Thus with a time lag of only a few weeks at a maximum, news and opinions circulated rapidly and widely, strongly enhancing a sense of international community across the region, at least among those literate in English.

Lowe Kong Meng was active across a web of ports tied by trade, mail, exchange of newspapers, personal and commercial networks, political developments and mutual interest, with Australia an integral part of this Asian colonial enterprise.

Privately owned newspapers, which often differed in their partisan approach, reported both on the events and affairs of the day and the deliberations of government and commercial activity. They also published criticism of government and policy and provided uncensored debate on a wide range of issues. Newspapers fulfilling these functions were unheard of in traditional Chinese society.⁶

5 For instance, by 1880 there were 456 newspapers in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and New Zealand (*Inangahua Times*, 3 September 1880: 2). There would have been at least one if not several in each of the other main British ports on the Asian seaboard.

6 The closest approximation to newspapers in China were the government gazettes, which reported government proclamations and activity and were issued by imperial authorities, but these were only published for the bureaucracy to read and not meant for the general public. There were also popular sheets, containing sensational news of all kinds, which were occasionally produced and sold in the cities, but are too crude and irregular to be regarded as newspapers (Chen 1967: 1–2). It was not until 1860 that the first western-style Chinese language newspaper, the *Chung Ngoi San Po* (*Sino-Foreign News*, *Zhongwai xinbao*, 中外新報), was launched in Hong Kong (Chen 1967: 18).

Lowe Kong Meng became a highly active user of the press in Melbourne, which was as modern in its form as any in the world at that stage. Over 2100 commercial advertisements and notices, placed by him or mentioning him, appeared in the Melbourne and other Australasian presses between 1853 and 1880.⁷ While there appears to be only two letters to the editor written solely by him before 1880,⁸ there are over 200 articles about his business, civic and social activities, including many reports of his involvement in legal cases and official inquiries, whether as plaintiff, defendant, interpreter or witness.⁹ Like his counterpart in Sydney, businessman Quong Tart (梅光達 *Mei Guangda*, 1850–1903), Lowe Kong Meng may have recognised the business value of publicity by way of using the media of the day (Couchman 2006). Also like Quong Tart, Lowe Kong Meng—or perhaps his wife, Annie—kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings, mostly of articles about Lowe Kong Meng but also of other articles of interest, particularly ones that reported on international affairs.¹⁰

Lowe Kong Meng's first known engagement with the Victorian government demonstrates his aptitude for operating within the new British modern forms of political agency. The occasion was when he led a delegation of Melbourne Chinese merchants to the colony's Chief Secretary, John O'Shanassy, on 30 May 1859, to discuss the Chinese miners' residence-tax strike that was raging across the goldfields.¹¹ The delegation, representing "some 200 Chinese merchants, and persons in their employ" from Melbourne, came to distance themselves from the Chinese miners' campaign and pleaded exemption for the merchants from paying the tax (*Argus*, 31 May 1859: 7). As well as Lowe Kong Meng and fellow merchants John A Luk and A Kum, the delegation had with them

7 Search of Australian newspapers in Trove (<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>) for 'Kong Meng' for 1 January 1853 to 31 December 1880 listed 2121 results. This does not include results from 1 September 1879 onwards, which refer to many mining and share reports for a range of gold mines which included 'Kong Meng' in the names of the mines. Although some of these mines had Lowe Kong Meng as a part-owner for a time, many were no longer, or never, owned by Lowe Kong Meng (searches conducted 13 and 20 November 2012).

8 In addition to a letter to the editor by Lowe Kong Meng about the Chinese residence tax strike (*Argus*, 1 June 1859: 7), he wrote another letter three years later, protesting the imposition of an increased duty on prepared opium (*Argus*, 18 June 1862: 5).

9 Search of Australian newspapers in Trove for 'Kong Meng' (in 'articles' only) for 1 January 1853 to 31 December 1880 lists 217 results. This does not include mining report results from 1 September 1879 onwards (searches conducted 13 and 20 November 2012).

10 Scrapbook held by descendants of Lowe Kong Meng.

11 For overviews of the Chinese miners residence tax strike, see Kyi 2009; Reeves & Wong-Hoy 2006: 153–74; Lovejoy 2005; Messner 2000: 63–69; Cronin 1982: 98–100; Serle 1963: 330–31.

three non-Chinese supporters: James Grant, lawyer and Member of the Legislative Assembly (M.L.A.) (Parliament of Victoria 2014a); merchant Mark Last King (who later became an M.L.A. himself) (Parliament of Victoria 2014b); and Reverend William Young, missionary to Victoria's Chinese.

King argued to O'Shanassy on behalf of the merchants that, as they were not living under the government's Chinese protectorate system operating on the goldfields, the merchants were not causing any cost to the government; hence, there was no need for them to pay the tax that funded the system. They were already repeatedly paying the poll tax of £10 per Chinese passenger arriving in Melbourne, as they travelled to and from China frequently, being engaged in a large trade importing goods from China to supply the Chinese mining population.

In attempting to gain redress for their grievances, Lowe Kong Meng and the merchants were not only adhering to the British concept of due process, they were also following traditional Chinese governance practice, which allowed for personal audiences with officials and grievances to be aired. The Chinese system, however, would not have countenanced the proceedings of that audience being broadcast publicly via a newspaper. Nor would the Chinese system have provided for a separate independent court, to which Lowe Kong Meng was able to take his challenge on the next day when their grievances were not addressed (*Argus*, 3 June 1859: 5; *Bendigo Advertiser*, 4 June 1859: 2).

The fact that Lowe Kong Meng also took the opportunity of writing a letter to the editor of the Melbourne *Argus* stating his views on the matter shows that he was keen to follow the modern British political practice of attempting to directly influence public opinion on government policy, by making his own stance on the issue a part of the public discourse and also by declaring how the Chinese in Melbourne were aware of, and keen to follow, the appropriate contemporary British governance procedure. He reprimanded the editor for impugning the sincerity and respectfulness of Melbourne's Chinese merchants. He highlighted that the "public meeting of the Chinese merchants" prior to the deputation to O'Shanassy "was a quiet and orderly one." Finally, Lowe Kong Meng demanded that the editor demonstrate the implication in the article about the meeting with O'Shanassy, that the Chinese in Melbourne would "evinced any symptoms of lawlessness or insubordination." Lowe Kong Meng asserted that:

The wording of our memorial [to the Chief Secretary] is free on the one hand from disrespect, and on the other from obsequiousness. We have unfortunately not succeeded in obtaining a favourable reply to our memorial, but we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have gone the

proper and constitutional way to work to have our grievances redressed. We still live in hope that the obnoxious Act will be done away with (*Argus*, 1 June 1859: 7).

After the failure of the delegation to get satisfaction from the Chief Secretary, Lowe Kong Meng pressed the case in another way by taking the personal step of refusing to pay the tax himself on the grounds that he was a British subject. He went to court to prove the point, arguing that his birth in the British dependency of Penang qualified him as being British. The court was unsure on the matter, and although the Bench rejected his argument, it agreed to his request to pay a one shilling fine, to give him the chance for an appeal to the Supreme Court (*Argus*, 3 June 1859: 5).

Active in Colonial Elite Society in Victoria

Lowe Kong Meng did not just engage with colonial authorities in Victoria when he had an issue that needed redress. From the late 1850s to the 1880s, he was also actively involved in the top levels of British colonial society in Victoria. This elite comprised eminent entrepreneurs and mining magnates as well as the squatter gentry and government officials, all of whom had the right to participate in politics and influence government decisions through personal and public affiliations. Such people became a natural local community for the cosmopolitan wealthy gentleman that Lowe Kong Meng had become. It is evident that his desire to be a part of this social class, and the ease by which he could mix with them, was reciprocated by this elite. Thus, in the free political environment that developed in Victoria in the 1850s, Lowe Kong Meng found himself socially among those who had direct political influence. Unlike British Asian ports and colonies, the Australasian colonies had recently acquired their own representative government, with parliamentarians elected in Victoria by secret ballot from 1856—the first in the world (Serle 1963: 208–10; Doyle 1951: 64–65)—and utilising a universal male franchise in Victoria since 1857 (Serle 1963: 273; Doyle 1951: 68). Lowe Kong Meng would have been astonished by such a degree of parliamentary democracy, allowing for public debate and changes of government as well as government policies, plus the concept of a loyal but combative opposition. He would also have been astonished by the fact that all adult males, of whatever level of income or education, could participate, via the vote and free public debate, in choosing who would form the government. However, the fact that parliamentarians in Victoria received no payment—until 1886—meant that only men of means could afford to be

elected (Doyle 1951: 68) and it was among such circles of the non-Chinese that Lowe Kong Meng associated.

