CENTRAL to the Chinese experience in Australia has been racism and political exclusion. The anti-Chinese laws of the late 1870s and 1880s, and the White Australia Policy of 1901, were declarations that Chinese people were a threat to mainstream Australia; that “No nigger, no Chinaman, no lascar, no kanaka, no purveyor of cheap coloured labour, is an Australian.”

For individual Chinese people, this could mean violence, wrongful arrest, commitment to a “lunatic asylum”, forced vaccination, eviction from the farms they’d built up, or being refused permission to re-enter Australia.

The explanation of Australia’s anti-Chinese history has long been largely uncontested: it was a creation of the working class. Miners, labourers, artisans and unionists all feared Chinese competition, in the gold rushes and later the labour market. In order to protect their wages and conditions from “cheap Chinese labour”, they rioted and murdered, went on strike, marched and protested and rioted some more and eventually forced an unwilling ruling class, dominated by pastoralists and merchants and represented by the Sydney Morning Herald, to legislate against Chinese immigration. In the course of this struggle the labour movement won over most of the other classes in society so that by 1901, the White Australia policy could be adopted with virtually unanimous support.

This hegemonic view of White Australia has been subjected to two withering critiques by Verity Burgmann. The dominant thesis attributes to the working class of the 1880s, she argued, a degree of power and influence that was quite unrealistic; to which we can add that far more extensive working class mobilisations, in 1890 and 1891, were unable to win...
far more modest objectives than the legislation of 1888, which limited the labour force, excluded residents from citizenship, and impacted on British foreign policy. She ridiculed the idea that the middle class and capitalists of the 1880s would pass legislation to protect workers’ wages and conditions from competition; given again that within a few years they were prepared to send artillery and use repressive legislation to impose “freedom of contract” and wage cuts. She pointed out that historians had discussed the anti-Chinese movement entirely divorced from the prevailing racism of the British Empire; as if the gold rushes and Chinese immigration came first, and the racism resulted.

I have always found this critique convincing. All the anti-Chinese laws passed in colonial Australia were passed by ruling class parliaments; not just in the ordinary sense, that it is the priorities of the largest capitalist enterprises which impose themselves most forcefully on lawmakers (as they do today), but in the narrow sense that to be a member of one of the colonial parliaments you almost inevitably had to be rich, or have wealthy backers, because members of parliament were unpaid (except in Victoria), and only the rich could afford to take the time for parliamentary duties. In all the colonial parliaments, from 1877 to 1888, there were only a handful of members of parliament with direct links to the organised labour movement. Despite this few historians have ever looked for a distinctively ruling class (or middle class) agenda behind the exclusion of Chinese immigrations, and later all non-Europeans.

This chapter tentatively explore some of the reasons I believe the Australian ruling class had for excluding Chinese immigrants, and promoting anti-Chinese racism. Their first and most fundamental concern was strategic: that a significant Chinese immigration, especially into areas of low European population, could involve the risk of weakening or even loss of British/Australian control of that part of the continent, the possibility of future war with China, or the possibility that a large Chinese population could be a fifth column during a war with one of the major European powers.

These concerns were fuelled by the dilemma of northern Australia. If the British/Australian ruling class failed to develop and populate the north, it would stand as a constant invitation to any other powerful nation wanting colonies, or land for settlement.

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7 “Capital and Labour”, p. 33
8 “Writing racism out of history”, pp. 84, 89; “Capital and Labour”, pp. 22, 24-8
9 Burgmann’s critiques contained her thoughts on a possible ruling class agenda, raising issues such as Chinese competition with European business, which were important but in my opinion of insufficient gravity for such a far-reaching policy. Other historians whose work has addressed explicitly ruling class or middle class agendas outside the dominant mythology are Rupert Lockwood, “British imperial influences in the foundations of the White Australia policy,” Labour History, no 7, 1964, pp. 23-33; and Ann Curthoys, “Race and Ethnicity: A study of the response of British colonists to Aborigines, Chinese and non-British Europeans in New South Wales, 1856-1881”, PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1973. Curthoys shows how violence on the gold fields in the 1850s acted to shift the balance of forces within the pre-existing parliamentary debate on Chinese indentured labour to give victory to the exclusionists. The leading role played by shopkeepers and traders in the anti-Chinese agitation on the goldfields is also discussed.
10 I am using the concept of a ruling class here in a Marxist sense; that is, the owners of the means of production (capitalists), and those people who control the social and political institutions that encourage and defend this form of class rule, eg military officers, the judiciary and high level police officers, newspaper editors and owners, politicians, bishops, leaders of sectarian organisations such as the Orange Lodge, etc. Such an approach is in no way meant to imply that there are no divisions of interest, or indeed no bitter struggles within this class, nor that individuals can have radically different opinions from the majority: indeed it is precisely such divisions that at times presage an era of social upheaval.
But how could the north be developed? One of the racist myths of British imperialism was that white men could not labour in the tropics, and this was widely accepted in the colonies.\(^\text{11}\) That left the plantation model as the only acceptable alternative, where a tiny population of whites supervised and ruled a large coloured labouring population who worked for low wages and with very few political rights. A century of anti-slavery agitation meant that such a model faced economic, social and political objections by those who wanted a society based on free-labour capitalism and parliamentary rule.

More significantly, if such a model was successful and large numbers of Chinese labourers introduced, the successful economic development of the north could involve importing a potential military danger. Having stolen a continent they were unable to fully use or develop, they feared other powers wanting a share, and they feared those who could develop the continent pushing them aside; and those fears grew as Australia’s isolation diminished.

Then there was the probability of Chinese labourers eventually moving south—how could they be stopped? This would pose a number of problems; not least of which was the problem of social control. Chinese people were not Christian, and could not be disciplined using the ideological methods used on people of British origin. Chinese camps were notorious for providing a space for larrikins and prostitutes. Chinese people were disciplined by their own secret societies; an enormously disquieting prospect. Finally, they could not possibly be admitted to Australian/British nationality given the entire discourse of British racial superiority. John Stuart Mill had warned that representative democracy required national homogeneity, and the recent American Civil War showed the consequences of a racially-stratified society.

The final concern was the emergence of the organised labour movement, and a wider political radicalisation during the 1880s, which challenged the way the Australian colonies were being run. Anti-Chinese racism could deflect working class anger away from employers and politicians, and unite the rulers and the ruled, the rich and poor, and give new impetus to British empire loyalism at a time when the imperial link was being questioned.

Australia’s newspapers played a vital role in promoting British empire racism. As the empire expanded, and tiny numbers of whites ruled over hundreds of millions of coloured people, there were daily reports of military action against indigenous rebels in New Zealand, Africa and Asia; all couched in the most horrific terms. The great Indian Mutiny of 1857 was revisited time and time again; in memoirs, political discussions and serialised romances in papers like Sydney’s popular *Evening News*. The “treachery” of the natives, “savagery” and massacres, the heroism of the English, the need for exemplary punishment, were drummed into readers. Stereotyping was the norm: victims

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\(^\text{11}\) For instance, Raphael Cilento (with Clem Lack), *Triumph in the Tropics: An Historical Sketch of Queensland*, Historical Committee of the Centenary Celebrations Council of Queensland, Brisbane, 1959; Kay Saunders, “Uncertain bondage: An analysis of indentured labour in Queensland to 1907, with particular reference to the Melanesian servants”, PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1974, pp. 36-39. The words “white”, “whites”, “coloured” and in this sentence “men” should all be read as if having quotation marks around them; as should all other loaded terms such as “prostitutes”, “larrikins”, etc. I have omitted quote marks simply to make the text readable.
included the poor and the French, while Aborigines were cannibals and lecherous; and “humorous” items about drunk or stupid Irishmen abounded.\textsuperscript{12}

JM Graham’s useful survey of the *Newcastle Morning Herald* and its attitude towards the “Chinese question” draws similar conclusions.\textsuperscript{13} Long before the labour movement began mobilising over the issue of Chinese immigration, the *Herald* was describing Chinese people as “almond eyed Celestials” who were “odious pests (77/08/22); of “stony heart”, “thick hide”, “obtuse faculties”, “low sensuality” and “ignoble brutal lusts” (77/12/11). The paper insisted there was a permanent dissimilarity between the races: physical appearance made them “aliens”, “strangers” and intermingling “repugnant to the feelings and instincts of the British people” (75/06/08). In comments which foreshadowed Hitler, rather than Barton, the *Herald* branded the “Chinese incubus” a “plague” and “the greatest social evil that [had] stained the annals of civilisation” (78/08/15). In 1887, it declared that the Chinese had to go, “by legislation, agitation, a crusade or still more violent means” (87/10/25).

