

Rural cosmopolitanism then and now?

European settlers and Chinese
farmers in late colonial
Queensland



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View from the 21st century

- Globalization of mobility has intensified and accelerated transnational migration to, from and through rural regions
- New patterns of significant international migration into rural localities with relatively culturally homogeneous populations
- Increasing reference in literature to ‘rural cosmopolitanism’ (Notar 2008, Popke 2011, Skoko-Krapovich 2015), but reinforces assignment of traditional rural as ‘non-cosmopolitan’
- Evidence of historical rural cosmopolitanisms: Fewkes 2012 (India), Ramsay 2004 (Thursday Isld), Robertson 2004 (Jamaica), Yu 1999 (W Australia).
- This paper examines the ‘rural cosmopolitanism’ of the northern Queensland district of Cairns, 1880 – 1920

The Chinese in Australia

Dominant narrative:

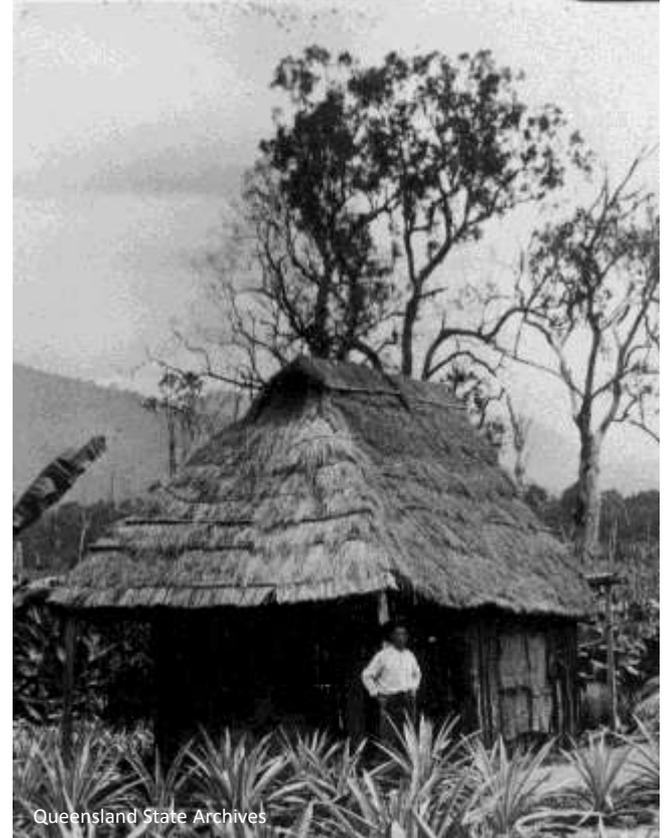
- Chinese arrived as miners in late C19
- Worked goldfields separately to and in competition with European miners
- Socially and spatially segregated
- Violent conflict between Chinese & European miners
- Following gold rush competed for other work with Europeans
- Rise of anti-Chinese movement
- Anti-Chinese legislation and 'White Australia' policy



The Cairns exception?