The inclusion of English émigrés James Grant and Mark Last King as part of the delegation to O'Shanassy was not just a temporary connection for a specific political action. Mark Last King stated in the meeting that he had acted as an agent for Chinese merchants in Melbourne for many years. King and Grant were also lifelong friends of Lowe Kong Meng, with both Lowe Kong Meng and Grant being pallbearers at King's funeral in 1879 (*Argus*, 17 February 1879: 4).¹²

Lowe Kong Meng also engaged with the European business elite of Victoria in founding new enterprises, particularly as an avid investor in Victorian joint-stock companies, another institution novel to Chinese society of the day.¹³ He was often a founding shareholder and provisional director when the companies were floated. He and fellow Melbourne Chinese merchant Louis Ah Mouy were among the first Chinese in the world to be directors of a listed public company.¹⁴ Lowe Kong Meng and Louis Ah Mouy are well-known historically for their involvement in the founding of the Commercial Bank of Australia (McCormack 1988: 57; Cronin 1982: 28; Yong 1974: 106; Oddie: 1961). However, Lowe Kong Meng (occasionally with Louis Ah Mouy) was also an investor in, and founding board member of, at least four gold and silver mining companies, a coal mining company, a deep-sea fishing company, a distillery and an insurance company. His name on prospectuses sits alongside prominent businessmen and politicians of the day, such as Thomas Bent, George Coppin and David Mitchell.¹⁵

12 At Lowe Kong Meng's own funeral, of the eight pall bearers, only one was Chinese—his partner Ah Yet (Chun Yut) (*Argus*, 24 October 1888: 16).

13 Lowe Kong Meng first experienced such capitalist arrangements during the period when he was often in Calcutta, between 1847 and 1853. It was a time when British and Indian traders there were actively promoting joint stock companies, providing initial capital and supporting these ventures before opening shares to the public, retaining control by purchasing as many shares as possible and integrating their industries vertically as well as horizontally (Macgregor 2012; Subramanian 2010: 154).

14 Between 1864 and 1871, five new foreign insurance companies, as well as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, were founded in Shanghai and Hong Kong. All (with the possible exception of one case where the documents are not explicit) had some or all Chinese shareholders and Chinese directors (Chesneaux et al. 1977: 219).

15 Yarra Distillery Company: *Gippsland Times*, 27 September 1864: 3; South Crinoline Amalgamated Quartz-Mining Company: *Argus*, 19 December 1864: 7; Commercial Bank of Australia: *Empire*, 30 March 1866: 8; English, Australian and New Zealand Marine Insurance Company: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 June 1866: 2; Hazelwood Coal-Mining Company: *Argus*, 12 December 1874: 8 (Thomas Bent and David Mitchell were also

Civil Society in Victoria

Victoria had a highly active civil society of community organisations engaged in civic and cultural affairs, and Lowe Kong Meng involved himself in some of these organisations (Figure 2.2). The importance of these organisations to Lowe Kong Meng's political activity lies in the fact that such organisations were independent of government, yet took a role in shaping the nature of society through public meetings, debate and the publication of pamphlets, journals and reports. They also took direct agency in developing initiatives and projects both of benefit to society and intersecting with government responsibilities. While traditional Chinese society allowed for private men of means to initiate and fund public projects, the difference in modern British social governance was that such projects were formulated collectively in public forums by open organisations running on democratic lines.

Lowe Kong Meng's membership in two such organisations also demonstrates his interest in the concepts of modern science and technology, the use of which were central to the understanding of social progress in the modern world of the day, and which could be brought to bear by community leaders to create social, economic and political progress for the colony. He was a member of the Royal Society of Victoria, the premier organisation for supporting scientific research, exploration and inquiry.¹⁶ He was also a sponsor of the Acclimatisation Society, whose aim was to improve agricultural production and husbandry by importing useful plants and animals from around the world, often in exchange for Australian native fauna and flora (*Argus*, 20 May 1861: 5).

Lowe Kong Meng was also invited to organise Chinese cultural and commercial displays for three of Melbourne's major exhibitions. Although he declined the invitation by Redmond Barry to curate a collection of Chinese works for the Art Exhibition of 1869 at the Melbourne Public Library (Lowe Kong Meng 1869), he was a commissioner for the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880–81 (the position that Atticus above alleges that Lowe Kong Meng paid for with political support for the government) and also the Centennial International Exhibition of 1888 (*Argus*, 24 October 1888: 16).

directors); Melbourne Fishmongers' and Deep Sea Fishing Company: *Argus*, 6 May 1880: 6 (George Coppin and Louis Ah Mouy were also directors); North Midas Gold-Mining Company: *Argus*, 10 July 1886: 14; Madame Kong Meng Gold-Mining Company: *Argus*, 11 February 1887: 8; Outward Bound Consolidated Silver-Mining Company: *Argus*, 11 February 1888: 14.

¹⁶ Lowe Kong Meng is listed as a member of the Royal Society of Victoria in 1864 and 1866 (Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre 2001).



FIGURE 2.2 *Chinese illuminated archway, next to the premises of Kong Meng & Co., Little Bourke Street, Melbourne, 1867, welcoming Prince Alfred on the first royal tour to Australia. ILLUSTRATED AUSTRALIAN NEWS FOR HOME READERS, 27 DECEMBER 1867. NEWSPAPERS COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA*

Low Kong Meng's engagement with Victoria's elite society was not just based on organisational activity in business and civics. Far from presuming a Chinese Quarter domicile, Low Kong Meng, Annie and their children lived in European suburbs in grand homes as affluent upper bourgeois (Macgregor 2012). It is remarkable how little the mixed-race nature of their marriage seemed to affect their reputation and their inclusion in British Victorian social

events. For instance, they attended the 1863 fancy dress ball held by the Mayor of Melbourne along with fellow merchant Ping Kee, with Lowe Kong Meng and Ping Kee dressed as Zouaves and Annie as a Greek lady (*Examiner*, 3 September 1863: 3).¹⁷ Lowe Kong Meng and his family were also involved in many other prominent social events (Figure 2.3).¹⁸ Annie and Lowe Kong Meng may have been the exceptions to anti-Chinese prejudice, as apart from Ping Kee in 1863, no other Chinese citizen of Melbourne appears to have had such a high social profile, though it could have been the social ease of Lowe Kong Meng, raised in the British style, with his perfect English, that led to his regular inclusion in elite social life in Melbourne.

A Pivotal Role among Chinese Victorians

Thus it is clear that Lowe Kong Meng had a certain level of access to colonial authorities in Victoria. He also had an interest in colonial politics and an understanding of the processes of how it could be influenced. Was he also able to bring the weight of Chinese numbers to this influence? For the duration of Lowe Kong Meng's life in Melbourne, there was always a substantial Chinese population in Victoria. From a peak of probably 46,000 in 1859—almost 10 percent of the colony's population—it fell to about 24,000 by the early 1860s, and then gradually decreased to 13,000 or so by the 1880s.¹⁹ Kong Meng's Chinese community influence can be considered in terms of business

17 Zouaves were members of a volunteer regiment, fashionable in many armies in the 19th century, characterised by uniforms which featured open-fronted shirts, baggy trousers and often sashes and oriental headgear.

18 Annie and Lowe Kong Meng were also prominent at the 1867 fancy dress ball honouring the Duke of Edinburgh's royal tour (*Argus*, 24 December 1867: 5), although perhaps the construction of a massive arch in the Chinese quarter proclaiming loyalty of the Chinese community towards the son of the British queen influenced the ball committee's decision to invite the Lowe couple (*Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 27 December 1867: 11). The couple were also invited as guests at two more fancy balls to celebrate the opening of the new Melbourne Town Hall in 1870 (*Cornwall Chronicle*, 20 August 1870: 16; *Argus*, 26 August 1870: 5). Annie also entered the 1864 Victorian Dog Show, winning second prize in the Italian greyhound section (*Argus*, 8 April 1864: 5) and her husband entered works of art and craft into exhibitions (*Star*, 9 July 1861: 15; *Argus*, 3 May 1865: 5).

19 Charles Powell Hodges stated that Chinese populations, in the census years of 1857 and 1861, were 25,424 and 24,701 respectively. He also states that it was between 1857 (the census year) and 1859 that Chinese immigration reached its height and that the numbers commenced to recede rapidly in 1861. He estimated that the Chinese numbered 40,000 in 1858 and that the height of the population was 46,000 on 28 May 1859 (Hodges 1985: 62). The delegation to O'Shanassy on 29 May 1859 estimated the number of the Chinese then



FIGURE 2.3 *Annie Kong Meng, aged 24, as "Night" for the Mayor's Return Fancy Dress Ball, Melbourne, 1863; her husband dressed as an Arab Chief.*
THOMAS BRADLEY HARRIS PHOTO ALBUM, [HTTP://WWW.THE-EASTERN-WINDOW.COM/HARRIS28.HTML](http://www.the-eastern-window.com/harris28.html). *THE AGE*, MELBOURNE, 30 SEPTEMBER 1863: 6.

leadership, clan organisation, district-of-origin affiliation, anti-Qing sworn brotherhood politics, merchant philanthropy and relations with the Qing Empire.

Lowe Kong Meng's role in dominating the economic affairs of the Australasian-Chinese mining communities is clear from shipping and trade records (Macgregor 2012). The majority of Chinese gold miners arrived as credit-ticket employees, bound in employment to the Chinese merchants and companies that had advanced them or their families the money to pay for the voyage. They were also bound to their employers until the debt was paid off and often bound to live off the provisions supplied by those same employers (Wang 1978: 114–18).