This chapter will focus on the period from 1877-1888, because that decade is decisive in the establishment of the politics of White Australia. Contrary to mythology, there was no continuous or rising movement against Chinese immigration from the gold rushes to federation. The anti-Chinese laws passed in 1855 in Victoria, 1857 in South Australia and 1861 in NSW had been soon repealed because the “danger” represented by large-scale Chinese immigration had passed. Ann Curthoys has illustrated for NSW how Chinese settlers became a vital and largely accepted part of the rural economy. But the second round of anti-Chinese laws, starting in Queensland in 1877, and then SA, NSW, and Victoria in 1881, were never repealed, but in all cases strengthened in the late 1880s as a result of the sense of crisis created in 1887-88.

This crisis was brought to a head by the arrival of the SS Afghan at Melbourne on 27 April 1888 carrying 268 Chinese passengers. The Victorian government forced the captain to leave without disembarking the 52 for Melbourne. Even before the time the ship reached Sydney, hysteria was at fever pitch. Tens of thousands of people marched to Parliament, led by the Mayor of Sydney, and there were attempts to rush the Legislative Council Chamber. The Parkes government promised to stop any of the Chinese from the Afghan, and the three other ships in the harbour, from landing; and rushed retrospective legislation into Parliament to legalise its actions and dramatically reduce the number of Chinese allowed to enter NSW.\textsuperscript{14} In Brisbane, the day after the Afghan arrived in Sydney, there was an anti-Chinese riot.\textsuperscript{15} Within six weeks, the colonies had met at an Intercolonial conference, held on 12-14 June, and agreed to common legislation to virtually prohibit Chinese immigration.

\textsuperscript{12} Conclusions of a selective survey of Sydney’s highest circulation paper, the *Evening News*, reading all March editions for the years 1870, 72, 74, 76 and 78; plus all other newspapers read in conjunction with this research.

\textsuperscript{13} JM Graham: "A danger that no language could magnify": The *Newcastle Morning Herald* and the Chinese question" in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol 69, pt 4, March 1984, pp. 239-250

\textsuperscript{14} See Markus, pp. 143-4; IM Britain, “Victoria, the Chinese and the federal idea, 1887-1888”, *ANU Historical Journal*, no 6, November 1969, pp. 49-54 for Victoria.

\textsuperscript{15} Raymond Evans, “Night of Broken Glass: The Anatomy of an Anti-Chinese Riot” in *Fighting Words: Writing about Race*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, pp. 79-94
The anti-Chinese laws of 1888 were added to in the 1890s, and then transformed into the White Australia legislation in 1901, and this in turn survived in its “hard” form until the 1960s, because most of the ruling class concerns underlying White Australia turned out to be enduring. By 1896, Japan had emerged as a credible military force to make anxieties about Asian invasion a permanent part of the Australian political landscape.\(^{16}\) Racism proved a durable method for containing working class discontent. White Australia was only repealed when it became an international liability—in the era of decolonisation in South East Asia—and when its ability to contain working class unrest declined in the era of the anti-Vietnam movement.

The arguments in this chapter will necessarily be tentative; involving issues rarely researched. There are many crucial issues not addressed here. One is the centrality of gold in ruling class and middle class hopes for accelerated economic development and political liberalisation,\(^{17}\) and their concern that Chinese miners dug up the gold and took it home, rather than invest it in Australia. A range of small and medium capitalists complained about Chinese competition: furniture makers, tobacco growers, fruit growers and teamsters. Mobilisation by these groups did not make Australian policy, but contributed to the strength of the exclusionist position. So too, in a more significant way, did the trade union and labour movement anti-Chinese campaigns. My failure to discuss these is not intended to minimise either their size or significance; merely to argue that other forces were more important in the final outcome. There will be few Chinese people present in this chapter, except as unrecognisable and hysterical stereotypes, since it is a history of the people who feared and scapegoated them.

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**Chinese people as a strategic threat: Queensland 1875-77**

The most extreme ruling class concern about Chinese immigration was strategic: centred on the possibility that at some point in the future, the British/Australian elite could lose control of a significant section of the Australian continent to a resurgent Chinese Empire. Central to this fear was population; the military power of nations was measured in great part by population,\(^{18}\) and no nation had more people than China’s 400 million. Right through the nineteenth century, China’s military weakness was seen as temporary; Napoleon had said that with good generals, China could conquer the world.\(^{19}\) China was also seen necessarily looking for an outlet for its surplus population.

Australia had one great problem the British never had to face in the Americas. A third of Australia was tropical, representing nearly three million square kilometres and a vast

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\(^{16}\) See Anthony Burke, *In fear of security: Australia’s invasion anxiety*, Pluto Press Australia, Annandale (NSW), 2001

\(^{17}\) The flavour of some of these hopes is captured in Paul A Pickering, “‘The Finger of God’: Gold’s impact on New South Wales” in Iain McCalman, Alexander Cook and Andrew Reeves (eds), *Gold: Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 2001

\(^{18}\) JCR Colomb, “The Naval and Military Resources of the Colonies”, pamphlet bound in volume of Australian Pamphlets, Mitchell Library

\(^{19}\) Quoted by Parkes, speech at Wagga Wagga given on Saturday 7 April 1888. Speech reported in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 1888, p. 3
coastline, an area two-thirds the size of India, and more than ten times that of Britain itself. When the Palmer River gold rush broke out in that remote area on Cape York peninsula in 1873, the European population of tropical Australia was not much more than ten thousand, mostly concentrated on the Queensland coast. Chinese immigrants into the “settled” colonies faced an existing social and political structure they had no hope of overwhelming. But Chinese immigrants into the tropical north encountered little in the way of infrastructure or government authority, and could easily become a majority of the population if able to find a living. This was the British-Australian nightmare: a coloured north, with a rapidly expanding Chinese population, drawing from a never-ending supply of people, taking effective control, and one day in the future a military beach-head for a resurgent Chinese empire. This was the “invasion” the ruling class genuinely feared.

In 1874, the Queensland liberal government had been prepared to facilitate the importation of indentured Chinese labourers for the sugar industry; but faced with large-scale Chinese immigration to the Palmer River goldfields, their policy shifted: to indecision during 1875, to attempting in 1876 to make mining more of a financial burden to non-Europeans on the goldfields; and finally in 1877, introducing severe legislative restriction on Chinese immigration, and excluding them from new gold fields. The shift to discrimination and exclusion happened in the absence of any significant campaign.20

Three features of Queensland’s response stand out: firstly, there was a shift in the nature of the argument about Chinese immigrants. When the debate started in 1876, the government’s main argument was that the Chinese took their gold away, imposed an economic burden on the state, and did not pay their way. But by 1877, with the number of Chinese immigrants on the Palmer reaching 17,000, they focused on a strategic fear for control of the colony. It was quite unlike the stereotype of discussions about Chinese immigration. The focus was not on cheap labour or morality, but on a fear that they were being invaded.

In 1877, John Douglas, the new liberal Premier, “did not hesitate to make use of the term “invasion”...as they were backed up by many millions of their countrymen”.21 Queenslanders “were the nucleus of what would eventually be a great nation” but “this Chinese invasion...might entirely reverse and change their prospects as a people.”22 With the Chinese preponderance on the Palmer, “the white population were not very certain that they might not have to defend themselves by force of arms.”23 This was not mere demagogy. In a private letter to NSW Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, Douglas wrote of his indifference to new colonial defence proposals, comments he would never have made publicly. “The invasion which causes us the greatest anxiety at the present time is this Chinese inroad.”24 William Bailey put it more clearly than most. “People...believed that if those aliens continued to increase at the present rate, the colony would not be able to govern them.”25 Thomas Stephens, who had owned the Brisbane Courier newspaper,

20 A survey of the Brisbane Courier newspaper for 1876 and 1877 showed very few public meetings, petitions or other protests about Chinese immigration into Queensland. There had been significant agitation in 1875, long before legislation was debated.