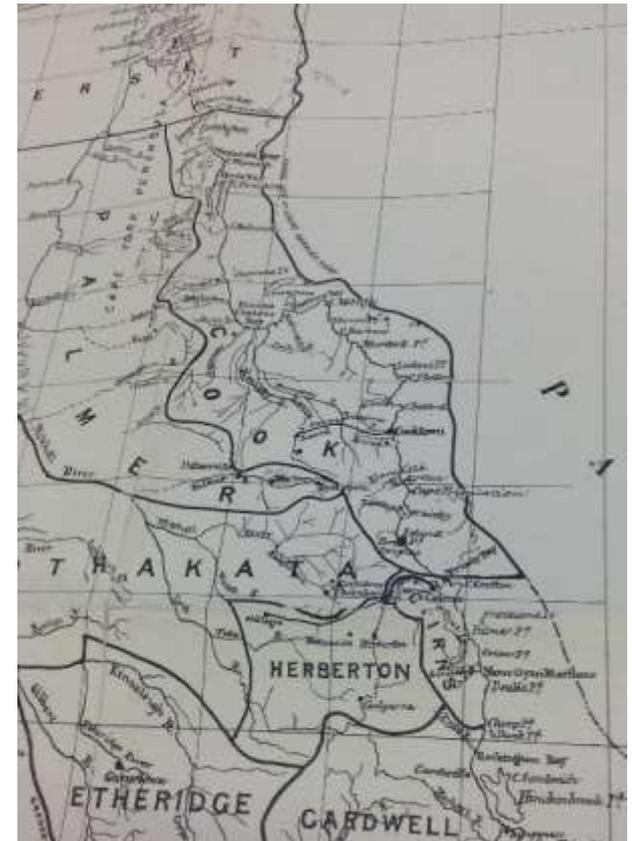
“By the 1890s, Cairns was renowned for its pro-Chinese attitude, being widely known as the town ‘where white men take their hats off to Chinamen’. In 1897, a visiting land commissioner stated: ‘So far as can be gathered there is no ill feeling between Chinese and Europeans in Cairns’, an observation which supported by frequent press comments favourable to the Chinese presence. As the Cairns Post plainly stated the same year: ‘We recognise it is in our interest that the Chinese should remain’.”

May, in Reynolds (ed) (1976) *Race Relations in North Queensland*, pp 287-8.