A report by James Dundas Crawford, a British consular official from Shanghai, identifies Lowe Kong Meng's company (all of whose branches incorporated the term *kum* (金 *jin* gold) in their names) as central to the credit-ticket arrangements for Chinese miners in Australia. Crawford, who went to Australia in 1877 to investigate the Chinese population in the colonies, provides useful information about the nature of the relationships between Chinese merchants and miners at this time. With a reasonable knowledge of written and spoken Mandarin, Crawford was able to access information from Mandarin- and English-speaking Chinese in Australia, and also from Chinese documents, which makes his insights into Chinese affairs in Australia particularly illuminating.²⁰ He qualifies the idea that merchants may have directly or indirectly contracted labourers to work on mines that the merchants owned and suggests instead that merchants would often advance the funds and charter the ships but that the mining and management of the miners was operated by others (Crawford 1877: 19). Crawford refers to two other Chinese firms, as well as Lowe Kong Meng's, as being the main players. He cites the firms' names (one firm uses the term *hwa* (花 *hua* flower) in all its branch names, the other uses the term *kwang* (廣 *guang* broad) but he did not clarify who owned them, nor on what basis they were organised (Crawford 1877: 30).

to be 45,000 (*Argus*, 31 May 1859: 7). Hodges also estimated the population of Chinese in 1880 to be 13,000 (Hodges 1985: 63).

20 As well as Crawford's report itself (Crawford 1877), see Michael Williams' assessment of the value of Crawford's report to Chinese-Australian historiography (Williams 2001) and Bob O'Brien's background account of Crawford's career (O'Brien 2004), which includes correspondence from Crawford that describes both how he conducted his investigation and also an indication of his Chinese language skills. Having been stationed in Shanghai, Crawford learned spoken and written Mandarin rather than one of the main emigré dialects such as Cantonese or Hokkien.

Clan Organisation

Although kinship was an important aspect of 19th-century economic and social organisation within Chinese-Australian communities, it was not, as recently argued by Alister Bowen (2011), the only basis of organisation. Kathryn Cronin (1982: 22) mentions that the Louey (雷 *Lei*) clan, who ran the Vaughan Springs Chinese mining arrangement in central Victoria, were prominent in the nearby city of Bendigo and included Louis Ah Mouy in Melbourne as a lineage leader. Yet the Loueys were a small fraction of the mining-era Chinese population.²¹ There was a diversity of clan names among the thousands of Chinese miners in Victoria, yet the coordination of large-scale movements of miners and goods from China, as evident from Lowe Kong Meng's domination of this trade, indicates cooperation and contractual relations beyond a purely same-surname basis.

Despite the wide diversity of clan surnames in Victoria, there were only a handful of Chinese merchant enterprises listed in the street directories of Melbourne from the 1850s to the 1880s, with Lowe Kong Meng being the major player. He managed a large proportion of the importing of Chinese foodstuffs and other goods, shipping in Chinese passengers, and investing heavily in capital-intensive mining. He was also invited by the Otago Chamber of Commerce to bring Chinese miners from Victoria to Otago (Macgregor 2012). While many clan business networks may have dealt with Lowe Kong Meng's firm, most of the Chinese miners in Victoria did not have the Lowe surname.²² Neither were Lowe Kong Meng's businesses organised solely along clan lines. Even within his own firm, the Lowe surname was not common. Partners and employees of Lowe Kong Meng can be found in the English language press, with a diversity of names.²³ Another example of Lowe Kong Meng's engage-

21 The earliest available data for Chinese surnames in colonial Victoria is a list of names registered in the See Yup Temple for 1892–1913. Out of the 9567 names listed, the Loueys, with 777, are the second largest group of names after the Wangs, but the Loueys are still only 8 percent of the total (Choi 1971: 179–82 cited in Cronin 1982: 152).

22 In the See Yup Temple, for 1892–1913, out of the 9567 names listed, only 553 are Lowe (Lau/Liu) (Choi 1971: 179–82).

23 For example, Lon Lin (*Empire*, 13 September 1861: 2), Ping Foi (*Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 4 September 1869: 168) and Ley Kum (*Argus*, 2 March 1877: 10). It was likely that, if they were of the same clan as Lowe Kong Meng they would have used 'Lowe' or 'Kong' in the public English version of their name, as did the two brothers of Lowe Kong Meng: Kong Fat, a storekeeper near Quorn in South Australia (*South Australian Register*, 7 February 1879: 6) and Kong Choy, who appeared in a photo album from 1863 (Eastern Window 2014).

ment with non-clan business partnerships is the Sun War On firm of Dunedin, Otago, which had Sun Kung On, Sew Toi, Lum Chung, Lee Mow Tie, as well as Lowe Kong Meng as partners.²⁴

District of Origin Associations

Rather than clan lineages being the sole means of social organisation in 19th-century Australia, it appears instead that wider federations based on common district of origin in China formed the basis by which various clan lineages cooperated with each other to achieve common goals. In Victoria, two examples are the See Yup Society (四邑公司 *Siyi gongsi*) for people from the Four Counties or See Yup (四邑 *Siyi*) and the Num Pon Soon Society (南番順公司 *Nanpanshun gongsi*) for people from the Three Counties or Sam Yup (三邑 *Sanyi*), both of whose constituencies were based on origin in counties in Guangdong province.

Many scholars, based on Yong Ching Fatt's work, have stated that Lowe Kong Meng was a leader of the See Yup Society (Bowen 2011: 40; Fitzgerald 2007: 66; Cronin 1982: 33; Yong 1974: 106) but there is no evidence to support this claim.²⁵ Evidence points to a Sam Yup family origin for Lowe Kong Meng. An 1863 article states that the "natives of the Sam Yup district, . . . the number of whom in the colony is about 450, [are] nearly all . . . traders" and that Lowe Kong Meng's father was born in the city of Canton (which is within the Sam Yup area). The article also states that Lowe Kong Meng "contributed largely towards the cost of erecting the Chinese Exchange in Little Bourke Street and is a trustee of the property" and that "this building [known in Chinese as the Num Pon Soon building] was established for the express purpose accommodation of natives of the Sam Yup district" (*Weekly Herald*, 14 August 1863: 1) (Figure 2.4). James Dundas Crawford's report also states that "the Nam-hoi [南海 *Nanghai*] and Pan-yu [番禺 *Panyu*] burghers . . . headmen of the guild of the "three yik" [i.e. Sam Yup], comprise the wealthiest members of the emigrant communities at the centres of trade in China, and in the various Chinese Colonies beyond sea" and that they were "the capitalists, polished citizens, usurers, financiers"

24 National Archives, Dunedin, DAAC, Acc D239, 119, Letters of Administration. A1859 (relating to the estate of Lee Mow Tie, who died without a will in 1874). Citation courtesy of James Ng.

25 Yong refers to Lowe Kong Meng's family as See Yup (Sze-Yap) in origin but I have checked all of Yong's sources and Lowe Kong Meng's district origin is not mentioned anywhere (Yong 1974: 106).



FIGURE 2.4 *Num Pon Soon Society building, Melbourne, 1863, built by Lowe Kong Meng for the society in 1860–1861.*

AUSTRALIAN NEWS FOR HOME READERS, 21 OCTOBER 1863. STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

(Crawford 1877: 8). Reverend William Young's 1868 report to the Victorian parliament on the Chinese in Victoria concurs:

The Chinese population of this colony is composed of the Su-Yap [See Yup], Sam-Yap, Heung-San [香山 *Xiangshan* now called 中山 *Zhongshan*] and Amoy [厦門 *Xiamen*] Chinese. The first named are by far the most numerous; the second are generally possessed of more learning and influence; the third and fourth form an uninfluential minority (Young 1985: 49).

Moreover, if Lowe Kong Meng had been a prominent See Yup man then we would expect to find his name on the honour board in the See Yup temple in South Melbourne (opened in 1866), which it is not.²⁶ Furthermore, Lowe Kong Meng stated at his meeting with O'Shanassy that:

the Chinese resident in Melbourne [mainly Sam Yup merchants] had no connection with their brethren [mainly See Yup miners] on the gold-fields, except to supply them with goods (*Argus*, 31 May 1859: 7).²⁷

Gongsi and Huiguan

Did these district associations have a political role, either within the Chinese community in Victoria, or among the wider colonial society? *Gongsi* (公祠), also romanised as *kongsi*) was the generic term used in the Chinese language to describe both the See Yup Society and the Num Pon Soon Society in Melbourne

²⁶ Carved inscriptions in Chinese characters, on stone, inside See Yup Temple, 76–80 Raglan Street, South Melbourne. There is a possibility that another version of Lowe Kong Meng's name might be present on the inscriptions, but as no other Chinese names for Lowe Kong Meng are known at this stage, this is an open question.

²⁷ A grave at the Melbourne General Cemetery in Carlton records Quan A. Ting, who died in 1860, as the founder of the Num Pon Soon Society. Current communal memory in the Num Pon Soon Society also regards Lowe Kong Meng as a benefactor, who helped fund the construction of their club house in 1860–61 but was not a member of the society (Cina Choi, Num Pon Soon Society, personal communication, 2008). But if Lowe Kong Meng was not a Sam Yap man, it would be extraordinary for him to have provided the funds and management to build such a grand structure for the Num Pon Soon Society (*Argus*, 25 July 1861: 5) and to be appointed trustee. This building, the oldest Chinese building in Australia still standing, was originally addressed as 71 Little Bourke Street East, but the property was renumbered in 1889 to its current number of 200–202 Little Bourke Street.

in the early 1860s.²⁸ In the same period, in Malaya and neighbouring areas in the East Indies, organisations called gongsi had a prominent role in managing, democratically, the affairs of Chinese mining communities (Heidhues 2003; Yuan 2000). Lowe Kong Meng and Louis Ah Mouy would have been well aware of these developments from their time in the Malayan peninsula.²⁹ The concept of the gongsi as a form of social organisation has its roots in China. It was a partnership of equals (for example, pooling labour and/or cash) entered into for a specific common benefit, which could be formed on a large or small scale, for temporary purposes or for longer activity, and which had a traditional role in village and rural life in South China (Chiang 2003). It appears that this method of communal organising took on a much greater role and increased in importance and level of permanency among Chinese émigrés moving to new countries “in which they had to fend in all matters completely for themselves” (Ward 1954: 360).

