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Asian Studies Program

Chinese Australia

Tasmanian Tin Miners, Addicts and Merchants

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GEN CHUNG HENRY

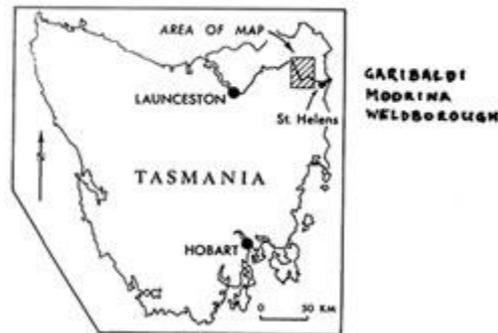
In 1901, the year of Federation, my maternal grandfather, Gin Chung, arrived in the northeast Tasmanian mining town of Weldborough. He came to join his father. In the 1880s my great grandfather was lured by the prospect of tin to risk the arduous journey from the southern Chinese county of Taishan (or Toishan) to Weldborough.



KEY

- 1 • TAISHAN (TOISHAN) - COUNTY CENTRE
- 2 • SANHE (SAN FOU) - THREE UNITIES DISTRICT
- 3 • TALONGOONG RESERVOIR
- 4 • SHENJING (SAM GING) - DEEP WELL DISTRICT
- 5 • WENCUN (MAN CHUN) - MAN FAMILY DISTRICT

Map of Toishan and Sunwei, China (*Shouting from China*)



Map showing location of Weldborough, Moorina and Garibaldi (St Helens History Room)

In this thriving Chinese village, Chinese dominated tin mining and outnumbered Europeans by up to 10 to 1. At its peak, Weldborough had about 700 Chinese miners: most of the State's 1,000 to 1,300 or so Chinese. The original pub slept three shifts to a bed. Not roulette but mahjong and fan tan were played in the island's first casino. A lottery was part of gambling and a Chinese man was murdered while taking the proceeds to the bank at nearby Moorina. In 1893 a visiting Chinese opera company performed at Weldborough and I imagine great grandfather under the tent with the excited crowd. Perhaps he worshipped at the elaborate local temple, burning incense sticks and seeking guidance from the deity. Weldborough's joss house - with its ornately dressed figures, intricate carving, scrolls and plaques - is now at the Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston.

In the Chinese tradition, grandfather saved hard from his meagre earnings for a steerage passage for his father to go home to Toishan to die. Great grandfather hadn't done well and failed to send any remittances home. Like most of his generation alone for years on the mining fields, at Weldborough he took to smoking and drifted off into the land of dreams through the haze of an opium den. He returned to his wife in Guangdong province an addict.

Unlike his father, grandfather shunned the pipe. Grandfather was addicted to work and prospered in

Australia. After three years in Weldborough and with mining in decline, he left to take up market gardening in Launceston. Then he headed south to Hobart. He began a laundry, branched into tobacco and fancy goods, and later established a wholesale and retail fruit and vegetable business, Henry & Co.



Advertisement for Henry & Co, *Santa Maria*, Hobart, 1950 (Chung Martin collection)

Gin (or Jin) was grandfather's clan name in Toishanese (Gen or Yan or Yian in Cantonese), but he assumed the name Henry and became Gen Chung Henry. I'm told that when setting up shop, grandfather asked the sign writers to paint 'Henli' meaning 'Doing well' or 'Showing a profit'. But they thought he said 'Henry'. Anyway, having a non-Chinese name was easier for his customers - better for business.

Henry & Co supplied all the hotels, hospitals and Government House. The shop was at 139 Liverpool Street. There, years after grandfather's death, my sister Lehene and I would grow up - over the shop.

Although far from China when he died of tuberculosis, aged 56 in 1941, grandfather was given a fitting farewell. City traffic was stopped to allow his cortege to pass while

people lined the streets to pay respect to this much-loved Chinese elder. The family even received a note of condolence from the governor, Sir Ernest Clark. According to an obituary in *The Mercury*: 'A keen, energetic business man, Mr Henry was well-known for his kindness and charity. He was president of the Tasmanian branch of the Kuo Min Tang (Chinese Nationalist Party), and gained complete mastery of the English language by diligence and perseverance.'

OBITUARY

Mr. Gen Chung Henry

Mr. Gen Chung Henry, a leading member of the Chinese community in Hobart, died at the age of 56 years at Hobart on Monday. Mr. Henry came to Tasmania when he was 14 years old, and began work as a market gardener. Subsequently he was a shop assistant, and eventually set up in business on his own account in Elizabeth St., where he engaged in the tobacco and fancy goods trade. Mr. Henry made several trips to China, and in 1927 entered the fruit trade. On returning from China in 1934 he successfully conducted a fruit business in Liverpool St.



