

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
on Sunday 29th May 2005 St Bartholomews Chapel, East Perth Cemeteries,
Commemorating The FONG family and the Chinese in Western Australia.

Citation presented by Kaylene POON

Emeritus Professor Reg APPLEYARD, President of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society, The Hon. Sue WALKER, ML A, representing the Leader of the Opposition, Professor David DOLAN, Chairman of The National Trust, Mr CHEN Mingjin representing the Consul-General of the People's Republic of China, Mrs. Siau Mee TEH, Senior Vice President of the Chung Wah Association, Mrs Edie HOY POY OAM Cit WA, esteemed Elder of the Council of Elders Chung Wah Association, The Reverend CHEH (JER) Chu, from the Buddhist Light Association. Ladies and Gentlemen.

We know MOON Chow the first Chinese arrived in the Swan River colony in October 1829. He settled in Fremantle, married Mary Thorpe and none of their children survived early childhood. His occupation was a carpenter and he died after being struck by a horse drawn mail van. He was elderly at the time of his accident but was held in high regard. As a result of his death speed limits were introduced for the roads of Fremantle. This short summary of one man's life contains more detail than most of the Chinese who may have lived and died in this state. Many who came here to seek their fortune for themselves and their families have perished with little or no fanfare or documentation. Their families and descendants have no idea where their remains may be. For traditional Chinese this is a very hard situation to accept.

Today I would like to share with you some of the history that reflects both the Chinese in Western Australia and a brief glimpse of my own ancestral heritage that is the FONG family. Between the 1880s until the early 1900s, several Chinese men from an area known as Toi Shan in the province of Canton (now Guangdong) came to Western Australia seeking their fortunes and a better future. These men were carpenters, gardeners, cooks, shop assistants and business managers. Work saw them travel to many parts of the North-West, besides the Perth metropolitan area. I would like to touch on the stories of several members of this family to illustrate the Chinese story in WA.

We are not so sure when the first FONG clan member arrived. Official records show much of the information; however many of us researching have come to the conclusion that this is not a complete or accurate record, especially with the listing of Chinese names, which I will explain later.

First I must give you a brief background to the origins of the family name. The descendants of Louie (Louey), Fong and Kwong can trace their paternal blood ancestry back to our one common ancestor, Ldtie Goan. Four thousand seven hundred years ago in China, during the reign of Emperor Huang-ti, Louie Goan was the emperor's right-hand minister for both military and civil matters. Louie adopted the name FONG after he was made a feudal prince of this region. One of his two sons reverted back to the original name while serving in the Imperial Court. Later another descendant Yee Ping FONG served as Imperial Advisor and Mayor of the national capital. He impressed the Emperor who bestowed upon him the family name of KWONG, which his line of descendants still uses to this day. Chinese believe that if you share the same family name, you must be a relation, some use the term a 'village cousin'.

Depending on where you may have been born or lived in this great state the odds are that you may have heard of or encountered someone with the FONG surname. They have been important members of the communities of Broome, Carnarvon and Geraldton in particular.

Traditionally Chinese say their family or surname first, followed by their given names. As I mentioned earlier this has caused much confusion especially when researching family history as quite often official documents and recordings have changed the names around. It must be noted that several families now have quite different names from their original, due to a lack of understanding or misinterpretation on the part of local authorities. Examples here today include the HOY POY family, whose correct family name is YUAN. Hoy Poy being the given name of the first of the family to arrive in WA in May 1894, 111 years ago.

Another example of name transposing involves the family of LOUEY Wah, the first President of the Chung Wah Association. He was a successful businessman in Melbourne who made generous donations to the Melbourne Hospital before he came to WA in the late 1880s. His selection as the Association's first President highlights the difference between the Chinese community here and in the eastern states. Leaders in the east tended to be scholars and intellectuals, rather than successful businessmen. With regards to the name change, Louey Wah's son LOUEY Ling Tack was recorded with TACK as his surname. This continued for the next generation with his son Arthur TACK becoming a well known and respected member of Broome's Chinese community. However, today Arthur's children use the FONG variation of the name. His son Doug recalls as a teacher he often arrived in new country postings to be confused with Les FONG the West Perth footballer from the 1970s and 1980s. No direct relation but it certainly helped Doug to assimilate into the local community, having an interest in sport. Until recently he was playing veterans hockey and one of his nieces has also represented the state in women's hockey.

Another example of name derivatives is WASHING. Currently the family is unsure if their family name should be WAH SHING, WAH HING or WAH YING" However as operators of Washing Bros Furniture Factory in Newcastle Street they were obligated under the factories Act, 1904 to register their business yearly and stamp their furniture with the 'Asiatic labour' stamp. It is ironic that the authorities issued them with a 'European Labour' stamp one time, obviously unaware it was a Chinese factory.