There is no space in this chapter to explore the considerable variation in the usage of the term *gongsi*, both historically and historiographically. Suffice to note that in mid-19th century Malaya, with its greater diversity of Chinese dialects among the émigrés but lower numbers from particular districts, the gongsi were usually organised upon dialect basis. By contrast, in colonial Australia, the Chinese émigrés were overwhelmingly Cantonese and in larger numbers as miners.³⁰ As a result, in Australia, Cantonese gongsi affiliation further divided up according to district of origin.

28 An 1861 phrasebook for Chinese in Victoria and California refers to the town of Emerald Hill and notes this as the location of the *Siyi gongsi* (四邑公司) (Zhu c.1857–c.1862). An illustration of the Num Pon Soon building in an 1863 newspaper shows the Chinese text on the signboard on the front of the building as 南番順公司 *Nanpanshun gongsi* (*Australian News for Home Readers*, 21 October 1863) (Figure 2.4).

29 Born in Canton, Louis Ah Mouy “learned the trade of a builder, and went to Singapore. From there he sailed to Victoria under contract to Captain Glendinning” (*Sun*, 12 May 1918: 5).

30 The bulk of the Chinese population of the Straits Settlements were in Penang, Province Wellesley and Singapore, and were primarily engaged in agricultural plantations. The populations in 1850–51 were: Penang 15,457; Province Wellesley 8,731; and Singapore 27,988—total 52,176. In 1860 they were: Penang 28,018; Province Wellesley 8,204; and Singapore 50,010—total 86,232. Mining in Malaya, which was mainly for tin, was in the areas of Lukut (in Negri Sembilan state), Kuala Lumpur (in Selangor state) and Larut (in Perak state). Though there was an influx of Chinese miners to these areas after 1850, civil wars between the Chinese kept the population growth in check. By the early 1870s, there were still only 31,000 Chinese in these mining areas (Purcell 1948: 68, 87–88, 102–103, 114). In Australasia, after reaching a peak in Victoria of 46,000 in 1859, the combined numbers of Chinese in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Otago remained in the 30,000–

Unlike in Malaya, the gongsi in Australasia did not run local regions as autonomous states. British jurisdictional control was already in existence in the Australasian goldfields, or if not, was rapidly brought into being by the colonial governments. Yet the Australasian gongsi were still a form of self-government for internal affairs within the Chinese communities, parallel and complementary to the British jurisdictional system. Unlike in the Malayan Straits Settlements, there was no official role for these societies within the British government system in Australia. There is also no evidence that the district gongsi had a role in managing economic enterprise. Their stated purpose and social role in Australia appears more akin to the friendly societies operating in the European societies of colonial Australia (Hirst 2005). As such, they were a form of civil society organisation that provided mutual support at crucial junctures. They provided assistance for arrival and orientation in Australia, intermediating with British officialdom, personal and civil crises (legal problems, persecution, riots, unfair tax campaigns), remittance of monies to home villages in China, and return passage to China for the poor, elderly or deceased.

Lowe Kong Meng's merchant status resonates with another traditional Chinese civil organisation that merged with the gongsi system in Australasia—the *huiguan* (會館). *Huiguan*, literally translatable as 'meeting hall', were set up in Chinese cities by natives from another district in China who were living temporarily or permanently in those cities. Such people were usually merchants, although scholars sitting civil service examinations in provincial cities or the imperial capital would also make use of the local *huiguan* organisation and its facilities. The *huiguan* was thus both an organisation and a building. The premises included meeting rooms, accommodation, shrine rooms and ancestor halls. The organisational functions included orientation as well as accommodation, financial support, arranging employment, organising for burial or return of bones to home villages after death and, of course, the company of people with familiar dialect and backgrounds (Naquin 2001: 598–621; Goodman 1995; Liu 1988). These functions could be considered as various ways in which the *huiguan* facilitated exchanges of money, assistance, employment and capital between its members, and so it is worth noting that English-language press of Melbourne in the 1860s referred to the Num Pon Soon building as the "Chinese Exchange" (*Weekly Herald*, 14 August 1863: 1; *Australian News for Home Readers*, 21 October 1863: 4).

40,000 range for the next decade. In 1861, Victoria had 24,701 Chinese (85 percent miners) and New South Wales 15,000 (93 percent miners), a total of almost 40,000 (Markus 1979: 14, 68; Hodges 1985: 62).

Crawford states that the guilds of the *yik* (邑 *yi* districts) “assume titles of a semi-official character...Kung-so [gongsi] and Hui-kuan [huiguan]” (Crawford 1877: 8). The Num Pon Soon Society, the Kong Chew Society (岡州公司 *Gangzhou gongsi*) and the See Yup Society all maintained buildings in Melbourne that operated as huiguan.³¹ In the 1850s and 1860s, the district societies in Victoria, as indicated above, appear to have officially called themselves gongsi even though they constructed and ran huiguan buildings. By the 1870s, Crawford’s account indicates that there was a shift to the equal use of huiguan and gongsi as the name for the type of organisation and not just huiguan only as the type of building and its function (perhaps in the way that, in English usage, the terms ‘town hall’ or ‘city hall’ have come to mean both the civic building and the city council that operates from that building). By 1911, when the Victorian Siyi societies were donating funds to the University of Hong Kong, the record of their donation lists the organisations as being huiguan by name and not gongsi.³²

While there was fluidity, over time, in terms of whether these organisations were primarily called gongsi or huiguan, it is clear that both terms convey a sense of them being the primary organisations for collective community in Victoria, acting above clan and firm, and thus they could have provided an important vehicle for community influence by leading Chinese citizens such as Lowe Kong Meng.

Democratic Rules

Management of the gongsi/huiguan in Australia, like those of earlier large-scale gongsi territories in West Borneo, also had many democratic features.³³ The constitutions of three of the district gongsi in gold rush Victoria—two See Yup Society branches and the society for people from Tung Kang (東莞 *Dongguan*), another Guangdong county—survive in the historical record and

31 While the Num Pon Soon huiguan would have primarily been for Sam Yup merchants, the See Yup huiguan included miners in its ambit, and its membership applied across Victoria.

32 For example, the “See Yup Wiu Koon (四邑會館)” (*Siyi huiguan*) and the “Kong Chau Wiu Koon (岡州會館)” (*Gangzhou huiguan*): A.W. Brewin, Registrar General, list of subscriptions to the endowment fund, University of Hong Kong, 1911. Citation courtesy of Michael Williams.

33 Yuan Bingling (2000) and Mary F. Somers Heidhues (2003) have demonstrated the striking democratic structures of the large-scale gongsi-run territories in West Borneo in the 1780s to 1850s.

all require election of officials, with rotation each year.³⁴ Democracy may have been skewed, however, by the financial wealth and thus influence of merchants. The regular rotation and change of leadership positions may be part of the reason why merchants such as Lowe Kong Meng and Louis Ah Mouy were never clearly reported in the English language press of the day as the leader of the district societies. It is possible that the societies were creating a culture of shared leadership among the members over time, where it could have been impolite for one person to claim publicly that he was the leader. For instance, although Louis Ah Mouy had a large role in the See Yup Society, an obituary in 1918 only states that he donated the land for its temple (*Sun*, 12 May 1918: 5).³⁵ The Tung Kang Suy society rules also imply that fluency in English and understanding of English law and custom were crucial in deciding on office bearers. With Lowe Kong Meng's financial beneficence and expertise in English customs and values, it is possible the Num Pon Soon Society would have valued his advice and respected his opinion on a wide range of matters regardless of whether he held office in a particular year.

While Lowe Kong Meng may have had long-term de facto authority over Num Pon Soon people, they were only a small minority in Victoria. In addition to this, if Lowe Kong Meng was not of See Yup origin, he would have had little direct influence over this majority community. However, as he was often involved in activities with Louis Ah Mouy and as they were the two prominent authors of *The Chinese Question in Australia, 1878–79*, it is possible that Louis Ah Mouy and Lowe Kong Meng could have agreed politically on many occasions. In turn, it is possible the Sam Yup and See Yup people could have acted in concert on certain issues that Lowe Kong Meng was championing during the anti-discrimination politics of the late 1870s and 1880s. If these possibilities were true, they could have formed the political basis of Atticus' claim that Lowe Kong Meng could influence the voting intentions of the Chinese in July 1880. However, there is insufficient evidence to verify these possibilities and more research is required on this topic.

34 Surviving published documents stating the rules of the See Yup Society branches in Melbourne and Ballarat are dated "1st day of the 5th month (1854)" (Yong 1977: 272) and "11th month, 6th day . . . 1854" (Young 1985: 49) respectively. The rules of the Tung Kang Suy Society (for people from Dongguan district), also based in Ballarat, are recorded in the *Ballarat Star*, 30 April 1861: 1S.

35 A claim that is not yet supported by any other historical evidence.

Sworn Brotherhoods

Beyond organisation along district lines, it has been claimed that Lowe Kong Meng was also a leader of the sworn brotherhood, the Yee Hing Society (義興會 *Yixinghui* or 義興公司 *Yixinggongsi*) (Fitzgerald 2007: 66; Cronin 1982: 33), which some historians regard as having been very influential in colonial Chinese communities in Australia. If so, this would have provided Lowe Kong Meng with another vehicle for community dominance.