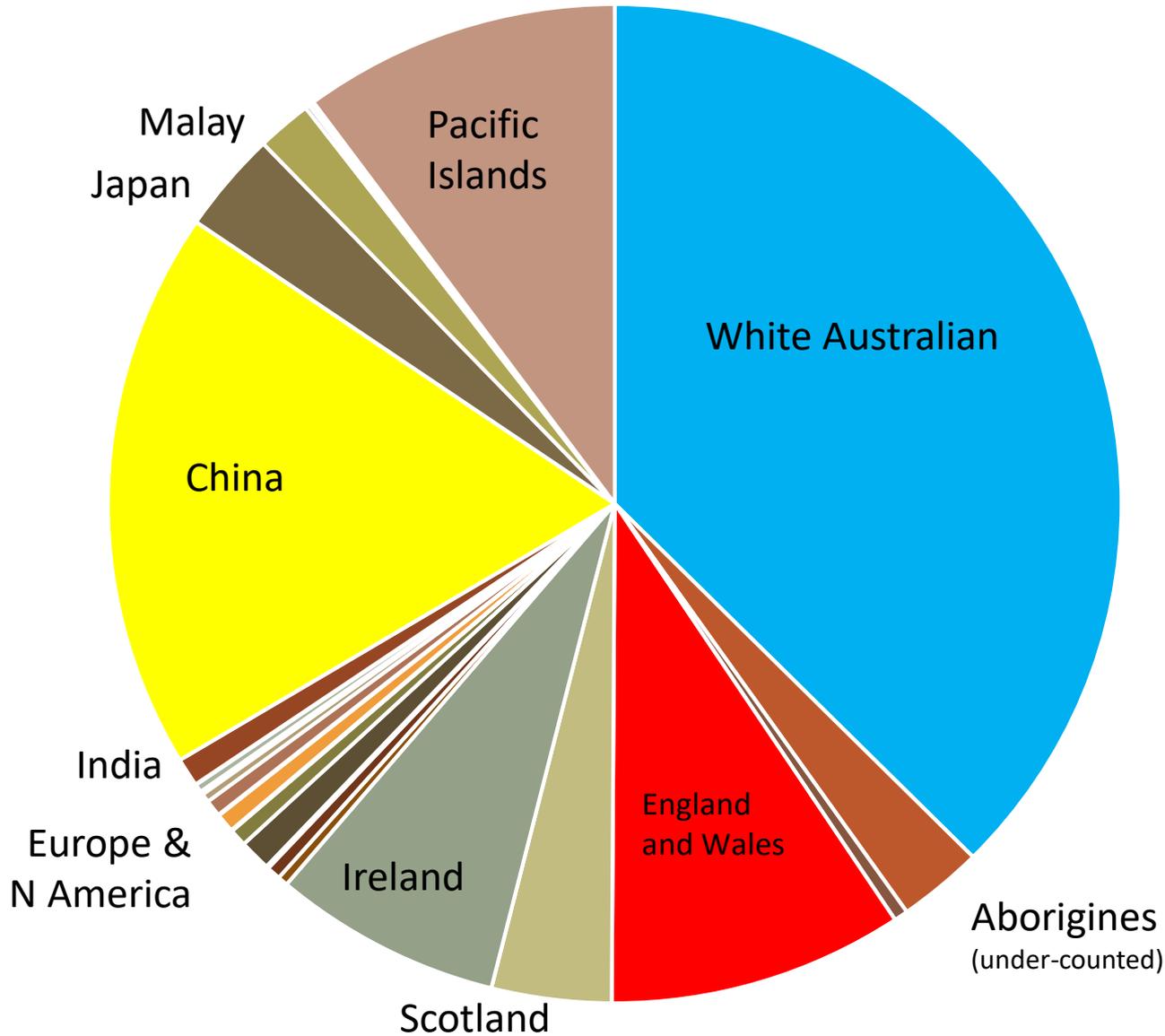


Chinese in Cairns

- First Chinese migrants arrived in Cairns in 1860s
- 1886 Census – 1337 Chinese in Cairns census district (29% of population)
- 1901 – 2078 Chinese in Cairns census district (19% of popn) (2nd highest in Queensland, after Palmer goldfield)
- 80% lived outside town as tenant farmers and gardeners for European landowners
- Planted uncultivated land with bananas, sugar, rice, maize, fruit and vegetables
- Some became naturalized and established own plantations and businesses



Birthplace of Residents of Cairns Census District, 1901



- Australia (white)
- Australia (Aboriginal)
- New Zealand
- England & Wales
- Scotland
- Ireland
- Ceylon
- Other British Colonies
- France
- Germany
- Italy
- Austria-Hungary
- Denmark
- Russia
- Sweden & Norway
- Other Europe
- Canada
- USA and Hawaii
- Other America
- India
- China
- Japan
- Malay Archipelago
- Syria
- Other Asia
- Africa
- Pacific Islands

Over 30 nationalities in population of 11,000

Racial hierarchy

Racial hierarchy with Europeans at top, Chinese in middle and Pacific Islanders and Aborigines at bottom

Reflected in wages (e.g. for field work: Europeans £52 per year, Chinese £30 per year, Aborigines £12 per year)

Also in labour/property relations: Chinese leased land from Europeans and employed Pacific Islander and Aborigine workers

Chinese farmers regarded as treating Aborigines better than European employers:

- “The Chinese offer their aboriginal employees full use of their humpty even to smoking the same pipe and drinking out of the same billy” (Walter Roth, Northern Protector of Aboriginies, 1898, quoted by Evans et al, 1993, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*, p 252).

Chinese also accused of ‘ruining’ Aborigines by providing alcohol & opium

Chinese as cosmopolitans

- ‘Sojourners’ not settlers (Rolls, 1992)
- Mostly from Kwangtung province, Canton – migration as response to food security but also cultural expectation
- Temporary and cyclical migration, predominantly male – women and children in China
- Sending remittances home and investing in property in China
 - Willie Forday – arrived in QLD 1898, bought 7 properties in China between 1915 and 1917
- Remained involved in home community and politics
 - “The ideal migrant was one who regarded himself as a member of his own village, but separated by distance.” (Choi, 1975, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia*, p 13)
- Chinese migrants as agents of cultural circulation
 - Willie Forday - travelled to China in 1915 with a complete Australian-made bicycle, 1 gramophone (VICTOR brand), 200 gramophone records and 2000 needles (Forday 1998)

Hybrid landscapes

“Hundreds of acres of swampy country were turned into rice fields, with here and there, on higher ground, an orchard or a plot of pineapples ... All this was the result of the industry of a much despised race, content with small returns, but nevertheless living on the best of the imported viands of their own country, supplemented with the prolific tropical products of their gardens, not forgetting the Chinaman’s well known fondness for pork, which was supplied from their own piggeries ... Pumpkins, sweet potatoes, and taro were grown in profusion, and one small area on Dodd Clarke’s selection was entirely devoted to peanuts for which the Chinese had a peculiar weakness.”