Moving on to the next story I wish to highlight, is that of FONG Lang another prominent clan member. He was born in Canton in 1858 and lived in the USA between 1878 until 10th April 1888, when he arrived in WA. He founded the Wing On Woo store in Geraldton in the same year. It is interesting to note that less than 5 months later he applied for naturalisation. While this was refused on the grounds that he had not been in the Colony long enough to qualify, I find it intriguing that he considered such a request. At that time Chinese made up the bulk of the Asians living here and their presence was at best only tolerated. They were certainly never encouraged to set down roots here.

Fong Lang's application might have been as a 'reaction' to the imposition of the various colonial acts from 1874 through to 1897 restricting the immigration and activities of Asians in particular the Chinese in the Swan River Colony. The culmination of these of course was the Federal Government's Immigration Restriction Act, 1901. He had spent nearly 10 years in America and no doubt witnessed the persecution and suffering of the Chinese there.

However Fong Lang's persistence paid off when he successfully reapplied for naturalisation in 1890, citing the ownership of freehold land in Geraldton and he was also a prominent member of the Presbyterian Church. He also managed to have his wife and family join him in 1895,

another highly unusual request. During this time the number of Chinese in the colony would have been approaching its peak of 1601 males and 20 females.

Most Chinese in WA at that time were indentured labourers, with no family members allowed to accompany them. He had four more children in WA and even managed to have a Chinese nurse brought out to assist his wife. Fong Lang however did not stay and left WA in 1906. We do not know the reasons why he moved; maybe he became disillusioned with the continual fighting for rights for the Chinese. The family moved to Hong Kong and descendants are now spread across the globe. Recent research was undertaken by Professor KWONG Tai his grandson at the Battye Library and uncovered newspaper clippings and other reminiscences. Tai lives in New York, and made a brief visit last year to attend a conference in Perth. One of his siblings lives in New Zealand and other family members in Canada. There is still a relation living in Sydney. Like many Chinese trying to trace their family history it is an arduous task because records were not kept or considered important. Tai even managed a quick trip to Geraldton to meet with the descendants of Sydney Fong, his grandfather's nephew.

By the time FONG Lang left Geraldton in 1906 his nephew Sydney FONG had established a thriving business in Geraldton Sydney Fong & Co. This comprised of shops, warehouse and a farm. The main shop being located in Marine Terrace and the buildings still carry the business name today. Sydney was able to bring several cousins from China to work in the business. This 'paper chain' connection was similar to other migrant groups. Once one family member was established they were able to 'invite' others to come out and employ them. With the Chinese however there was the added hurdle of the immigration laws. Sydney's direct descendants have made their mark in various ways. His eldest daughter Irene and her husband Capt WAN ran the very successful Canton Restaurant in Perth for many years. Their two children Brian and Shirley WAN carried on after their parents retired. Brian only recently retired from the restaurant business having operated the Swan Lake Chinese Restaurant in Churchlands for many years.

Sydney's other children established themselves in Geraldton, Perth, Melbourne and New South Wales. Sydney himself continued Fong Lang's active involvement with the church and on his passing was considered to be an important member of the Geraldton community. Athol one of his sons better known as Chummy, carried on the family business in Geraldton until his untimely passing in October last year. His funeral was attended by over 600 mourners, with family relations travelling from as far as Canberra and Melbourne to attend. The procession out to the cemetery was also given a police escort. The family's standing in the local community is still strong and descendants spread across Australia are involved in various professions from medical, pastoral care, the IT industry through to the crayfishing industry in Geraldton. I am pleased to see several of his descendants here today. They are all actively researching their branch of the Fong family tree.

The scenario today is quite different from 100 years ago. Some of you may be unaware that in 1910 a bill in State parliament was tabled which would have outlawed intermarriage between Caucasians and Asians. Luckily it failed. Prior to Athol's generation such liaisons were fraught with great difficulty. Families would often disown daughters who married Chinese and the police would charge women who cohabitated with Chinese with, vagrancy.

This failed bill and other earlier discriminatory acts were a catalyst for the formation of the Chung Wah Association in 1909.

The Chung Wah Association is the state's longest continual running ethnic organisation. Our headquarters in James Street Northbridge is a lasting symbol of the Chinese contributions to the state. Its main aim is to provide welfare services for the Chinese community, which we still

do today. This has been broadened to include cultural activities to support the more tolerant multicultural community we live in today. The battle for recognition has been tedious and now I would say swinging in the opposite direction. So much so that some members of the community were and still are suspicious of attempts to recognise the Chinese. The example which most polarised the Chinese was the recent classification of the Hall in James Street by the Heritage Council. This had been mooted for many years prior, with resistance from the community, as it was seen as another legislative form of control. It was not deemed to be a 'reward' or 'acknowledgement' of achievement. However with education from our Historical Group we are slowly changing this pattern of thought.

Sydney and Henly FONG would have been founding members of the Association. By this time the numbers of Chinese had dropped to 1175 males and 37 females, due to the influence of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901. This huge imbalance between the ratio of males to females led to some Chinese males taking a second 'wife'.