21 Queensland Parliamentary Debates, vol XXIII, p. 245

22 QPD, vol XXIII, p. 246

23 QPD, vol XXIII, p. 247

24 Parkes correspondence, Mitchell Library, volume A881, p. 141

25 QPD, vol XXIII, p. 235
warned that in two or three years, “every Government officer, every white man, would be
driven from the North…[and] a military force would be required to regulate or coerce the
Chinese two hundred and fifty miles inland from the coast.”

The second significant feature of the Queensland debates was that these were not concerns
about coloured labour in general, but this specific Chinese immigration in particular. The
conservative Opposition leader, AH Palmer, a representative of Queensland’s pastoralists
and a supporter of Chinese and Pacific Islander labour, “wished it to be understood that
he was not an advocate for filling the Northern portion of the colony with Chinese, in the
way they were swarming into it now”. A section of the conservative Opposition rejected
the anti-Chinese rhetoric as scare mongering, but they were deserted by most on their own
side. George Grimes MLA, a sugar planter, believed that “the Chinese
invasion…threatened the existence of Queensland as, he would not say a British but an
Anglo-Saxon colony.”

It might seem a simple thing to Lord Carnarvon, that there would be 17,000
Chinamen in Queensland; but to Queenslanders—who knew how small was the
proportion of Europeans, and how easy it was, considering their proximity to
China, to make the 17,000 17,000,000.

The third remarkable feature of the debates around the 1877 Chinese Immigrants
Regulation Bill was that the Legislative Council was far more militant than the Legislative
Assembly – which directly contradicts the established mythology that attempts to restrict
Chinese immigration were frustrated by rich squatters who were hungry for cheap labour.
The Upper House toughened up the proposed law considerably – halving the number of
Chinese people that could arrive on any ship, from one per five tons registered weight, to
one per ten tons; and removing a clause which allowed Chinese people to get their £10
entry tax returned if they left within three years, a clause the Assembly reinstated. Where
British subjects of Chinese origin were excluded from the restrictions, the Council tried to
include them, until the Assembly rejected that amendment as well.

This strategic fear of a potential Chinese invasion of the north would never go away; and
resurfaced as a key issue in the crisis of 1887-88, when the focus was the Northern
Territory, and the “open door” it offered Chinese immigrants.

The spectre of slavery

In January 1888, the British Colonial Secretary sent a stiffly-worded “please-explain” to all
the Australian colonies, demanding a report outlining all “exceptional legislation affecting

26 QPD, vol XXII, p. 115
27 QPD, vol XXIII, p. 248
28 QPD, vol XXIII, p. 250-1
Chinese subjects” and the reasons for it. Perhaps the most interesting and complete reply came from Tasmania’s young Attorney-General, Andrew Inglis Clark, who argued that if significant numbers of Chinese people should come to the colonies they would either threaten the “the supremacy of the present legislative and administrative authorities”, or, if they accepted an inferior social or political status, they

...would create a combined political and industrial division of society upon the basis of a racial distinction. This would inevitably produce in the majority of the remainder of the population a degraded estimate of manual labour similar to that which has always existed in those communities where African slavery has been permitted, and thereby call into existence a class similar in habit and character to the “mean whites” of the Southern States of the American Union before the Civil War. Societies so divided produce particular vices in exaggerated proportions, and are doomed to certain deterioration.

Clark was not arguing that Chinese immigrants will undercut established wage levels; he was saying that in sufficient numbers, Chinese immigrants might produce a fundamental change in the economic, social and political structure of society.

This was a concern frequently expressed in the debates about Chinese immigration. Amongst the most powerful liberal politicians and business leaders, there was a fierce determination to avoid any kind of “mixed-race” society. This determination was shaped, not by the opposition of labourers and newly-formed trade unions, but by a structure of pre-existing British political and economic theory, in two distinct but related guises.

The first is the political theory of John Stuart Mill, and in particular in his enormously influential, Considerations on Representative Government. To read the speeches of Australia’s colonial politicians, and the editorials in colonial newspapers, is to constantly encounter the ideas in Considerations. Mill argued that the price for “free institutions” was racial homogeneity, a dominant nationalism, and strong law and order. “Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist.” Similarly, for a federation to succeed, “there should be a sufficient amount of mutual sympathy among the populations... The sympathies available for the purpose are those of race, language, religion, and, above all, of political institutions, as conducing most to a feeling of identity of political interest.” These were concerns constantly applied to discussion of Chinese immigration by leading politicians. Sir Henry Parkes pointed to the supposed indifference of the Chinese to free institutions, and their loyalty to the Chinese

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29 The Chinese Minister in London, Liu Jui-fen (Lew-ta-Jen), had complained to the British Foreign Office about laws discriminating against Chinese immigrants to the Australian colonies, and in particular to the imposition of a £10 poll tax (letter of 12 December 1887, found in Queensland State Archives, PRV7188-1-1). This complaint was then forwarded to the Colonial Office, which in turn wrote to each of the colonial governors, who in turn asked their ministers to draft a response.

30 Memo from Andrew Inglis Clark to PO Fysh (Tasmanian Premier), dated 24 April 1888, found in NSW State Records, Col Sec special bundles 4/884.1


32 Mill, p. 298. He goes on, naturally enough, to look at that great federation, the United States of America, and some of the structural weaknesses which led to civil war.
empire. Others accused the Chinese of lack of respect for the law, and giving their loyalty to their own secret societies.

Mill’s was a ruling class standpoint; he opposed universal suffrage because it meant giving the vote to people who paid no taxes, inviting them to spend other people’s money. He was for restricting the vote to people with some education, and for plural voting, to avoid any domination by the majority working class. The whole idea that there could be races or national groups not accepted into the dominant nationalism reflects the way British nationalism itself defined those people as “the other”. When Henry Reynolds discovered Mill, he commented:

It seems to me, then, that we could have had Australian nationalism much as it was, with restrictive immigration, with deportation of the Kanakas, with restrictions on Aborigines, if it had just been based on Mill’s liberal nationalism and not on Social Darwinism.

But just as there were political motives behind ruling class opposition to a mixed race society, so too there were, in the eyes of many in the ruling class, fundamental economic issues at stake. A colony, state, or nation, with a large percentage of “coloured people” would inevitably develop a racially-divided economy; something akin to the slave states of the American south, or the plantation colonies of Mauritius or Natal.

Slavery is today rightly remembered for its racism and utter brutality. But the success of the anti-slavery movement had also rested on its promotion of laissez-faire economics. Slavery was seen as inefficient. John Stuart Mill argued that, “All processes carried on by slave labor are conducted in the rudest and most unimproved manner.” Perhaps worst of all, slavery “brings labor into contempt, and fixes it to the badge of degradation”. These warnings were struck a nerve with a colonial ruling class attempting to discipline an unruly white working class to arduous and unrewarding work. In the southern states of America, white people without slaves had lacked any useful role in society. They were thus reduced to a “promiscuous horde” who were “little removed from savage life, eking out a wretched subsistence by hunting, by fishing, by hiring themselves out for occasional

33 Speaking to his Chinese immigration bill, NSW LA, 5 March 1879, in SMH, 6/3/79, p3-4
34 eg Bayer, NSW LA, 6 March 1879, in SMH, 7/3/79, p3; Macrossan 16/6/77 in Queensland LA, QPD, vol XXIII, pp. 357-8; Mein (Postmaster General), Queensland LC, QPD, vol XII, p. 73; Thornton, Queensland LC, QPD, vol XXIII, pp 88-9; Melville, 8/6/80 in New South Wales Parliamentary Debates, vol 3, p. 2698. There were conservatives who disputed this, claiming that Chinese people were law-abiding; eg AH Brown in the Queensland Legislative Council.
35 Mill, pp. 212-222
36 “Racism and other national discourses” in the Geoffrey Gray and Christine Winter, The resurgence of racism: Hanson, Howard and the race debate, Monash Publications in History, Clayton (Vic), 1997, pp. 36-7. In my opinion the first two were based on Mill rather than social Darwinism. As if to prove Reynolds’ point, the racist former MP, Graeme Campbell, as independent member for Kalgoorlie, quoted from Mill’s Considerations on Representative Government in the parliamentary debate on racial tolerance in 1996. Judith Brett, “John Howard, Pauline Hanson and the politics of grievance”, in Gray and Winter, p 25 In her footnote (no 36 on p 28) she gives reference as CPD 30 Oct 96, p. 6176.
37 John Stuart Mill, Principles of Political Economy, with some of their applications to social Philosophy. Charles C Little & James Brown, Boston, 1848, book II (Distribution), chapter V, vol 1, p. 297
38 Thomas Halliwell, The American War considered specially with regard to Slavery, G. Watson, Dunedin (Scotland), 1865, Part II, p. 32
jobs, by plunder.” They became known as “mean whites”, or “white trash” — and it was this social layer Andrew Inglis Clark feared in his reply to the Colonial Office. As a consequence, there could be no substantial immigration of white labourers into a slave or plantation economy; and no building of a prosperous, industrial economy.