Much has been written about sworn brotherhoods, also called secret societies, in various countries (see Cai 2004 and Ownby & Heidhues 1993 for references). In Australia, most of this discussion has revolved around how widespread the Yee Hing membership was, its secretive processes and its secret language. There is also discussion on its role as a force against the Qing and its later revolutionary and nationalist political activity with respect to China. It appears to have been the only example in Australia of a sworn brotherhood, although it has been referred to by a number of names: Sheathed Sword (Cronin 1977: 32–35; Crawford 1877: 10–11), Hong Men (洪門) and later Chee Kung Tong (致公堂 *Zhigongtang*) or Chinese Masonic Society (Fitzgerald 2007: 57–99; Cai 2004; Kok 2005, 2002).

Hu Jin Kok and John Fitzgerald, in particular, argue that the Yee Hing Society/Hong Men played a prominent role in 19th-century Chinese Australia. Kok, using a cryptological analysis of temple and cemetery inscriptions, argues that all Chinese organisations in 19th-century Australia were either Hong Men, Yee Hing or allied groups (Kok 2005, 2002). However, his evidence for the dominance of these sworn brotherhoods in Australia throughout the 19th century relies upon a sophisticated methodology of his own devising, which is based on allegorical text interpretations of inscriptions in cemeteries and temples, and which is hard for other researchers to follow.³⁶ He also does not sufficiently ground his studies in chronological, geographical and sociological contexts, making it hard to determine how widespread, long-lasting or important the Yee Hing/Hong Men influence might have been. Fitzgerald, who is interested in the development of pan-Chinese political consciousness and universal social values, focuses on determining the origins, development, activities and leadership of the Yee Hing and underplays the district associations' influence, often writing about native-place associations and secret societies as if they are virtually the same (Fitzgerald 2007: 46–47, 65–66). Regarding the Yee Hing, he

³⁶ Hu Jin Kok's (2005, 2002) theories may well be valid, but are interspersed sparsely throughout texts which are primarily a documentation of thousands of inscriptions on gravestones and temple plaques around Australia.

focuses mainly on its political aims and evolution, and assumes that its constituency was almost always based on political values and aspirations, however much they may have changed over the 19th century. He acknowledges, though, that at times the Yee Hing engaged in criminal behaviour (Fitzgerald 2007: 82). Despite mentioning serious conflict between the See Yup Society and the Yee Hing in Melbourne in the 1890s and 1900s, Fitzgerald does not explore the origins or significance of this conflict, nor what it may imply about the lack of strong support among the community for the Yee Hing (Fitzgerald 2007: 82).

It is clear from Crawford, and the founding dates and grand styles of buildings still extant, that the district associations were the main founders of community buildings such as temples and huiguan. This was especially so during the goldrush era but also into the early 20th century, thus affirming the central role that district affiliation had within goldrush Chinese politics and onwards. Fitzgerald cites Janis Wilton as evidence that the Chinese Masonic Society (the renamed Yee Hing Society) took over community temples in rural New South Wales in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the numbers of rural Chinese declined. However, Wilton does not explore the original creation of these temples, which she acknowledges to have been founded by district associations (Fitzgerald 2007: 93, footnote 21; Wilton 2004: 96–97). The earliest mention of the Yee Hing establishing their own building is by Crawford writing in 1877. He mentions that:

the Tartar branch of the “Sheathed Sword” Society has erected a public building at Ironbark Camp, tripartite, a central hall, flanked by two wings, well-situated geomantically on the south side of the village,—at its entrance, in fact, and overlooking a small pond (Crawford 1877: 11).³⁷

However, his description of the range of Chinese public buildings, from Melbourne to Cooktown, indicates that the district associations had a greater number of buildings (Crawford 1877: 8–11).

Cronin (1982: 33) states that the Yee Hing Society’s “meetings, initiation ceremonies and regular calisthenic sessions were held in [Lowe Kong Meng’s] store”, but offers no source for this claim.³⁸ There has been no evidence

37 This building still stands, and is now called the Bendigo Joss House Temple. Above the entrance, the characters 致公堂 (*Zhigongtang*, *Chee Kung Tong*) clearly indicate its allegiance to the Yee Hing inheritance and is congruent with Crawford’s representation of it being a Sheathed Sword institution.

38 There is no source for this in Cronin’s published book (1982). There is, however, a citation in Cronin’s Ph.D. thesis (1977: 35) that recounts “secret society meetings” being “held in

proffered yet to substantiate Lowe Kong Meng's involvement in the Yee Hing, nor is there evidence that it was prominent during the gold rush.³⁹ Fitzgerald (2007: 59) cites its earliest mention in the testimony of Chinese witness Howqua to the 1855 Goldfields Commission of Inquiry in Victoria. However, Howqua was actually talking about how the "Freemasons" were ubiquitous in China, as there was a new emperor, that is the Taiping leader. Howqua does not mention that these Chinese "Freemasons" were in Victoria (Goldfields Commission 1855: 335–38). Fitzgerald (2007: 59) also cites Cai Shaoqing as demonstrating that the Yee Hing were in Australia from the earliest days of the gold rush, but Cai only assumes that the Yee Hing must have been in Australia that early due to the large number of Chinese arriving. Cai's sole evidence is a reference in the Hung League handbook from Bendigo, Victoria, to ten earlier lodges as opposed to five. He argues that this reference dates the handbook as being after the Daoguang Emperor (1820–1850) (Cai 2004: 137)—but Cai does not acknowledge that this evidence also implies that the handbook could have also been written in the 1860s or 1870s. The earliest detailed reference to this brotherhood is, again, Crawford, in 1877, who states that the Sheathed Sword Society is present in different parts of Australia, but that its strength was declining (Crawford 1877: 10–11). Yong and Fitzgerald also provide evidence from within Chinese-Australian community history and community legend that refers to the Yee Hing in New South Wales as dating back to either 1850 or 1858, but this is from later written and oral accounts (Fitzgerald 2007: 57–61, 75–77; Yong 1977: 157). Crawford, who met and discussed Chinese-Australian matters with Lowe Kong Meng and his partner Ley Kum (O'Brien 2004: 167), does not refer to Lowe Kong Meng as being associated with, nor a leader of, the Sheathed Sword Society, although it is possible that such matters would not be revealed to an English government official. Finally, Maurice Leong, See Yup Society historian, states that from its earliest days to the 1950s, the office bearers of the See Yup Society were always merchants and supporters of the Qing dynasty and thus would not have been members of the Yee Hing Society (Maurice Leong, personal communication, 2001).

So there is little evidence as yet for the Yee Hing being a strong community-leading force in Victoria in 1880, let alone Lowe Kong Meng being

Kong Meng's store (Sun Kum Lee)", but this is based on a 1904 source, which is 16 years after Lowe Kong Meng's death.

39 Cronin (1977: 32–35) cites a mention of the Sheathed Sword in Melbourne in 1854, but gives more prominence to the district associations. Moreover, her description of the structure and function of the Sheathed Sword society is based solely on accounts of similar societies in Hong Kong and Malaya.

their leader. Moreover, if this sworn brotherhood did have a strong anti-Qing and anti-monarchical flavour (Fitzgerald 2007: 83–85), such politics would not be to Lowe Kong Meng's liking, as there is strong evidence to support Leong's view that merchants such as Lowe Kong Meng were supporters of the Qing government.

The Prestige of Merchants

With no Chinese government to levy taxes and manage the communities' civic affairs, the funds to manage community organisation and endeavour were derived from membership subscriptions, the profits of economic activity and philanthropic donations. With no Chinese government careers available in these foreign polities, opportunities for community-evolved leadership revolved around business ownership, elder status in a clan grouping, astute leadership skills or the moral authority of underground political figures.

Traditionally in China, merchants were officially the lowest strata in the social hierarchy, after gentry/scholars/officials, peasants and artisans. Unofficially, of course, the power of merchants' money was commonly used in China to gain political and social influence, education, land and government positions for family members.

Among the overseas Chinese, the merchants, who controlled most of the financial flows in the community, were usually astute leaders and were unofficially regarded within their local diasporic context as the true leaders of the community, or at least as men who commanded great respect. Yong (1967: 7) states that charitable spirit was an important quality for claiming leadership status in overseas Chinese communities. Lowe Kong Meng had a great reputation for philanthropy, not only evident from his paying for the Num Pon Soon building, but also in his "giving liberally to churches and public charities, without respect to creed or denomination" (*Argus*, 24 October 1888: 16).

Qing Rank Awards

Recognising the growing power of the merchants in the overseas Chinese communities, the Qing authorities began to formalise this power by granting them, from the 1860s, rank in the Chinese imperial civil service. Yen Ching-Hwang (1970) gives a detailed exposition of this practice. It was both a way to keep the overseas Chinese focused on allegiance to the home government and also a way for the government to raise additional revenue. Lowe Kong Meng was

granted rank by the Emperor, perhaps as early as 1861, and it was later claimed that he was the first overseas Chinese thus awarded.⁴⁰ This claim is supported by Yen's statement (1970: 21) that the first Chinese in Southeast Asia, Singapore merchant Cheang Hong Lim (章芳林 *Chang Fanglin*), was not awarded rank until 1869.