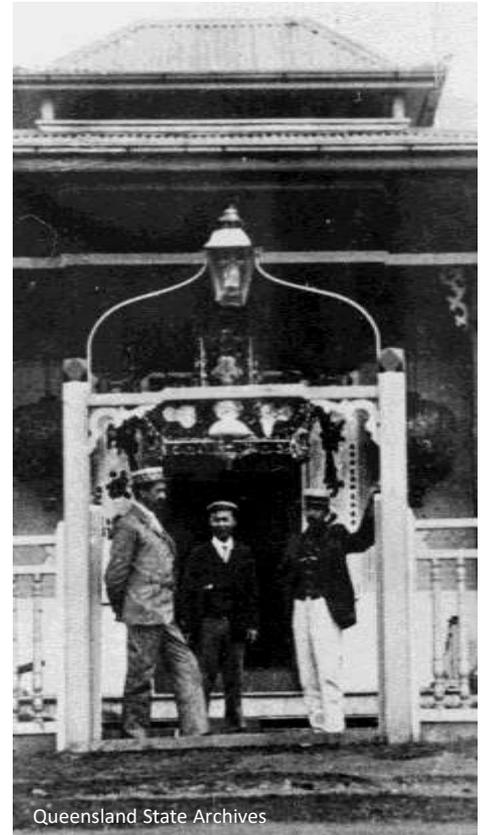
Collinson, 1941, *Tropic Coasts and Tablelands*, p 15



Cosmopolitan attitudes?

“Tolerance was emerging, sometimes even in the positive form of public and official support for the Chinese. On one occasion the Mayor of Cairns rebuked the anti-Chinese crusader, Potts, for his anti-Chinese stirrings. On another, the leading citizens of Cairns, in response to the anti-Chinese fomentations, petitioned the Premier of Queensland saying that the Chinese were the backbone of Cairns.” (Ling, 2001, *Plantings in a New Land*, p 24).

“Amicable contacts were more typical in relations at the local level than the isolated examples of racial antagonism.” (May, in Reynolds, 1976, p 287).



Cosmopolitan attitudes?

“To us, humble observers in a strange land, the one unhappy circumstance – a blot of the fairness of the country, is the presence of Asiatics in such large numbers. We have visited the Chinese quarters of this town, and marvelled at their apparent prosperity. In an indefinable way, we were surprised that they should be allowed to walk on the same footpath as a white man or a white woman ... In this street of Chinese we were sickened by the sight of more than one white woman peering shamefacedly out of the doors of the houses, and we wondered sadly if these were girls who had travelled all the way from England full of hope – to become the inmates of Chinese dens.” (‘First Impressions’, by ‘New Chum’, in *Cairns Post*, 21 March 1911, p 7)



Cosmopolitan relations?

“some [Chinese] gardeners lived with Aboriginal women, or with Europeans who were generally social outcasts” (May, in Reynolds 1976, p 262).

“Two months ago I landed in Cairns, the Paradise of the Kanaka, the alien race, and corrupt Js. P. The first thing that I noticed whilst walking up the street was a black Cinghalese arm-in-arm with a young white woman. I began then to think of my sisters and to hope that death would claim them for his bride than they should be like the picture before me. When I spoke to people of the town about it they told me that there were dozens of young white women living with all kinds of the black and yellow curse in Northern Queensland. What else was there for them to do: not even a white woman can earn a few shillings for washing or cleaning, the Chinese, Japanese and Cinghalese occupy all the work in the town” (‘The Traveller’, in *The Worker*, 23 March 1901, p 2).

Cosmopolitan relations?