The problem was compounded by the fact that while slavery was disastrous in the long term, in the short term it could be enormously profitable for a few. Thus the struggle to eliminate slavery came to be seen by urban and progressive capitalists as a struggle against a minority their class.

These were no mere academic issues in Australia. One of the first, great social movements, against the transportation of convicts in the 1830s and 1840s, had been built almost entirely within the discourse of anti-slavery, and against some of the richest people in New South Wales, the squatters who so craved their labour. And the squatters’ answer to the drying up of convict labour, the importation of a few thousand Chinese labourers and other “coolies” in the 1840s and early 1850s, was seen as an attempt to consolidate a semi-slave regime. The Chinese were themselves branded by this as slaves, or slaves-in-waiting. And it was not just the businesspeople and artisans of Sydney who were opposed to the importation of “coolies”. In 1841, the British Colonial Secretary, Sir James Stephen, warned the Governor of NSW:

> To expedite augmentation of wealth in New South Wales by introducing the black race there from India would, in my mind, be one of the most unreasonable preferences of the present to the future which it would be possible to make… As we now regret the folly of our ancestors in colonising North America from Africa, so should our posterity have to censure us if we should colonise Australia from India.

These enormous structural issues are the background to some of the rhetoric in the debates over Chinese immigration during the late 1870s and 1880s. Sometimes, it was argued that Chinese immigrant labourers were themselves actually slaves or semi-slaves; when NSW MLA Angus Cameron, a businessman, moved in 1880 to restrict Chinese immigration, he...

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40 Herman Merivale, applied this theory to distinguish two paths of economic development for new colonies; one which focused on meeting the wants of the colonists, the other which focused primarily on production for export. In the latter, the plantation colonies of the American south and the West Indies, the production of exportable commodities could be so profitable as to produce an insatiable demand for labour, which was met through the horrors of slavery or indentured labour. But such prosperity was inevitably short lived; the profits of Jamaica’s sugar planters having fallen, for example to just 3% by 1812, and sustained only by a massive differential tariff. The entire lesson of Merivale’s survey was of the durability of slower, more rounded growth, based on small farmers and free labour, and of the need to restrain the greedy planter who is just out for quick profits. The clear implication is that Australia was between the two models, and could go either way. In *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies: Delivered before the University of Oxford in 1839, 1840 & 1841*, Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, London, 1861, pp. 82ff, 260ff, 346-7

41 This is not new, of course. The association of the anti-Chinese movement with opposition to transportation was argued at the time.

42 Forgetting, of course, that it was the British and other Europeans who made Africans slaves in the Americas. Quoted in Curthoys, thesis, p. 92. The campaign against transportation itself had been shaped and influenced by the politics of anti-slavery; and there were frequent comparisons between the struggle to stop transportation and the struggle to stop Chinese immigration.
spent more than a quarter of his speech asserting that Chinese people did not come as free men, they could not call their bodies or their souls their own, they were closer to being slaves than anything else; and these were arguments echoed by other MPs in that debate. When merchant William Box debated the 1877 Gold Fields Amendment Act in the Queensland parliament, he called the Chinese serfs in their own country, a point repeated by Postmaster General CS Mein, one of Queensland’s leading solicitors, in the upper house debate. There is a second version of the Chinese as bearers of slavery, the one expressed by Andrew Inglis Clark.43 It is the argument that the presence of a sufficient number of people from an “inferior race” — for instance, a situation in which the number of Chinese was broadly equal to, or more than, the number of whites — would create a racial division in the labour market, with in this case the Chinese doing the menial and labouring work in slave-like conditions. In this version, part of the danger is again the sheer number of Chinese people; and their supposed ability to produce a racially stratified society.

All these fears were brought into sharpest relief by the problem of “the north”. Liberal politicians especially felt an enormous conundrum: no progressive empire could leave such an area undeveloped,44 and anyway, there were profits to be had. But most saw no alternative to some kind of plantation economy, and simply accepted that northern Australia would be different, and that Chinese immigrants may be a necessary part of the labour force. When Queensland Premier John Douglas spoke to his government’s anti-Chinese Gold Fields Amendment Bill, in August 1876, he conceded that “under proper control, they [Chinese people] would very likely be the very best class they could introduce for developing the tropical resources of North Queensland.” The problem was that there were too many of them.45 The Premier of Tasmania, PO Fysh, dissented from the decisions of the 1888 Intercolonial Conference, called to develop united legislation against Chinese immigration, attacking the proposed new law as disregarding “the climatic characteristics of the Northern territories of Queensland, South Australia, and Western Australia, which are a barrier to successful occupation, except in pursuit of avocations peculiarly tropical and unsuitable to European labour.”46

The logic of this approach was explored by Sir Henry Parkes, in a remarkable article he wrote for the Melbourne Review of October 1879. Parkes proposed an amalgamation — not a federation — of Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales. He pointedly excluded Queensland from this merger, “because her capabilities of soil and climate so clearly mark her out for a colonizing career dissimilar from that of her elder sisters”.47 The implication

44 One of the strongest colonial arguments for dispossession of the Aboriginal people was that they had done “nothing” with the land.
45 QPD, vol XX, p. 380. By 1879, he was arguing that white men could work in the tropics.
46 Minutes of the Intercolonial Conference, NSW Legislative Assembly Votes and Proceedings, 1887-8, vol 2, p. 176
47 By contrast, he can happily propose the merger of the three because of “the corresponding character of their leading pursuits, and their equality of promise in their future capabilities” and these can lead to “a reciprocity of patriotic feeling”. Parkes, “An Australian Nation”, in Melbourne Review, October 1879, p. 327. Parkes sent his article to the veteran British Liberal and Opposition leader, WS Gladstone, which in itself
is that the economic structure suited to the tropical north would be a threat to the
democratic institutions of the southern colonies. Parkes’ proposal to form an “Australia”
without Queensland was rejected by the former Premier of that colony, John Douglas, who
declared that virtually nobody in Queensland imagined “the existence here of a separate
nationality except in association with the rest of the Australian states”. Nevertheless, it is
clear that some version of Parkes’ proposal for southern unification was part of the
substance of the November 1880 Intercolonial Conference held in Melbourne.

If Australia was not to be divided into two very different forms of society, with very
different political systems—an autocratically-ruled, plantation north and a parliamentary,
wage-labour south—then coloured labour and Chinese immigration would ultimately
have to be stopped.

At the Intercolonial conference of January 1881, the issue in contention was Western
Australia. In 1880, the colony’s Legislative Council tried to solve a labour shortage in the
north by offering subsidies for the importation of Chinese labourers, an action which
galvanised the other Australian colonies at the Intercolonial Conference of 1881 into
protesting to the Colonial Office in an attempt to get the WA legislation struck down. But
as angry as they were with WA, it was of modest importance only to the coloured labour
debate in this period.

Queensland presented a series of extremes. Her tropical industries were the most
advanced of the northern colonies, with her profitable sugar industry dependent on Pacific
islander labour. But Queensland had also led in the rejection of Chinese immigration.
From 1884, the majority of Queensland’s conservatives were in favour of harsh anti-
Chinese laws, and the conservatives won the 1888 election on the basis of being more anti-
Chinese than the liberals of Sir Samuel Griffith. So while the problems associated with
“slavery” and the “slave trade” in islanders were a constant source of agitation—indeed,
the main point of difference between liberal and conservative parties—the exclusion of
Chinese immigrants removed the extra dimension which China’s population gave to the
“problem”. In other words, as long as “coloured labour” was largely confined to sugar,

indicates the seriousness of his proposal. See WE Gladstone papers, vol CCCLXXVI. It is transcribed on a
card in the index to the Parkes correspondence, fiche 25.