After an account by the *Argus* of Lowe Kong Meng wearing his official robes of rank to the Duke of Edinburgh ball (*Argus*, 24 December 1867: 5), a letter was sent to the *Argus* a week later from "Justice" in Ballarat claiming that Lowe Kong Meng actually purchased his title and that the Chinese government "never confers such a distinction" on Chinese "that go abroad from the boundaries of China" (*Argus*, 1 January 1868: 6). This supports Yen's exposition that such rank was purchased. Theoretically, the award of rank required passing examinations, yet Yen shows that the practice of selling rank by the imperial authorities, within China, became commonplace from the late 18th century—although until about 1889 the pretense was made that the buyer was actually "donating" funds towards a specific charitable endeavour and that the grant of rank was in recognition of this. The sale of rank accelerated after 1860 due to the huge expense of suppressing the Taiping, Nien and Muslim Rebellions and the increasing need to pay indemnities forced on the government by victorious foreign powers (Yen 1970: 20–22).

An illustration of the opening ceremony at the new huiguan (referred to in the English language press as a "temple") of the See Yup Society in Melbourne in 1866 shows at least ten men also dressed in robes similar to rank robes, with the distinctive button-topped caps. If these men held rank positions, it is likely that they also purchased their rank (*Australian News for Home Readers*, 20 December 1866: 5). The fact that Lowe Kong Meng and possibly the See Yup elite sought Qing-ordained status at that time suggests it is unlikely that Lowe

40 The first mention of Lowe Kong Meng's rank is in article in 1866 which stated that during his residence in Melbourne, he had the title of "Mandarin of the Blue Button order" conferred on him by the Emperor of China (*Australian News for Home Readers*, 20 September 1866: 4). Humphreys (1878) then stated: "in 1863, he received, at the hand of His Imperial Majesty, Ham Toon, Emperor of China [Ham Foon, Xianfeng, reigned 9 March 1850 to 22 August 1861], the honor of being elevated to the rank of Mandarin of the Blue Button, Civil Order." As the Xianfeng Emperor died on 22 August 1861, it is not clear whether the award was conferred before the Emperor's death, or whether the award decision was made by the Emperor before his death but not conferred on Lowe Kong Meng until 1863. It was not until Lowe Kong Meng wore his robes of honour to the Duke of York fancy dress ball on 23 December 1866 that the claim was made that he was the first overseas Chinese to be awarded such rank (*Bendigo Advertiser*, 26 December 1867: 2).

Kong Meng and the See Yup Society were supporters of the anti-Qing Yee Hing Society.

It is worth considering whether the currying of support from the overseas Chinese merchant elite by the Qing authorities may also have been an attempt to thwart the growth of anti-Qing forces fleeing to the diaspora after the collapse of the Taiping rebellion. This may have also been one of the factors behind the establishment of Qing consulates around the diaspora, with the first being in Singapore in 1877 (Yen 1970: 21). Although Singapore, San Francisco (1878) and Havana (1879) were early locations of consulates where there were significant Chinese populations (Godley 1992: 8; Yen 1985: 144, 213 cited in Lake & Reynolds 2008: 37, footnote 78), no Chinese consulate was established in Australasia until 1909 in Melbourne (Yong 1977: 22). It is also worth noting that an obituary after Lowe Kong Meng's death in 1888 claimed that "had he lived, it was contemplated to appoint him the Chinese Consul-General for Australia, a position which, as far as Melbourne is concerned, he had de jure long occupied" (*Argus*, 24 October 1888: 16).⁴¹

Lowe Kong Meng's support for the Qing government is also indicated by the fact that he was the principal organiser of the grand events held to honour the official visit of the two Qing commissioners to Australia in 1887. Contemporary commentators, and historians since, have taken the purpose of this tour at face value, as a commission of investigation into the conditions of Chinese in Australia. Yet curiously, a round of new Qing rank entitlements were awarded to various people in Australia subsequent to the tour, including Quong Tart in Sydney as well as Lowe Kong Meng's son Herbert Kong Meng, Louis Ah Mouy's son Wong Ho, and the Victorian government's interpreter to the Chinese, Charles Powell Hodges, in Melbourne (*Examiner*, 20 January 1888: 3). In fact, the profile of the Qing commissioners' tour matches the profile of what Yen (1970: 23) calls a rank-selling tour, a common feature in the diaspora by then, where two representatives of the Qing travel abroad seeking applicants for the purchase of rank. Reports of the rank positions awarded after the 1887 tour maintain the fiction that they were awarded for merit or services to the Empire, and it was not until 1889 that the true nature of the sale of rank positions was publicly acknowledged by the Qing government (Yen 1970: 23). After 1889, there was an ongoing and massive sale of these positions across China, in the treaty ports and across the regions with Chinese diaspora—which

41 It may be that a unanimity of pro-Qing opinion among Lowe Kong Meng and other merchants was enough, in the Qing government's opinion, to curtail the strength of the anti-Qing forces and minimised the need for the expense of an official consul to be sent out from China, but further research is required to assess this.

is why many photographs taken of diasporic and treaty port community leaders in the 1890s and 1900s show almost all the men in the photographs wearing costumes of rank.

The Chinese Famine of 1878

Apart from seeking a relationship with the Qing imperial system, another project demonstrated Lowe Kong Meng's conception of a sense of pan-Chineseness, above and beyond particularist interests of district of origin, dialect and business dealings. It also demonstrates his ability to have widespread influence among Victoria's Chinese. In 1878, he led a public campaign in Victoria to raise funds for victims of the massive famine raging in north China (*Australian Town and Country Journal*, 4 May 1878: 9–10; *Argus*, 21 May 1878; *Cornwall Chronicle*, 27 May 1878: 2). This illustrates Lowe Kong Meng's empathy for Chinese who were not from the areas in South China and the Nanyang that he would have culturally and dialectically identified with. Even more remarkable was that this campaign was not led by the Chinese government, nor by the British or colonial Victorian governments, but represents an extraordinarily early involvement by overseas Chinese in a non-political, non-government campaign in China. Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley has demonstrated how significant this famine was in both the Chinese and global consciousness at the time and also how it drew widespread sympathy across China and among overseas Chinese (Edgerton-Tarpley 2008). There was a similar famine in India two years earlier, which sparked an unprecedented fundraising campaign across the British Empire, including Melbourne (Twomey & May 2012). The Indian campaign was thus likely the model that Lowe Kong Meng was inspired by when he launched the China famine campaign.

The Chinese Question Pamphlet

The unity of community action led by Lowe Kong Meng, Louis Ah Mouy and Cheong Cheok Hong, in a fundraising campaign in support of famine victims garnered widespread support among Chinese and non-Chinese in Victoria for a Chinese community cause that emphasised the common humanity of Chinese and Europeans. The famine campaign demonstrated the possibility of effective organised public action by Chinese on behalf of Chinese interests, and demonstrated that Lowe Kong Meng, with others, could lead this collective action. It was after working together on the North China famine campaign

in 1878 that these three men partnered again to write *The Chinese Question in Australia, 1878–79*. The decision to write and publish the pamphlet shows that these men realised that they could apply their combined political and promotional-campaign experience to an issue that affected Chinese interests in the colony itself.

Conceived as a riposte to the political campaigns of an anti-Chinese league, which itself was supporting the Seamen's Union struggle to keep Chinese sailors out of Australasian coastal shipping (Markus 1979: 81–92), *The Chinese Question* takes a broad view of the matter, addressing the spurious arguments that Chinese were an inferior culture to that of Britain and Europe and calling for an equality of treatment for migrants from the British Empire to the Chinese Empire and vice versa as agreed in the Treaty of Peking in 1860. The text demonstrates that the authors saw Chinese society as capable of and willing to transform itself by coming into association with the new and evolving values of modernity which the British were bringing to the region. They also viewed Chinese traditional society as having much to offer to the modernising world (Lowe Kong Meng et al. 1879).

In recent years, historians have begun to focus on the importance of *The Chinese Question* pamphlet. Paul Macgregor (2004: 41, 47–54), John Fitzgerald (2007: 111–12, 114–15), Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds (Lake 2010; Lake & Reynolds 2008: 27–44) have all examined the content and impact of *The Chinese Question*, which argued for an end to discrimination against Chinese in Australia and promoting the benefits to Australia's development that would flow from an increased immigration of Chinese. Lake and Reynolds analysed the impact of the pamphlet on the development of white racist views, particularly in Australia and America, but the personal political background and context in which Lowe Kong Meng operated was not examined in depth by any of these authors in their writings on this pamphlet.

For Lowe Kong Meng personally, the free movement of people, goods and ideas between empires and cultures proved a sound basis for stellar success, financially, socially and culturally. It was on this basis that he established his political views and expectation that he could be a full participant in political and civic life in Victorian colonial circles, and in the British as well as the Qing empires. The concept of fully free movement included, for him, the movement into other cultures, a personal movement through cultural transformation and community movement into modern ways of living. Though based in Melbourne, Lowe Kong Meng operated within the international ambits of both the British Empire and the overseas Chinese business and trade networks. He subscribed to the resurgence of the international reach of the Chinese government, through rank award, diplomatic missions and a consulate system.