- Occasional marriages between Chinese and Europeans
- Access to property – prominent local figures
- Weddings between Chinese with European associates as best men or witnesses
 - Patrick Gee Kee (with Patrick's pigtail hidden in wedding photographs)
 - Yip Hoy

“[The marriage document of Yip Hoy and Ah How in 1884] could be added to a figurative collection of early examples of cross-cultural co-operation between members from separate cultural communities at a time in Australian history dominated by expression and acts of racism and social prejudice.” (Wong Hoy, 2002, *Yip Hoy and Family*, p 3).”



Cosmopolitan relations?

- Business partnerships
- European participating in Chinese banquets for weddings, births etc (“such racial fraternisation became commonplace in Cairns” May in Evans (1976), p 270).
- Some Chinese lived in European residential districts
- Chinese merchants permitted to travel in First Class rail carriages (but others in segregated carriages)
- Europeans visiting Chinese neighbours and tenants on Sundays and at Chinese New Year
- Chinese involved in fundraising for and management of local hospital (and sometimes treated on same wards)
- European, Chinese and Japanese children attended same schools
- Increasing European interest in and spectating of Chinese New Year festivities
- Chinese processions incorporated into visits of Governor and Premier
- Chinese procession as part of annual carnival
- European and Chinese both participated in the Chinese lottery
- Popularity of Chinese lanterns among Europeans
- Features in local newspapers on Chinese food
- Mixing of Chinese and western dress and fashions by Chinese residents

Cosmopolitan boundaries

“The nature of community involvement by the Chinese and of their social intercourse with Europeans undoubtedly fitted the racist mould; it seldom reached the proportions of friendship between equals. As a rule, it was the Chinese who offered hospitality and the Europeans who condescended to accept it.” (May, in Reynolds (1976), p 281.)

“The racial harmony characteristic of Cairns was based entirely on European self-interest and lasted only as long as the Chinese kept their place.” (May, in Reynolds (1976), p 289).



Spectrum of attitudes

Outright racism and hostility

- Anti-Chinese groups and meetings
- Hostility from some white farmers and businesses (especially in sugar industry)
- Anti-Chinese reportage and opinion in local press
- Exemplified by Thomas Givens, MP for Cairns



THE CHINESE INVASION.

CARROOWEAL, June 21.

Great indignation is felt here at the Government's action regarding the Chinese invasion. A most inhuman and grossly ridiculous proceeding was enacted here on Friday last, when 23 Chinese were brought before the Bench, and deported across the border to face stages of 50 to 100 miles without the hope of food or water. The unfor-

The Influx of Chinese.

The revelations made by the WORKER last week in reference to the influx of Chinese into Queensland on false permits are borne out by Treasurer Cribb's reply to Labour Member Givens in Parliament on Friday last. During the six months ending 30th September at Cooktown, Port Douglas and Cairns the total number of

THE YELLOW AGONY.

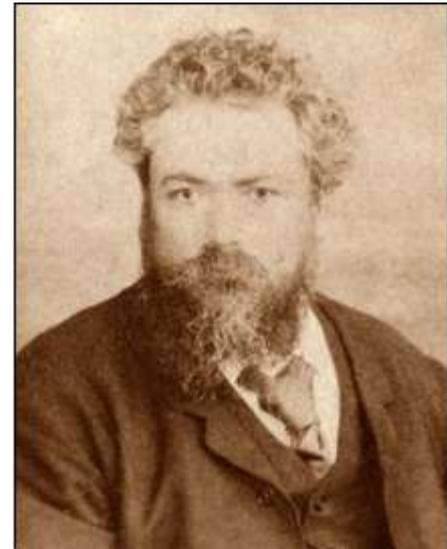
(To the Editor of the Cairns Post.)