Henly FONG, my great uncle arrived in 1896 aged 20 years. Anne Atkinson's dictionary 'Asian Immigrants to WA 1829 - 1901' shows a 20 year gap between his arrival and setting up his tailoring business in 1916. I will fill in some of the gap today. Henly initially tried his luck gold mining in the Northern Territories. He arrived 10 years after the Goldfields Act 1886 which prohibited him from obtaining a miner's license in the Swan River Colony. My father has told me that the Chinese miners would often plant sweet potatoes by the water holes so that when they returned they could either dig up the vegetables to eat or the leaves, whichever was available. The Chinese were also responsible for planting tropical fruit trees such as mangoes, paw paws and lychees around the territory. Unfortunately Henly did not strike it rich through his gold mining endeavours He moved to Cossack and was involved in the Chinese articles in the area, however the Sharks Bay Shell Fishery Act, 1886 had also impeded the Chinese from establishing themselves. Henly moved to Broome and was a tailor from 1916 to 1935 in Napier Terrace. He had a Chinese wife back in Toi Shan, and had a Japanese wife in Broome who bore him a son and daughter. Unfortunately I am still to discover the wife's name, as this is still a sensitive issue. Henly travelled back to China three times which meant he had to apply for three CEDTs (Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test). The wife and son returned to Japan and Henly's daughter Pearl** later married into the Ellies family, the well known Ceylonese pearl sorting family. Mixed marriages were very common particularly in the north west, and reflected by the census ratios I have mentioned earlier whereby there was 1 Chinese female to every 80 Chinese males, prior to 1901. This dropped to 1:32 in 1911, however still not great odds for a Chinese union.

My father John Kee FONG recalls an incident as a young child in Broome when he wanted a new pair of shorts to wear to school. He started to cut some khaki drill only to be scolded by his uncle, who insisted that he use white material, worn by the white gentry. My father's only thoughts were that this meant more washing after playing in the red dust with his cousins the children of FONG Sam! These cousins have also spread throughout the state and overseas.

Many of Henly's descendants are now living in the USA after his Chinese son Frank left China during the liberation and settled in Hong Kong, eventually moving the family to America in the 1980s.

My father stayed with Henly until he enlisted in the Australian Army in 1943, after putting his age up. Unlike Jack WONG SUE and Doug SUE who had been rejected earlier, my father was accepted first time round. Jack was famously rejected by the Australian Navy only to be accepted by the Air Force, later winning the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Doug SUE (no relation to Jack) also was rejected on the grounds that he was employed in essential services.

His father was a market gardener in Northam. He was successful on his third attempt to join the Air Force. His mother lost her Australian citizenship upon marrying and years later was sent a letter from the Australian Government querying why she had not voted in the elections. Similarly when Yuen Hoy Poy married Mary Brewer in 1910 she was listed as being born in China not Victoria.

When my father returned from active service overseas he moved to New South Wales and married my mother Winifred QUAN MANE in 1954. They returned to Perth in 1955. This was quite a culture shock for my mother who had been used to a large Chinese population in Sydney. The 1954 census shows only 137 males and 15 females of Chinese by 'Race'. In fact they were the only Asians listed on the census of WA for that year. Also when my parents listed my birth in the notices in August 1956 they were contacted by the local West Australian newspaper which noticed there were 4 birth notices for FONGs born within 4 days of each other. It is pleasing to see that three of us are here today.

During my time trying to research the Chinese in WA I have found there to be some contradictions. On varying levels there existed much discrimination, whether through economic or social tiers. For example English Classes taught by the Church for the Chinese migrants were not so much for helping them to integrate but hopefully to convert them to Christianity so they could take the message back home when they left. The Asiatic labour stamps pushed by the trade unions were to discourage shoppers from purchasing Chinese made goods. This back fired as shoppers often found these products to be of a better quality.

At a grassroots level I have seen family photos whereby the head of the Chinese male has been cut out. The stigma of such an acknowledgement was too much for some families. Requests for assistance from descendants from mixed marriages are very common now. They have hit a 'brick wall' with either no living family members who can remember or have information.

However on the personal level I have discovered that most Australian born Chinese today do not hold the same fears and experiences of their forefathers. Like most children we have all suffered some form of isolation, be it name calling because of our look, size or the way we dress. I did not experience discrimination when seeking employment or friendship.

In fact I would consider living at this time to be the most acceptable in our short history. However it is tempered with the fact that we must always be on our guard to counter any new situations. History does show that things have a way of repeating themselves, if we let down our guard.

On closing I wish to thank the Royal Western Australian Historical Society for inviting the Chinese community to today's celebration. Thanks go to the Society members who organised the lovely flowers and music and to the volunteers from The National Trust for their time and work preparing the venue.

Thanks also to the Chinese instrumentalists Mr CHEN Zhi and Ms LEI Cai Hua.

Lastly a special thank you to the Reverend Braden Short for officiating at today's service.

** Henly's daughter was not called Pearl. Her correct name was Agnes or 'Aggie'. One of her daughter's is Pearl. Her other children's names are Charles, Pat and Alan.