Within the international, intercultural trading community of which Lowe Kong Meng was a part, mutual respect for the cultures of Europe and China was often demonstrated. There were many articles in the Australasian press commenting on *The Chinese Question*. While many were opposed to its views, a large number supported the arguments, some even agreeing with the document's call for a major immigration program from China to help develop the colonies' vast spaces. Many saw through the negative claims about Chinese culture and people, as promoted by the anti-Chinese activists, as having no basis in fact or experience. They also recognised the anti-Chinese arguments as often being based on appeals to fear in the populace to support other political agendas.⁴²

It is likely that, for most of the 1860s and 1870s, Lowe Kong Meng felt that the Chinese communities in Victoria were supported by the conservative white elite. Geoffrey Oddie (1961: 69) has argued that the Chinese merchant elite were acceptable to Victorian colonial society; the Chinese labouring classes being the only focus of racial concerns. More recently, Amanda Rasmussen (2009) has countered that social intermingling at local levels between Europeans and Chinese, including miners and labourers, led to local acceptance of Chinese as members of European-Australian communities.

However, the Commercial Bank's desire for Chinese depositors—one of the reasons why Lowe Kong Meng and Louis Ah Mouy were invited to be directors (*Sun*, 12 May 1918: 5; Wood 1990: 11; Vort-Ronald 1982: 135)—suggests that, at least in some business quarters, cultural diversity as a principle was acceptable in Victoria. Letters to newspapers supporting Chinese immigration, including immigration of Chinese labouring classes,⁴³ and repeal of Victoria's anti-Chinese taxes from 1862 (Wang 1978: 275) also suggests that opinions regarding Victoria's appropriate ethnic mix were more diverse between the 1850s and 1870s than was depicted by Andrew Markus (1979) in his work on anti-Chinese views in the 19th century.⁴⁴

42 As an example of commentary supportive of *The Chinese Question's* views, see *Manawatu Times*, 5 February 1879; as an example refuting those views, see *Hawke's Bay Herald*, 4 February 1879.

43 As examples, during the year with the highest population of Chinese in colonial Victoria, see: *Argus*, 1 January 1859: 6; *Argus*, 12 January 1859: 1S. See also editorial comment on these letters in the 1 January issue (*Argus*, 1 January 1859: 4).

44 Andrew Markus' work on Chinese emphasised the instances of antagonism towards Chinese by Europeans in Australia and California during the 19th century and glossed over instances of mutual respect and support between Chinese and non-Chinese in these polities (Markus 1979).

Yet for all the strength of argument in *The Chinese Question*, it was a text out of character with the way in which Lowe Kong Meng had usually involved himself in colonial politics. Until the 1880s, he wrote no letters to the editor championing Chinese rights in general or advocating on behalf of individual Chinese. While he had met with O'Shanassy in 1859 to address the residence tax grievances, his empathy then for the plight of fellow Chinese extended no further than his fellow merchants. Nor is there any indication that he voiced his opposition on any earlier occasion to the £10 Chinese poll tax introduced in 1855, or the apartheid system of the Chinese goldfields protectorate. It is true that, after discriminatory taxes and regulations regarding Chinese in Victoria were repealed in the 1860s, there was very little public commentary or agitation against the Chinese again until the 1878 seamen's campaign. Hence, there was little need for Lowe Kong Meng to take a public stand.⁴⁵

It is possible that his co-author, the 27-year-old Cheong Cheok Hong, was the principal protagonist for penning and publishing *The Chinese Question*. After 1878, Cheong was almost always a co-author with Lowe Kong Meng of many letters to the editor. Cheong also, later in his career, organised public campaigns on social and political matters regarding the Chinese and often took to the stage in public meetings to press his case. Of the three authors of *The Chinese Question*, Cheong is the only one to have ever spoken on a political matter at a public forum. Lowe Kong Meng had, however, planned to attend the Intercolonial Conference on the Chinese Question in 1888, but his death meant that Cheong went in his stead (Welch 2003).

Which makes it all the more interesting to consider whether, as Atticus claimed in 1880, Lowe Kong Meng was working politically to support the conservative government, and if so, why? Could he have commanded the voting support of the Chinese of Victoria, and if so, why?

July 1880 Election Campaign

The resurgence of Chinese community engagement in colonial politics, leading up to the July 1880 election campaign, begins then with the publication of *The Chinese Question*. During the seamen's anti-Chinese strike in December 1878, support for the anti-Chinese campaign had been weak in Victoria, compared with New South Wales and Queensland (Markus 1979: 80, 92). The South

⁴⁵ Although when Lowe Kong Meng was invited in 1865 to send Chinese miners from Victoria to the Otago goldfields, he required and was granted a promise from the Otago authorities that there would be no anti-Chinese legislation in that province (Ng 1993: 125).

Australian correspondent in the *Argus* partly ascribed this to the impact of the pro-Chinese views of *The Chinese Question* (*Argus*, 7 February 1879: 7).

While anti-Chinese agitation was not a major issue in the July 1880 election, it did have an insidious presence.⁴⁶ The Anti-Chinese League had a renewed life in 1880 due to increasing concern over Chinese moving into the furniture-making trade (Markus 1979: 92–97). In May 1880, weeks before the election was called by James Service, a letter by Lowe Kong Meng, L. Tye Sing and Cheong Cheok Hong in the *Argus* countered claims that Chinese were undercutting the wages or conditions of white workers in the furniture industry (*Portland Guardian*, 27 May 1880: 3). During the election, the Anti-Chinese League was regularly placing the same advertisement in the election pages, calling voters to question candidates as to their view on Chinese immigration (*Argus*, 10 July 1880: 9). Voluminous reports in the press on public meetings held each day in each electorate around the colony recorded questions being put to the candidates. Questions about the Chinese occurred regularly, but they did not dominate the discussions, though the issue was there.⁴⁷ Of those candidates who were asked such questions, all responded saying they were in favour of restricting Chinese immigration in order to preserve the jobs of the working classes and the British character of the colony. This view came from across the political spectrum: from ministerial candidates (that is, James Service's party), opposition candidates (Graham Berry's party) and the handful of doubtfuls (that is, independents). Not all candidates had to field questions on the Chinese issue and many did not state their views on the matter, but no candidate spoke in favour of Chinese immigration. Where candidates did differ on the Chinese question was whether they were in favour of immediate action against Chinese immigration (a prohibitive poll tax) or whether they thought the issue was valid, but there was no pressing reason to act at the moment given the low numbers of Chinese in or coming to the colony.

Even though no candidate would take a pro-Chinese stand, there were others in the European community of the colony who would. In the press

46 In the following exposition of the debate over the Chinese question in the election, it may appear that the issue was a major element of the campaign discourse but this is because I have been able to collate disparate accounts in the press of the day. In fact, when measured in column centimetres in the newspapers and compared to the coverage on the candidates' speeches, the Chinese question made up only a small percentage of the overall debate.

47 Examples of candidates making anti-Chinese statements included on James Service's side: Harper (*Argus*, 3 July 1880: 8), Latham and Mitchell (*Argus*, 9 July 1880: 5), King (*Argus*, 8 July 1880: 6; *Argus*, 13 July 1880: 6), Davies and Purcell (*Argus*, 10 July 1880: 8: a, c); on Graham Berry's side: Hackett and McColl (*Argus*, 5 July 1880: 7: a, b).

were articles and letters in favour of the Chinese and reports of favourable public lectures being held, such as one auspiced by the Old Scotch Collegians Society, where the audience completely supported the speaker's stance (*Argus*, 6 July 1880: 5). Yet it is hard to tell how widespread support for the Chinese in Victoria was. Certainly the Anti-Chinese League was carrying out a certain amount of agitation, but it is unclear how much support they had among the populace. It would seem, though, that many candidates felt it behoved them to support this view, no matter how weakly, as votes could be gained by it or at least some negative aspersions about their supposed pro-Chinese stance could be avoided. The candidates from the conservative side who took anti-Chinese positions even included two who had sat, or who were at that moment sitting, on boards of companies with Lowe Kong Meng. They were land speculator (and future premier) Thomas Bent (*Argus*, 14 July 1880: 6) and theatrical entrepreneur George Coppin (*Argus*, 10 July 1880: 8b).⁴⁸

There is no record of Lowe Kong Meng taking an active role in the actual election campaign, neither in letters to the press nor in public speaking. Curiously, he was mentioned by one ministerial candidate, S.G. King, stating how he (King) approached Lowe Kong Meng during the height of the anti-Chinese agitation over the seamen's strike in 1878 and persuaded him (Lowe) to send a telegram to China warning off Chinese from coming to Victoria while the anti-Chinese feeling was high. Engaging Lowe Kong Meng to take such action was presented by King as an example of his own practical political action to stop Chinese coming to the colony.