Sir.—Is it not high time the Municipality placed a tax on Chinese hawkers as some protection to the white man? Just look how things are managed, white draymen have to pay for licenses while Johnnie "no-arms" anything of such payments, and the big yellow merchants and fruit growers get all their carting done by well-to-do fellow

Spectrum of attitudes

Tolerance within the law

- Importance of upholding rule of law in a frontier region
- Obstruction of anti-Chinese meetings
- Defence of right to vote of Chinese rate-payers
- Prosecution of police officer charged with robbing Chinese man
- Exemplified by Mayor Louis Severin



Spectrum of attitudes

Recognition of economic contribution

- Self-interest of whites with business connections with Chinese
- Chinese filling labour gaps

“These patient, plodding people mostly cook our food, wash our clothing, provide us with fresh fruit and vegetables, and perform innumerable other services which we might seek in vain from our own kith and kin. That they are unlike us in many important traits of character is but stating a truism, as race differences are the rule all over the habitable globe ... Who, or where, are the eager competitors who would be willing to undertake the drudgery of the Chinaman on the same terms provided we expelled him tomorrow? In what sense can he be said to be injuring white labour if this latter is not there to step in and take his place?”
(Letter to the *Cairns Post*, 18 February 1886, p 3)



Spectrum of attitudes

Recognition of economic contribution

- Respect for work of Chinese in transforming land and establishing tropical agriculture

“Every addition to the productiveness of the soil is an addition to the wealth of the country, and the Chinese, to their credit, have been among the most industrious of our colonists in this respect.” (Letter to the *Cairns Post*, 18 February 1886, p 3)

“I want in your issue to ask why the Unionists and whites should be so against colored Australians and Chinese. Ask them if they want White Australia to cultivate it. The Aloomba line was opened up by the Chinese, second the Barron, and third Atherton, besides all the other places, and now they want ‘White Australia’. People say that Chinese take money out of the country, because they see them going home for trips, but look how they work for this country and open it up while they are here” (Letter to the *Cairns Post*, 6 March 1913, p 3).

Spectrum of attitudes

Acceptance and integration

- Rarely articulated in press or other documents
- Implied by reported interactions
- Exemplified by Low Choy children
 - Boys: part of speedway and cricket teams
 - Girls: active in girl guides and Red Cross

Prizes Distributed.
The distribution of prizes at the McDonnell's Creek School took place on Tuesday. Every child received a prize. Mrs. Craig presented two prizes, one for sewing, won by Mavis Low Choy, and the other for an essay on the district, won by Robert Dunn. Mr. Whittick gave a special for regular attendance, and it was won by George Cartwright. Miss Higgins gave a silver medal for regular attendance and it was won by Mona Cartwright. Miss Munro gave a prize for the child doing the most Red Cross work from June to the holidays, and it was won by Herman Weinert and Mavis Low Choy. They cut for the prize and it fell to the former, and the latter received a prize presented by Mrs. Ross. Quite a number of parents and friends were present, who provided afternoon tea and lollies for the children. Mrs. Ross, Deeral, presented the prizes, assisted by Mr. Lewis, Chairman of the School Committee.

Imperfect cosmopolitanism?

- Cairns district around 1900 characterised by imperfect rural cosmopolitanism
- Culturally mixed but stratified population
- Sense of connectedness to other parts of world (by migrants' mobility to China, but also to British Empire and North America)
- Openness to coexistence and difference
- Imperfect because located within racial attitudes and beliefs of the time
- Open to coexistence but not equality