The conference had been originally proposed to discuss common action against Chinese immigration, but
when faced with a lukewarm response, Parkes suggested another conference between the three colonies he
wanted to unify to discuss border tariffs. Once agreed to, he urged the three to try and find “some common
ground for alliance”, pointing to, “The immense territory of Western Australia and the northern part of
Queensland [which] appear to me to be destined to a separate political existence”: words entirely
reminiscent of his Melbourne Review article. Letter Parkes to colonial secretaries of Victorian and South
Australia, 2 November 1880, NSW State Records, 4/830.3 Also, letter to Victorian Colonial Secretary,
Graham Berry, 2 November 1880, Parkes corresp, Mitchell Library, A916, pp. 439-41. It is also clear that
Parkes’ full intentions regarding the conference were hidden from the public; the Sydney Morning Herald
explained that Queensland’s attendance at the conference had been unnecessary because there had been no
plan to discuss “the whole question of intercolonial tariffs”. 4 December 1880, p. 5; but it does point to
Parkes’ past opinion and hopes that his desire to exclude Queensland from any future union will be rejected.

South Australia expressed its willingness to discuss the union of the three as a first step towards more
general federation. Letter from SA Chief Secretary, William Morgan, to Parkes, 13 November 1880, NSW
State Records 4/830.3.

Western Australia was a Crown Colony until 1890, when it gained self-government.

NSW LA V&P, 1880-81, vol 1, pp. 345-6
and largely sourced from the Pacific islands or India, it was less likely to fundamentally reshape the economy or political institutions of Queensland, whose economy also boasted extensive mining and pastoral industries based on wage labour. When sugar planters began recruiting significant numbers of Chinese labourers in 1883, the newly elected liberal government pushed through the most extreme anti-Chinese immigration bill in the colonies; with the support of a majority of the conservatives.  

The most serious issue surrounding “coloured labour” in Queensland was the extensive agitation led by sugar planters for North Queensland to separate into a new colony with its capital at Townsville. Northern separation raised the spectre of a “black colony”, run by a ruthless aristocracy of planters, with all hope of advancement denied to white immigrants. There was no guarantee that such a colony would maintain restrictive laws against Chinese immigration. A “black colony” might also contain the seed of a future Australian civil war, as had happened so recently in the United States. This fear of possible future civil war runs through many of the debates on Chinese immigration, and Helen Irving has commented that “the long shadow of the Civil War hung over [federation] debates throughout the 1890s.”

It was in the third of Australia’s tropical colonies, South Australia’s Northern Territory, that the issue of Chinese immigration and Chinese labour in the tropics became one of the battlegrounds that led to the legislation of 1888. South Australia’s businessmen and politicians looked at the rich sugar industry in Queensland and fantasised about the profits to be made when the Northern Territory was developed. The SA government spent large sums on infrastructure, research and incentives to get tropical industries started and wanted a return on its investment. The assumption behind all their plans was that labouring work would be done by coloured labourers, but attempts to organise the recruitment of labourers from India, Japan, Mauritius and other places all failed. The one group of coloured labourers who did come to the Territory were Chinese people; initially to work in the gold mines or prospect on their own account.

For the conservatives, mostly based on pastoral production and less concerned about democracy, this was not an issue. But South Australia’s liberals were completely torn on the issue. They wanted both Chinese restriction and northern development. Between 1880 and 1887, the South Australian House of Assembly passed five separate bills to restrict Chinese immigration into the Northern Territory, every single one of them failing in the Legislative Council. But at the same time, the House of Assembly was approving enormous grants of land and other incentives to get potential sugar planters to set up in the Territory, on the explicit understanding that these would probably employ Chinese

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52 It was passed in March 1884; QPD, vol XLI, pp. 345-58, 429-41. This debate is very bitter, and prolonged by vicious party point-scoring, which hides the lack of any substantial differences.

53 See for example, Cilento, p. 398. The British government rebuffed attempts by the planters to get them to introduce legislation dividing the colony of Queensland. It must be remembered that the Civil War—the bloodiest war ever involving Europeans—was not 25 years distant in 1888; more recent to Australians in the period of this study than the sacking of the Whitlam Government at the time of publication in 2002.

54 In To Constitute a nation: A cultural History of Australia’s Constitution, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 70. Some Queensland conservatives opposed northern separation, including their leader, McIlwraith, and their Brisbane mouthpiece, the Courier.

55 These attempts were: 1880 (to restrict entry of Chinese people into the whole of South Australia), 1880 (NT only), 1881 (whole of South Australia; amended in the Legislative Council to not apply to the Northern Territory), 1886 and 1887. See South Australian Parliamentary Debates for details.
labourers. The contract for building the Pine Creek railway in the Territory, signed in 1886, allowed the contractor to use Chinese labourers. The primary stated objection of the Liberals to Chinese immigration was that the Chinese would take away their gold—that great lever for economic development and white immigration—and compete too effectively with Europeans. With that in mind, the SA Parliament passed a gold fields act in 1886 to exclude Chinese miners for two years from new goldfields discovered by Europeans.\textsuperscript{56}

The result was that from 1880 onwards, Palmerston (Darwin) was a predominantly Chinese town, and Chinese people outnumbered Europeans in the Territory by around six to one. In no other area was the predominance of a Chinese population so complete. Then in 1887, there was another major influx of Chinese labourers to work on the railway,\textsuperscript{57} with 1000 arriving in December 1887 alone. Moreover, the attitude of Europeans in the Territory was changing. Chinese businesses had begun to assume a more significant position; Europeans wanting to hire Chinese labour had to subcontract it through Chinese storekeepers, giving Chinese employers an advantage.\textsuperscript{58} Close links were developing between Chinese-owned businesses in Darwin and Singapore and other centres of Chinese population, and Chinese entrepreneurs spoke of turning Port Darwin into a second Singapore.\textsuperscript{59} Such a prospect horrified Australian liberals. Where once the European businesspeople of Port Darwin had welcomed Chinese labour, now they began protesting against it. From Queensland came hysteria that Chinese people would enter Queensland via the overland route from Port Darwin.\textsuperscript{60}

In September 1887, Sir Henry Parkes travelled to Melbourne and Adelaide to put pressure on the South Australian government, but was told by the Premier, Playford, that while the government favoured prohibition for the south, Chinese labour would be needed in the Territory, provided they brought their wives.\textsuperscript{61}

The eastern colonies finally got their way with South Australia as a result of the crisis they created in 1888. Elections for a third of the Legislative Council, held at the height of the crisis, shifted the balance of opinion in that chamber.\textsuperscript{62} South Australian governments still tried to find a way to develop the Northern Territory on the plantation model. Even after

\textsuperscript{56} PL Donovan, \textit{A land full of possibilities: A history of South Australia's Northern Territory}, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981, pp. 135-8. See debate on Northern Territory Sugar Plantation Bill, SAPD 1880. South Australian debates were unique for rarely raising issues of “slavery” and the problems of a racially stratified society.

\textsuperscript{57} Donovan, pp. 151-58, 177. The railway employed up to 3000 Chinese labourers, and linked many of the Territory’s gold mines to Port Darwin. It appears to have cost in excess of £1 million, and extraordinary amount of money in those days.

\textsuperscript{58} Timothy G Jones, \textit{The Chinese in the Northern Territory}, revised edition, Northern Territory University, Darwin, 1997, pp. 34, 47-8

\textsuperscript{59} Jones, p. 35

\textsuperscript{60} Donovan, pp. 176-8;

\textsuperscript{61} SMH, 14 Sept, p. 7; 16 Sept 87, p. 8

\textsuperscript{62} This was, I would suggest, a largely middle class vote. The SA Legislative Council was elected on the most liberal upper house franchise in the colonies, but to vote one still needed to own property worth £50 or be a £20 leaseholder. PA Howell, “Constitutional and Political Development, 1857-1890” in Dean Jaensch (ed), \textit{The Flinders History of South Australia: Political History}, Wakefield Press, Netley (SA), 1986, p. 117. Howell comments that, “This meant that ‘the average working family man’ qualified.” However, only 41% of adult males in the colony were on the Legislative Council rolls, p. 118.
pushing through his colony’s anti-Chinese laws, SA Premier Thomas Playford visited India in 1892 in an unsuccessful attempt to organise temporary Indian agricultural labourers for the Territory.\textsuperscript{63} Throughout this period, the plantation model of economic development was more generally becoming less profitable, and it was largely closed down as an option by the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901.\textsuperscript{64}

\textbf{The East awakened: Fears of a Chinese threat 1887-8}

The years 1887-88 saw a rising anti-Chinese hysteria which reached its peak with the Afghan crisis in Melbourne and Sydney from late April to May 1888, the anti-Chinese riots in Brisbane and Sydney, and the Intercolonial Conference of 12-14 June 1888 which agreed that all colonies would pass new legislation to virtually prohibit any Chinese immigration. The traditional explanation focuses on rising numbers of Chinese immigrants, the agitation of the labour movement, and in particular the propaganda campaigns of the \textit{Bulletin} and the \textit{Boomerang}; which all lead to the issue being taken up by the parliamentary liberals. These are no doubt factors, but they don’t really explain why it is that by November 1887— with the anti-Chinese movement in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane barely revived—the governments of NSW, Queensland and Victoria were already committed to a new round of anti-Chinese laws.\textsuperscript{65} Indeed, Sir Henry Parkes warned that his government expected to take unilateral action against an expected shipload of Chinese—a stance which prefigured the Afghan crisis five months later.\textsuperscript{66}

I would argue that the dilemmas of Australia’s politicians over the use of Chinese labour in the tropics were resolved by fears of a possible strategic crisis; and that some of them created a political crisis over the Afghan in order to force the closure of the “open door” in Darwin, and a resolution to the “Chinese question” more generally.