Chinese Voting Allegations

Among the business and social elite in Victoria in which he moved, Lowe Kong Meng was regarded as "strictly conservative" in his politics (*Argus*, 24 October 1888: 16). However, as both sides of politics were taking anti-Chinese stances in the July 1880 campaign, there would be no benefit in Lowe Kong Meng getting Chinese Victorians to vote for 'the law and order party' of James Service unless Service had privately assured Lowe Kong Meng that he would instigate no discriminatory legislation action against Chinese once he came into power. The

⁴⁸ In 1874, Bent and Lowe Kong Meng were both provisional directors of the Hazelwood Coal-Mining Company (*Argus*, 12 December 1874: 8). In mid-1880, Coppin and Lowe Kong Meng were both provisional directors of the Melbourne Fishmongers' and Deep Sea Fishing Company (*Argus*, 19 June 1880: 10).

broad claims by Atticus appear not to have been repeated in other Australian newspapers, yet curiously the article was quoted verbatim in at least four of the New Zealand presses.⁴⁹ However, there was specific mention in the Victorian press of purported Chinese vote rigging in the Creswick electorate parliament after the election. In a dispute between two M.L.A.s from that seat, T. Cooper and R. Richardson, opponents of Cooper (who was from the conservative party) stated that he was elected with the support of Chinese voters. Cooper retorted that Richardson, too, had Chinese voting for him. Further, he stated that at the earlier election in February 1880, the returning officer at the polling booth, who happened to be Richardson's brother, was on the one hand allowing Chinese who were voting for Richardson to get ballot papers but on the other cross-examining pro-Cooper Chinese to the purpose of rejecting their entitlement to vote (*Argus*, 2 September 1880: 6).⁵⁰

At least one of James Service's party, G. Purcell, candidate for the electorate of Stawell, stated publicly that he was in favour of a prohibitive tax on Chinese (*Argus*, 10 July 1880), so it seems likely that Atticus and his anti-Chinese allies were attempting to blacken the reputation of Service's party by tainting it with a pro-Chinese stance, regardless of the actual truth. It is also likely that Atticus was exaggerating the extent and import of the practice of assisting Chinese to vote on a candidate's behalf and chose to argue that it was only the conservative candidates who were attempting to win with Chinese votes. Regardless, the new parliament under Berry's leadership passed legislation shortly after the election that tightened the regulations regarding entitlement to vote and it was clearly expressed that one of the aims of the Act was to limit Chinese voting capacity (*Argus*, 8 September 1880: 9).

At any rate, the account of Cooper and Richardson both getting Chinese voting support belies the claim that Lowe Kong Meng was behind this practice. The Daylesford Historical Society holds 19th-century voting enrolment receipt books which record mass enrolments of Chinese on particular days. The historical society believes that Chinese miners were paid one shilling per man if they enrolled to vote and voted for a particular candidate (David Endacott, Daylesford & District Historical Society, personal communication, 1994). So it is possible that this practice was widespread but driven by particular candidates themselves rather than Lowe Kong Meng.

49 Not all Australian newspapers are available through the National Library of Australia's Trove website, so it cannot be certain the claims were not reprinted in Australia.

50 For a vivid description of the alleged techniques used to harness the Chinese vote, see the full article by Atticus (*Grey River Argus*, 10 September 1880: 2).

Furthermore, when one considers the organisational landscape within the Victorian Chinese community, as described above, the evidence is ambivalent as to how strong Lowe Kong Meng's influence was. Certainly he had great prestige and respect. Even if his district affiliation was with Num Pon Soon, these Chinese were always a minority in Victoria. However, as he was working closely with Louis Ah Mouy on anti-discrimination campaigning, the See Yup majority may have lined up behind him (Lowe Kong Meng) on this campaign. Given his support for Qing authority, it is unlikely that he would have been a leader of the anti-Manchu Yee Hing Society which, based on Crawford's evidence, could have had a declining influence over the Chinese community at that time. The days of mass importation of Chinese labour under the credit-ticket system were well gone in Victoria by 1880, and so few Chinese would have been financially obligated to Lowe Kong Meng or in his employ.

Graham Berry Brings in Anti-Chinese Legislation

If Lowe Kong Meng and other Chinese leaders had indeed attempted to influence the Chinese vote in favour of Service's party, they failed in that attempt, as Berry won government by going into a coalition with O'Shanassy's group. Soon after, an anti-Chinese delegation met with Berry and elicited a promise of an intercolonial conference to discuss uniform legislation on the Chinese question. This led to Chinese immigration restriction acts in New South Wales and Victoria by the middle of 1881. The influence of Lowe Kong Meng, however, can be seen in some mitigation of the force of these Acts, as both had provisions that allowed for Chinese who left the colony temporarily, such as merchants like Lowe Kong Meng, to be granted certificates of exemption for their return journeys. The Victorian Act also provided exemptions for Chinese who, like Lowe Kong Meng, were British subjects. These two exemptions were similar to the exemptions Lowe Kong Meng sought for merchants when he originally met with O'Shanassy in 1859 to protest against the 1859 anti-Chinese taxes. Furthermore, the Victorian Act of 1881 also exempted Chinese who were accredited representatives of the Chinese government (Markus 1979: 94–97). It is possible that Lowe Kong Meng used his favourable connections within parliament to broker these concessions in 1881, but there is no evidence to verify that he undertook such an intercession.

As the calls for greater official discrimination against Chinese in Victoria increased between 1880 and his death in 1888, Lowe Kong Meng increased his involvement in advocating on behalf of Chinese equality, using the methods of

British political discourse he had learnt in Penang, Calcutta and Melbourne. Yet his political advocacy remained focused on Chinese experience in Australasia.

Conclusion: Lowe Kong Meng's Political Legacy

Self-defining simultaneously as both a subject of the British Empire and an official of the Chinese Empire, Lowe Kong Meng conceived of the possibility of political allegiance being multiple, with the polities for whom that allegiance applied having sway in each other's territories. His view was that the citizens of each country should be able to live in the other and be allowed to fully participate in the civic affairs of each country. He did not support the ideas of limits to immigration and boundaries around the rights of citizenship.

He chose to reside in Victoria, a modernising European society, and relished the opportunities provided by that modernisation. He appears to have spent little time in China and did not involve himself in the modernisation of Chinese life, economics or politics. To be fair, calls for such modernisation in China were not evident among overseas Chinese until after his death in 1888, yet echoes of his values can be found in developments in the Chinese diaspora from the 1890s onwards.

He may have been a part of an 1883 attempt to set up a Chinese-language newspaper in Australia, as reported in the Hong Kong press.⁵¹ He surely was well aware of the development of western-style Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore from 1860 onwards (Chen 1967: 18–23) and that some of these were underwritten by politically engaged wealthy merchants. However, it was not until 1894 that the first Chinese language newspaper appeared in Australia. The *Chinese Australian Herald*, in Sydney, as demonstrated by Mei-fen Kuo (2009), had a conscious editorial policy of transforming Australian Chinese attitudes to modernity. This was only strengthened by the defeat of China by the newly modernised army of Japan in the war of 1894–95, the subsequent calls to strengthen China by adopting western technology and values, and the long-running campaign by Kang Youwei (康有為 1858–1927) and Liang Qiqiao (梁啟超 1873–1929) to reform the Qing government system. However, Lowe Kong Meng's interest in science and technology, the use of these in his mining endeavours and his investment

51 There was an account in 1883 in the Hong Kong *Daily Press* (孖刺西報 *Malaxibao*) about an attempt by some Chinese merchants—who may or may not have included Lowe Kong Meng—to publish a bilingual newspaper in Australia (*Daily Press*, 20 September 1883, cited in Kuo 2008: 9).

in technologically progressive companies suggests that he would have supported such calls to modernise China.

On the other hand it is questionable whether Lowe Kong Meng would have been supportive when some Chinese in the Straits Settlements, led by Lim Boon Keng (林文慶 *Lin Wenqing* 1869–1957) in Singapore from 1894, began to argue for a Confucian revival. Their calls included the establishment of schools to teach Chinese language to the younger diasporic generation and the founding of Confucian temples, combined with the adoption of western ideas to modernise Chinese society (Chen 1967: 77–78). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Lowe Kong Meng was always photographed or sketched in Chinese clothing and lived among décor of a semi-Asiatic style (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 13 June 1888: 5). It was also stated in the press that he lived “in the style of an English gentleman” (*Australian News for Home Readers*, 20 September 1866: 4), yet firmly adhered “to the costume of his countrymen” (*Weekly Herald*, 14 August 1863: 1). Similarly, while the architecture of the Num Pon Soon building in Melbourne follows the latest western fashion, the furniture and fittings of the shrine and meeting room in the building completely follow traditional Chinese style. However, all his children were Australian-born and adopted western dress and values, and none appear to have learnt to speak, read or write Chinese. None of his sons took over the management of Kong Meng and Co. after their father’s death and may have had no role in the firm at all.⁵² On balance, the political importance of maintaining Chinese culture in a modernising world is not well demonstrated in his personal and family life.

Lowe Kong Meng’s political values appear to have revolved around support for established authority, valuing and expressing loyalty to monarchy and acknowledging those with wealth, education and standing as the appropriate leaders of government. On the other hand he encouraged a multicultural and internationalist social system underpinning the conservative political system with fluid movement between countries and relishing progress in science, technology, production, communications and trade. If he had supported the conservative Service government, it would have been partly due to an opposition to rule by the undisciplined and disrespectful masses, as well as any possible understanding that the James Service government would resist the calls for anti-Chinese legislation.

It would have been interesting to see how Lowe Kong Meng would have responded to the escalation of exclusionist views if he had lived to see the era

⁵² A few years after Kong Meng’s death, his partner Chun Yut ran his own business from the premises that Kong Meng and Co. had occupied for 25 years, before leaving Australia permanently with his family.

of post-Federation White Australia. Equally it would have been interesting to see how he would have responded to the increasing polarisation of cultural choices open to overseas Chinese—to become fully westernised and lose any sense of Chineseness, to adopt many western values but remain self-identified as Chinese (and focus on remaining socially within the immigrant Chinese community networks) or to choose to return to China.

It is likely he would have continued to steer a middle way between these options, but whether his prestige would have carried others, or whether he would have been increasingly isolated in his views, is a question that cannot be answered. However, his approach to cross-cultural endeavour in an internationalist world and his resistance to the politics of prejudice and fear resonates strongly in the changing cultural hegemonies of the 21st century.

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