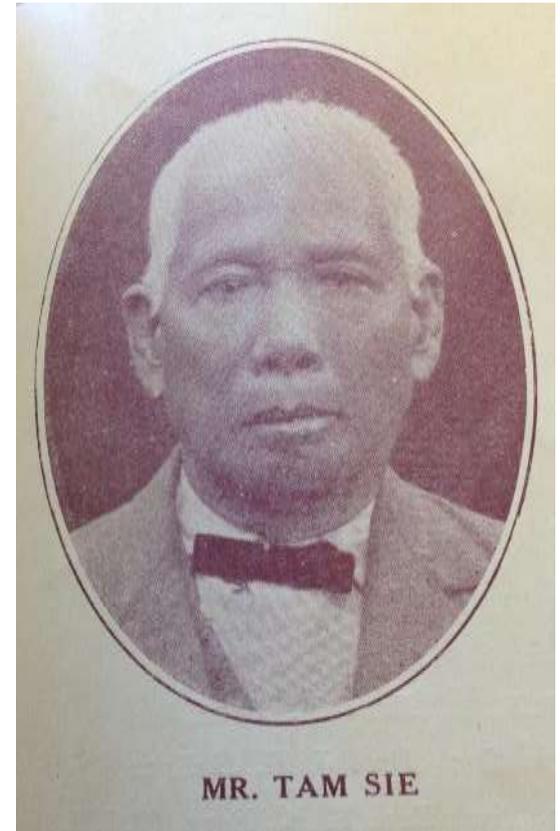
Spatially & temporally contingent

- Closeness of a rural community necessitating interaction
- Remote rural location created a liminal space away from politics and surveillance of colonial centres
- Agrarian transformation of the frontier engendered sense of shared endeavour

“The tropical environment was a vital part of the setting, as it enabled Europeans to rationalise the active role of the Chinese in the local economy. At a time when it was felt that white men should remain aloof from arduous labour in the tropics, the Cairns Post was able to state (if somewhat defensively): ‘At least Cairns has some valid excuse for its large number of Chinese residents.’” (May, 1984, *Topsawyers: The Chinese in Cairns 1870-1920*, p 164).

Spatially & temporally contingent

“Tam Sie’s sense of being a pioneer is also expressed in his describing himself as a participant in the development of Australia. In 1903, Tam writes: ‘I spent [a] considerable amount of money in experimenting as to the suitability of the Climate as to the growing of Rubber and Cotton, on a Farm I had about twelve miles out on the Nerada line.’ (Yuanfang, 2001, *Dragon Seed in the Antipodes*, p 49).



The retreat of cosmopolitanism?

Rural cosmopolitanism of Cairns district dismantled under external pressure

- National anti-Chinese politics and legislation
 - 1901 Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act (introduced dictation test)
 - 1903 Nationality Act (prohibited naturalization of non-Europeans)
 - 1910 Sugar Cultivation Act (prohibited non-Europeans from working in the sugar industry)
- Shaming by national press and politicians as a 'weak spot' in White Australia
- Arrival of new wave of farmer-settlers from NSW with engrained anti-Chinese attitudes
 - Competition with Chinese farmers for land
 - Accused Chinese of undercutting wages and prices

The retreat of cosmopolitanism?

- Chinese population in Cairns itself decreased from 1450 in 1901 to 450 in 1909
- Balanced by increase in Chinese population on Atherton Tablelands in SW of district – but more hostile relations
- By 1921 only around 1000 Chinese in Cairns census district (4% of population)
- Increasingly spatially segregated and concentrated
 - “Over time the population of Malaytown changed from just Malays and by the 1920s comprised an assortment of people from different cultures. They were mainly Hindus, Chinese, Japanese, Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders, Jamaicans, South Sea Islanders or Filipinos.” (Hodes, 1998, Malaytown, p 3).

The retreat of cosmopolitanism?



- Wealthier Chinese opted for survival through assimilation

“My parents and their parents suffered from a generation of shame – the shame of belonging to an Asian minority in an essentially Anglo-Celtic society. They deliberately refrained from handing down various aspects of Chinese culture to their children. That was how they coped: by fully assimilating. They saw that as being absolutely essential for their children. We ate very little Chinese food at home, and we did eat was very much an adaptation of the real thing. Whilst my mother had some sets of chopsticks, we never used them.”

Darryl Low Choy, in Ling (2001) *Plantings in a New Land*, p 62

Lessons for the 21st century

- Rural cosmopolitanism is not new, there are (precarious) historical precedents
- Rural areas can provide liminal spaces for cosmopolitanism to flourish against prevailing societal attitudes
- The cyclical mobility of migrants is part of the enriching contribution of cosmopolitanism
- Openness to coexistence and difference is part of the hybrid reconstitution of the global countryside
- Intolerance to difference destroys cosmopolitanism