From 1875 to 1894 there was a transformation in the Western view of China; from a patronising view of China as a rotting, decaying empire, ripe for plunder to a vision of the “Awakening East”, a China that was modernising and becoming able to stand up to the greatest European powers. The transforming event for Australian views was China’s

\textsuperscript{63} John Playford, “Thomas Playford” in \textit{Australian Dictionary of Biography}, vol 11, p. 248. The issue of labour for tropical industries was still worrying Parkes as late as November 1887; when he wrote to Victorian Premier Gillies to suggest a new laws to practically prohibit Chinese immigration; letter dated 4 November 1887, in NSW State Records, 4/884.1

\textsuperscript{64} Adrian Graves discusses the crisis of profitability in the plantation-based Queensland sugar industry from 1883, and documents the drive by both liberal government and sections of the industry to restructure it on the basis of central mills and family-owned farms. He attributes to this the ultimate rejection of Pacific island labour for the industry; \textit{Cane and Labour: The political economy of the Queensland sugar industry, 1862-1906}, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1993

\textsuperscript{65} Letter Parkes to Gillies, 4 November 1887; Letters from Parkes to colonial secretaries of Queensland, SA, Tasmania, New Zealand, dated 8 November 1887; Reply Gillies to Parkes, 19 November 1887; Rely Griffith to Parkes, 2 December 1887; all NSW State Records, 4/884.1. The chief obstacle to immediate new legislation was that the legislative session in most parliaments was virtually over; with Queensland due to go to the polls in April-May 1888.

\textsuperscript{66} Parkes telegrams to colonial secretaries of Victoria, SA, Queensland, Tasmania and NZ dated 28 November 1887; Victorian Premier Gillies also pre-empted his government’s response to the Afghan incident in a letter to Parkes, 30 November 1887, both in NSW State Records, 4/884.1
strong showing in its undeclared war with France, from 1883-5. France had been pushing its way into Indo China for decades. Hostilities escalated sharply in 1884, when France attacked Formosa (Taiwan); however a landing party was repulsed. In October 1884, Chinese forces drove the French from Tamsui (Formosa); and then in late March 1885, recaptured Langson, in northern Indo-China, in a historic victory for the Chinese military. Although she made substantial concessions, the result was seen as a victory for China. This view of a powerful China lasted only until the debacle of its war with Japan in 1894, and has been largely forgotten by historians, but it was crucial in the Australian crisis of 1887-8.67

With China’s unexpected resistance to France in 1883-5, came a strong push within British diplomatic circles to secure an alliance with China against Russia. Through much of the nineteenth century, much of Britain’s foreign policy had been directed to containing the expansion of the Russian empire. Britain had gone to the brink of war in 1877-8 over Russia’s attempt to conquer and colonise the Ottoman Empire; and again in 1885 Britain and Russia were on the brink of war over Russia’s incursion into Afghanistan, seen as a direct threat to its control of India, “the jewel in the crown”. These war scares had had a profound impact in the Australian colonies. There was a widespread belief that war with Russia was inevitable, and that through an alliance, China’s military could be turned against Russia. In his meticulously researched history of Anglo-Chinese relations between 1880 and 1885, Victor Kiernan showed that while no alliance was ever concluded, there was a widespread belief that it probably had.68

This belief extended to Australia. In 1887, when opposing the Naval Agreement between the Australasian colonies and Britain, the NSW protectionist-labour politician EW O’Sullivan warned that if war broke out between Russia and China, and if China was a British ally, “the time may come when the ships of war which are subsidised by us may be sent as convoys of ships bringing Chinamen to the shores of Australia.”69 In an 1887 Victorian debate on factory legislation which discriminated against Chinese-run workshops, FT Sargood commented on the strength of Russian and French fleets in the Pacific, noting that, “China has a strong fleet and is increasing it very much... this is an ally which we have no right to offend...for such a trifling object as the branding of furniture.”70 In 1888, New Zealand politician Josiah Firth wrote a long letter to all the colonial premiers which talked about how “in the probable coming struggle between England and Russia in these seas and elsewhere, China will be one of our most potent Allies”.71 Discussing the issue of self-government for Western Australia, the protectionist newspaper, the Australasian Star, feared that portions of the colony “might serve as a piece of territory to purchase the assistance of China with for some enterprise against Russia in Central Asia”.72

67 EVG Kiernan, British Diplomacy in China 1880 to 1885, Octagon Books, New York, 1970 (first published 1939)
68 Kiernan, pp. 304-5
69 Bruce Mansfield, Australian nationalism in the growth of the labour movement in the Eighteen-Eighties in New South Wales, with reference to Queensland, MA thesis, Sydney University, 1951, p. 84
70 Victorian Parliamentary Debates, 1887, vol 56, p 2637, quoted in Britain, p. 45
71 Letter from Firth to Sir Samuel Griffith, dated 14 February 1888, Griffith correspondence, Dixson collection, Mitchell Library, DL MSQ 186
If China was Britain’s indispensable ally, it would be in a position to make modest demands on the Empire. All Australian politicians could do was trust London, but their confidence in London had been shattered by a series of conflicts, none more potent than over the annexation of New Guinea. When the McIrlwraith government in Queensland took possession of the non-Dutch half of New Guinea in the name of the crown, Britain vetoed it. Colonial ruling class anger turned to hysteria when German annexation was announced on 19 December 1884. Now there was a powerful European state on their doorstep with the ability to threaten Australian shipping. Victorian Premier James Service warned Britain that “the bitterness of feeling towards her will not die out in this generation”. In Brisbane, Sir Thomas McIrlwraith, now leading the opposition, told parliament, “it is the grosses piece of treachery on the part of the English Government to the colonies that has ever been perpetrated.” There were mass meetings of protest in Sydney and other towns, and republicans gained a boost. Lord Roseberry, soon to become British Foreign Secretary, confessed to having feared that New Guinea might have “lost” the Australian colonies.

A colonial fear that Britain would prove unreliable in defending the Australian colonies from Chinese immigration connected with earlier concerns over Britain’s treaty with China, made at Peking in 1860. This guaranteed British citizens the right to enter China—one of its main purposes—and extended a reciprocal right to Chinese citizens wanting to enter the British empire. In 1877, Secretary of State for Colonies, Lord Carnarvon, invoked the treaty to disallow Queensland’s anti-Chinese Gold Fields Act Amendment Act. From that point, the treaty became an issue in every debate on Chinese immigration.

These great issues: the renaissance of Chinese military might; the belief that China was now Britain’s key ally in the East; and loss of confidence in British loyalty towards Australian interests all came together in 1887, when the Chinese government sent a special mission to Australia to report on the conditions faced by its people living here. The agenda for their visit was spelled out in a remarkable article written by “Marquis” Tseng (Tseng Chi-tse), a member of the Tsungli Yamen, China’s quasi-foreign office, in January 1887. Tseng attacked countries which hunger “for land they do not and cannot make use of”, expressed outrage at the abuses suffered by Chinese people in various colonies, pointed to China’s revitalised military, and promised that one of the immediate aims of

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74 The Brisbane *Courier* correspondent in Sydney reported: “The masses do not care very much about New Guinea.” Quoted in Thompson, p. 95. A similar comment was made in *SMH*, 5 January 1885, quoted in Thompson, p. 97
75 Many saw Queensland’s annexation as an attempt to guarantee indentured labour for the sugar industry; nevertheless, even those colonial politicians and newspapers who vehemently opposed the labour trade supported annexation on strategic grounds.
76 Quoted in Thompson, p. 92
77 Thompson, p. 103
78 Through the crisis of 1888, Victorian Premier Duncan Gillies and Tasmanian Premier PO Fysh argued that the strategy of the colonies should be to get Britain to renegotiate the treaty with China, so that large scale Chinese immigration was stopped at its source.
Chinese foreign policy will be “the amelioration of the condition of her subjects residing in foreign parts”.  

