Chinese in Queensland: Stories from the Records

Queensland and China have close ties dating back to some of the earliest days of the Colony. Chinese in Queensland: Stories from the Records reflects on this relationship and the Chinese community’s contribution to the building of Queensland.

This story is told through old documents and rarely seen photographs from the collection of historical public records held at Queensland State Archives, Brisbane.

The first Chinese immigrants arrived as indentured labourers in the 1840s at a time when there was an emphasis on bringing workers and their families into Queensland to work in various agricultural industries. The Immigration Restriction Act, 1888 was passed to limit the passage of Chinese settlers and immigrants into Queensland and between the Australian Colonies. The penalties were generally a monetary fine or imprisonment depending on the severity of the breach of the Act.

In 1888 the Queensland Government brought in legislation to limit the number of Chinese people entering the State. However, since the easing of legislation in the 20th century, the Chinese community's positive influence in a variety of social, cultural, industrial and professional areas in Queensland has grown significantly.

Chinese settled in various Queensland towns created strong local Chinese communities and this is reflected in areas such as Brisbane's Chinatown. The Chinese have played an integral role in the development of all aspects of Queensland life and remain a strong and vibrant cultural community throughout many regions in the State.

In 1891 the Chinese Restriction Act was passed allowing for passage to China and entry to Queensland upon return. Thomas Ashney was one of the Chinese immigrants who arrived on 6 October 1860. Thomas Ashney dated 1848 as an indentured labourer. The application provision under the Immigration Restriction Act, 1888 was passed to limit the passage of Chinese settlers and immigrants into Queensland and between the Australian Colonies. The penalties were generally a monetary fine or imprisonment depending on the severity of the breach of the Act.

On 21 February 1891, p. 595 Queensland Government Gazette, Thomas Ashney dated 1848 as an indentured labourer. The application received an exemption, a provision under the Immigration Restriction Act, 1888 was passed to limit the passage of Chinese settlers and immigrants into Queensland and between the Australian Colonies. The penalties were generally a monetary fine or imprisonment depending on the severity of the breach of the Act.

The opening of goldfields in the late 1860s saw the number of Chinese immigrants increase, many as settlers rather than indentured workers. They became the cornerstone of a number of trades and professions in the Colony, working as sugar and banana growers, market gardeners, miners, shopkeepers, cooks, furniture makers and in other essential occupations.

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Chinese canegrowers working on the Hop Wah plantation near Cairns c1878. The Hop Wah syndicate consisted of Chinese workers, many of whom had also worked on the Palmer Goldfields. Hop Wah also grew cotton and a variety of subsistence crops on a plantation of more than 600 acres. The land was selected by Andrew Leon, a prominent Chinese businessman in Cairns.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1098175 (DID 1893)
Premier and Chief Secretary's Department, State Public Relations Bureau, Photographic Unit

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1092456 (DID 1887)
Premier and Chief Secretary's Department, State Public Relations Bureau, Photographic Unit

View of Cooktown c1880. By 1877, there were at least 15,000 Chinese residents in the Cooktown area. In 1880, some Chinese settlers began working in tin mining at Granite Creek near Cooktown.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1092457 (DID 1888)
Premier and Chief Secretary's Department, State Public Relations Bureau, Photographic Unit

Extracts from a Mining Warden's register showing miners' rights and business licences issued at Palmerville in November and December 1874.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1098202 (DID 1901)
Mining Warden, Maytown

Letter from Samuel Allen and Sons Ltd to the Crown Solicitor, Brisbane, dated 3 March 1909, requesting the deed of grant for an allotment of land situated at Proserpine. The land was purchased by Mr W Ching Do under the Sugar Works Guarantee Act 1893. The Act promoted the growth of the sugar industry in Queensland and enabled sugar works to be established via debentures (unsecured loans) or guaranteed loans issued to individuals by the Treasury Department. Under the Act, the entire loan amount was to be paid in full, with interest, to the Treasury within 15 years.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1098206, letter 09/860 (DID 1905)
Crown Solicitor's Office

Application outlining the request for a garden area at Cloncurry by Charlie Ah Sing in 1906. The application form includes geographical detail regarding the location of the garden.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1098196  (DID 1895)
Mining Warden, Cloncurry

Application, dated 9 October 1877, which was submitted by William Ulie for Selection 363 located in the Calliope Homestead Area within the Land Agent's District of Gladstone.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1098210 (DID 1909)
Lands Department

Petition by Chinese canegrowers residing in the Cairns and Innisfail districts dated 15 September 1915. The petition requests that prohibitions under the Sugar Cultivation Act 1913 cease to be applied to cane workers and growers of Chinese birth and descent. The Act states that occupiers of land for sugar cultivation, and workers employed in the sugar industry, must pass a dictation test to engage in the cultivation of sugar cane upon any land within Queensland. Various monetary fines are outlined in the legislation, with different sums charged to individuals depending on whether they are a worker or employer. The Act also includes the capacity for the court to order the forfeiture of the crop of sugar cane where the occupier has not passed a dictation test. The petition was unsuccessful.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1098204 (DID 1903)
Agriculture and Stock Department

Chinese banana growers loading produce onto the Carroo from punts in the Johnstone River at Geraldton, 1902.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1092458 (DID 1889)
Premier and Chief Secretary's Department, State Public Relations Bureau, Photographic Unit

Above centre: Chinese man in traditional dress seated with opium pipe, Palmer Goldfields c1877.

Queensland State Archives Item ID 1092454 (DID 1885)
Premier and Chief Secretary's Department, State Public Relations Bureau, Photographic Unit