The Commissioners visited the Australian colonies from May to August 1887. Their visit provoked alarm. The conservative South Australian Register speculated that China might invade the Northern Territory in retaliation for the poll (entry) tax.\(^{81}\) NSW Premier Sir Henry Parkes tried to find a way to restrict their activities.\(^{82}\) If anything, the atmosphere after the visit was more agitated than during it. Newspapers inflamed their readers with suggestions that, “the Chinese Commissioners came here to form a judgement of the Australian Colonies as a field for emigrants from China,” as the Sydney Morning Herald put it,\(^{83}\) going on to argue that public concern over Chinese immigration had been significantly increased by their visit, ”and the belief that [their] report...is likely to be followed by a Chinese invasion of Australia.”\(^{84}\) It was precisely at this moment, in the weeks following the visit of the Commissioners, that the Premier of Victoria, Duncan Gillies, initiated a discussion among colonial premiers about joint legislation to further restrict Chinese immigration.\(^{85}\)

The visit of the Chinese Commissioners led to a formal complaint by the Chinese Minister in London to the Foreign Office, and letters to all the Australasian colonies demanding to know what special restrictions were placed on Chinese people, and why. This worked to confirm colonial fears of British treachery, and British concern for the demands of the Chinese empire. That letter was received by the NSW Governor on 10 March 1888, and soon published in the colonial newspapers.\(^{86}\) Some of the replies to London were quite long and substantial, like that written by Andrew Inglis-Clark. Sir Henry Parkes had his reply to London telegraphed. A telegraph message to London cost about 10 shillings a word, at a time when ten shillings was a day and a half’s pay for a labourer. And Parkes’ reply is several pages long. So that single response probably represented five or ten years’ average wages—around $100,000 in today’s terms. This gives us a glimpse of the anger and concern he obviously felt.

Just one week later, with the anti-Chinese movement provoked to new levels of alarm, Parkes gave an extraordinary speech to the citizens of Wagga Wagga.\(^{87}\) The speech was made some 20 days before the Afghan arrived in Melbourne. Parkes began by pointing to the dangerous world situation, “the extraordinary disposition on the part of the largest Powers in the world to array themselves in arms”. As if this weren’t bad enough, China was “rapidly creating armies and a formidable navy”. This dangerous empire had agents right here within Australian society.

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81 Referred to in WG Lewis, p. 16
82 Telegram from Parkes to Queensland Colonial Secretary, dated 23 May 87; in QSA PRV7188-1-1
83 SMH 15/10/87, quoted in Richard Fletcher, “The role of the immigration question in gaining for the labour movement recognition by society in the period 1877 to 1890 in New South Wales”, MA thesis, Sydney University, 1964, p. 123; WG Lewis, p. 12ff
84 SMH 17/10/87, quoted in Fletcher, thesis, p. 123. Victorian Premier Duncan Gillies did not agree with the alarmist view of their visit,
85 Telegram from Gillies to Parkes, 3 November 1887, NSW State Records, 4/884.1
86 Printed paper in NSW State Records, 4/884.1
87 On Saturday 7 April 1888. Speech reported in SMH, 9 April 1888, p. 3
Those amongst us who have only been accustomed to regard the poor Chinaman that perhaps struggles through the streets of Wagga with his baskets filled with vegetables or fruit, and who have been accustomed to look down upon him, will, after I sit down, regard him, I think in a new light, because I shall be able to show that he represents here a great Power…which has risen up to be one of the most formidable Powers in the world.

Parkes then pointed out that whilst the total European population of all the Australasian colonies was just three and a half million, the population of China was some 400 million. But China’s power was no longer purely human: and Parkes returned to outline in detail China’s military transformation. “She has now some of the finest armour-plated ships floating on the sea”, and he went on to list tonnages, the thickness of their armour, the speed of the Chinese warships, and all the details of their massive guns. And turned to detail China’s new national army. And how China had begun the manufacture of guns, ships of war and all the materials of war. And the purpose of this long and detailed exposition was this: to make clear, “what that power is which must presumably protect Chinamen wandering about the colonies.” He then referred to the complaint made by the Chinese Minister in London. If they allowed Chinese people to settle in Australia in significant numbers, they would soon find themselves reckoning with a great military power wanting to protect them. Nowhere in this speech was there a single line about Chinese immigrants taking European jobs; and Parkes rejected the arguments of those who attack the Chinese as immoral.

The issue was strategic; an issue of national survival. Given the real state of China’s military, this was a fantasy, but the intensity of Parkes’ fear was a product of how little control the Australian ruling class had over vast areas of the tropical north.

The pervasiveness of fears of Chinese invasion is reflected in some of the popular literature of the time. Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice have documented Australian fantasies of Asian invasion. They find that the first such stories are published in 1888: William Lane’s notorious White or Yellow?: A Story of the Race War of A.D. 1908, serialised in the Boomerang from February to May 1888; and an anonymous novel, The Battle of Mordialloc or How We Lost Australia. The reason that Chinese invasion fantasies date from 1888, and not earlier, despite a mass anti-Chinese movement in 1878, and other such movements earlier during the gold rushes, is that China’s changed military status has made some kind of invasion in the future seem credible. The Yellow Wave: A Romance of the Asiatic Invasion of Australia is another conservative invasion fantasy, written by the establishment NSW MLA Kenneth Mackay. He begins with the visit of the Chinese Commissioners and their plans for a Chinese colony in the north. Like The Battle of Mordialloc, the Russians are in alliance with the Chinese; in this case attacking India and Australia simultaneously, in order to tie up British military support. The idea of a Chinese alliance with Russia simply inverts the common perception of a British-Chinese alliance against Russia; a proposition both credible, and one which put both sets of “bad guys” on the side of evil. This literature both reinforced a sense of military danger from China and Chinese immigration; and reflected the strategic dimension to Australian fears.88

Divide and rule

The years 1877-1888 saw the rise of a working class challenge to the power and priorities of Australia’s employers and their political allies; a challenge which climaxed with the great strikes of 1890 and 1891, and the formation of Labor parties in NSW, Queensland, SA and Victoria. Unions, new and old, grew rapidly and a more radical, quasi-socialist outlook took root amongst many working class people. It was also a period of economic turbulence, with recessions and substantial unemployment in 1877-80, and then, in most colonies from 1886 onwards as the long boom gave way to the catastrophic depression which began in 1890. Confidence and a sense of crisis were mixed in the late 1880s, producing a heady questioning of assumptions, as republicanism, Australian nationalism, first-wave feminism, theosophy and cultural experimentation flowered alongside strikes, union organisation, and class politics in a mix remarkably similar to that of the late 1960s. Oppositional politics were most advanced in New South Wales, and working class consciousness most developed in the mining communities of the Hunter Valley, and in parts of inner-Sydney.

There is good reason to believe that anti-Chinese racism was used to limit this challenge from below. In the global sense, of course, it underpinned the development of an Australian nationalism which could incorporate both the labour movement and Irish republicanism, a nationalism whose phobias led to reliance on the empire for “protection”, which in turn led a majority of the labour movement to initially accept the militarism of William Morris Hughes and involvement in the bloodbath of 1914-18.  

The great urban working class mobilisations against Chinese immigration all came at times of unemployment and economic distress: 1878 in New South Wales and elsewhere, 1880 in NSW, and 1888 in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Bitterness at the workings of capitalism was deflected—deliberately or otherwise—onto a racialised target.

But fear of the Chinese was also useful in a more local sense. Queensland’s own political genius, Sir Thomas McIlwraith and his partner, John Murtagh Macrossan, vigorously identified Queensland’s conservative party with the anti-Chinese cause. This was the party favoured by the wealthiest squatters and dedicated to preserving the right of sugar planters to recruit and indenture pacific island labourers—the so-called “slave trade”. When anti-Chinese campaigner John Potts took his crusade to Mackay, his meeting was chaired by Hume Black MLA, a wealthy sugar planter and one of the leaders of the movement for northern separation in the Queensland Parliament. McIlwraith’s conservatives won the 1888 election against the Liberals, led by Sir Samuel Griffith, the man who had written most of Queensland’s anti-Chinese laws, in a torrent of anti-Chinese hysteria; leading to a brutal riot in Brisbane’s Chinatown on the night of the election.

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89 This is most evocatively described in Humphrey McQueen’s A New Britannia. There is a long history of ruling classes and politicians setting out to “divide and rule”; in the newspapers of the 1870s, this was explicitly described as Britain’s strategy in India. Today, this process is referred to as “wedge politics”.

90 John Potts, One year of Anti-Chinese work in Queensland: with incidents of travel, Brisbane, 1888, p. 18. One of the more interesting aspects of this nasty little pamphlet is the degree of opposition he faced in agitating against Chinese immigration.
Saturday 3 May 1888. This represented no increase in real working class influence on politics; indeed McIlwraith’s election led to an immediate countermanding of a decision by Griffith to end assisted immigration. This was a blow to the labour movement which had fought hard to stop assisted immigration since an economic downturn had begun in 1885-6, and which had won a significant concession from Griffith.

Similarly, the economic policies of Sir Henry Parkes were bitterly resented by most of the labour movement: these included assisted immigration at times of high unemployment, and free trade. In the 1877 election, Parkes had lost his seat of East Sydney on this issue. Parkes was also violently hostile to strikes, sending—not just police, but—artillery to suppress a miners’ strike at New Lambton in the Hunter Valley in 1879. The miners had been key supporters of the Seamen’s Union in its 1878 strike against the ASN company when it replaced European sailors with Chinese crews on some of its ships. The miners had taken strike action, but there is no record of the Seamen’s Union returning the favour—perhaps because it saw itself as deeply indebted to Parkes for his opposition to Chinese labour. The Parkes government sent artillery against Hunter Valley miners again in 1888, but it appears that this may have been on the initiative of the Governor. Nevertheless, Parkes was largely spared the consequences of such brutal actions by the extent of official trade union support for him as a result of the Chinese issue.

Racism towards Chinese people could also be used to save, or boost individual political careers. One of the most appalling and destructive pieces of anti-Chinese propaganda came in 1876, with the publication of the report by a Select Committee of the NSW Parliament into the common lodging houses of the City of Sydney and nearby areas. It was endlessly quoted, in parliamentary debates and by public meeting orators, despite the police rejecting its substance.

This inflammatory, racist and dishonest report was the work of Angus Cameron MLA. Cameron was to become one of the most significant anti-Chinese agitators in New South Wales. He had been elected to the NSW Legislative Assembly in 1874 as the candidate of the Sydney Trades and Labour Council, who paid him a wage to allow him to attend parliament. But by 1876, Cameron had been drawn into the faction of Premier Sir John Robertson, and was parlaying his political position into a parallel career in business in partnership with James Fletcher, a mine owner and proprietor of the Newcastle Morning Herald, and as secretary of building societies. The growing distance between Cameron and the Trades and Labour Council came to a head in March 1876, when Cameron absented himself from parliament to avoid voting against Robertson’s Public Education Bill, which was opposed by the TLC and those supporting secular education. Cameron immediately faced a tidal wave of anger. Radical MP David Buchanan declared Cameron’s

91 The story of the riot and its context is told in “Night of broken glass: The anatomy of an anti-Chinese riot” in Raymond Evans, Fighting Words: Writing about Race, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, pp. 79-94
93 Coghlan, vol III, pp. 1285-6
94 Curthoys, thesis, p. 424-8
political career “at an end.” In his electorate there were angry meetings of protest, involving leading members of the TLC. Within a fortnight, Cameron had severed his links with the TLC.96

Cameron’s betrayal took place on 15 March 1876. His motion for a select committee into common lodging houses had been proposed and passed the day before, 14 March 1876, at a time when he had already decided on the action which would mark him as a traitor to the unions. Far from being a product of the labour movement, the Select Committee report into common lodging houses was an attempt to save the political career of Angus Cameron at the point at which he broke with the labour movement.97

Other researchers have begun to dig out similar evidence of ruling class politicians using anti-Chinese racism to boost their careers or parties. In a compelling and profoundly researched book, Andrew Gyory argues that the 1882 anti-Chinese law in the United States was not a product of labour movement agitation east of the Rockies, but the result of the two desperate, competing parties for presidential office using attacks on the Chinese to win the vote in California. He meticulously documents working class attitudes to Chinese people, and finds both a certain amount of racism, and a conscious resistance to the politics of racial division; a resistance which later broke down under the weight of popular propaganda. He shows that outside California, the great anti-Chinese demagogue Denis Kearney had little appeal.98

Closer to home, Philip Ferguson has re-examined the origins of White New Zealand,99 and Jerome Small has looked again at the Clunes (Vic) riot of 1873, historically presented as an anti-Chinese strike, sparked when mine-owners recruited Chinese strikebreakers. He shows that the strikebreakers could only be recruited from towns where Chinese miners had little contact with Europeans, and that other Chinese people supported the strike and warned the Clunes miners when the strikebreakers were on their way. He shows too that the memory of the strike as anti-Chinese, rather than anti-employer, was the result of a conscious intervention by the town’s businesspeople in the post-strike debate.100

These studies all raise the broader question of the origins and uses of racism, and challenge the hegemonic view that working people are the naturally racist class in society. They are, I would suggest, the tip of the iceberg, and indicate that a lot more critical research is needed into the history of White Australia.

96 Evening News, Sydney, 16 March 1876, p. 3, col 1; for the debate on the Education bill, see Evening News, 9 & 10 March.; for the reaction to Cameron, Evening News, 18 March, p4, c6; 24 March, p.3.
97 Evening News, 15 March, for the select committee; 3 April for report of public meeting addressed by Cameron at which he makes it clear he knew he would be disappointing his working class supporters when he failed to vote against Robertson’s bill.
98 Andrew Gyory, Closing the gate: race, politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill (NC), 1998
Conclusion

The anti-Chinese laws of 1888 represented a virtual declaration of White Australia: the laws of 1901 did not add much to what had been achieved thirteen years earlier. These laws represented more than the promotion of racism; they defined — in conjunction with vast assisted immigration programs — both the ideal Australian population, and the dominant mode by which labourers in Australia would be employed.

It is my opinion that the White Australia policy represents the coming together of two fundamental needs on the part of the Australian ruling class at the end of the nineteenth century. The first was the need to secure their physical control over a vast portion of the earth’s land mass, including areas they were incapable of exploiting. China’s supposed emergence as a significant military power represented the first possible threat to that control; and Japan’s actual rise consolidated that fear.

Secondly, White Australia met the ruling class’s need to find a means to incorporate the middle and working classes into a new Australian nationalism, loyal to the British empire, as a means to legitimate the kind of society they presided over and defend their rule from internal rebellion. The willingness of the labour movement to mobilise against Chinese immigration helped drive through the anti-Chinese laws, and to shape the form Australian nationalism took, but only because such a form fitted with the wider needs of most of the dominant class in Australian society.

Finally, White Australia represented the final act in the long struggle by Australia’s urban capitalists and modernisers to get the kind of economy and labour force they wanted: “free” and white wage labour. The majority of the ruling class, and almost all the middle class, wanted to avoid the economic problems which they believed would be created by a racially-stratified plantation-based economy in the north, and the political disaster experienced by United States of America which found itself plunged into civil war by the irreconcilable divisions between the modern industrial sector based in the north, and the southern slave states.

The anti-Chinese legislation and hysteria of the late 1880s was part of the process by which an increasingly wealthy and powerful local ruling class established a measure of independence from London, as a means of remaining a loyal part of the wider empire. White Australia was a declaration that Australian politics would be driven by a fear of Asia and Asians; a standpoint which remains — despite all the talk of engagement and multiculturalism — a significant element of government decision making today.

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101 This is not to diminish the suffering caused to Pacific islanders, Aboriginal people, and others who were targeted under the 1901-2 legislation: it is merely to weigh the relative impact of what was new.

102 Although much Aboriginal labour in rural industries would remain unfree for many decades.