MR. GEN CHUNG HENRY

A keen, energetic business man, Mr. Henry was well-known for his kindness and charity. He was president of the Tasmanian branch of the Kuo Min Tang (Chinese Nationalist Party), and gained complete mastery of the English language by diligence and perseverance. He leaves a wife and family of three sons and four daughters.
The funeral will take place at 2.30 p.m.

Obituary notice for Gen Chung Henry, *The Mercury*, 1941

(Chung Martin collection)



Mary Lum Lee, c.1930 (Chung Martin collection)

Grandfather was survived by his wife, Mary Lum Lee, whom he married on a trip back to China and brought out to Australia; and six children, four of whom were born in Hobart. His estate included properties in Canton bought over five return visits, and a new home at Dragon Field village near the county centre. It was built when he took his family to Toishan for two years in the 1930s.

My mother Dorothy remembers playing the piano as a five-year old on the ship to China. And when great grandmother, who had never ventured abroad, was shown the new family home in Dragon Field village, she could see that her son - my grandfather - had indeed prospered in Tasmania. She closed her eyes with joy, content to travel into the spirit world to rejoin her husband, my pioneering great grandfather.

I didn't know grandfather, let alone my great grandparents. And although I was a child when grandmother died in Hobart, I don't remember her either. I do remember being told she expected to return to China

to have grandfather reburied there. My mother watched her mother dressing him in his best suit and shoes, lining the pockets with crisp one-pound notes - the wherewithal for the afterlife - and having his body placed in a specially-made metal casket. This was in turn fitted into a wooden coffin. The idea was to preserve his body so it could be disinterred and returned to the motherland.

This didn't eventuate. Grandmother didn't go back to China; nor was grandfather reburied there. Grandmother thought of China as home, but her home became Australia and her children became Australianised. When she died, they laid her to rest alongside their father at Cornelian Bay cemetery, Hobart.

HENRY FAMILY

My grandparents' first child was born in China - a girl, Joyce. Faced with such misfortune, they immediately adopted a boy, Fon. Only a son could preserve the family name - the name the parents would themselves change in the different world of Australia! Only a son could continue the family line, take care of his parents in their old age and worship the ancestors. Girls would be married off into someone else's family.

Within a year of landing in Hobart, grandmother gave birth to a son of her own - her precious Gordon. He was succeeded by another boy, Lester. Then my mother was born, followed, alas, by another daughter.

Gordon was pampered and encouraged to excel at school. He would take over, develop the firm and succeed in everything he attempted. Young Lester used to wag school - led astray by some 'Australian' boy. When I was growing up in the 1950s, Uncle Gordon was always in a suit: managing and in charge. Uncle Lester wore a grey dustcoat: carrying boxes of bananas and delivering from a truck; generous to a fault, happy-go-lucky. He too always wore a double-breasted suit to go out at night or weekends, and every Tuesday evening when he and Uncle

Gordon took their reserved seats at the picture theatre.

As for the girls, as children - especially the eldest, Auntie Joyce, and my mother Dorothy (less so the youngest, Auntie Marie) - they toiled almost ceaselessly in the shop for little reward. But they could probably count themselves lucky they hadn't been put in a bucket and drowned at birth!



Dorothy Henry as 'Miss China', *The Mercury*, 1942 (Chung Martin collection)

During the Second World War Dorothy was pictured in a cheongsam and designated by *The Mercury* as: 'Miss China of 1942 ... busily working for Allies Day on July 31 which will be marked by a big fair in the Hobart Town Hall. The stalls will carry the colours of China, Russia, Free France, and Greece ... Dorothy will play her part ... to help those whose countries and homes have been desecrated by the enemy ...'

Uncle Gordon married late, fathered nine children and became a pillar of respectability - in the Chinese and business community and the Catholic Church. He was

Honorary Consul of the Republic of China (Taiwan), a Justice of the Peace, and honoured with a Medal of the Order of Australia.

By contrast, my mother Dorothy married early and caused a scandal. She was fifteen when her father died in 1941. She adored him and he spoilt her - even buying her a violin and paying for lessons too! Now she was left with a grieving mother who thought her worthless - a girl. She was distraught. She had a nervous breakdown. And then she fell into the arms of her brothers' charming friend, Charles Chung.



Charles Chung (left) with Dorothy and Gordon Henry at beach, 1942 (Chung Martin collection)

WILLI CHUNG SING



Willi Chung Sing (Chung Martin collection)

My paternal grandfather, Chung Shing Loong, came from impoverished Xinhui (or Sunwei) County, east of Toishan. At the age of 22 in 1887 he landed in Launceston to seek his fortune. He caught a train to Hobart and started work at McGregor's, a large market garden destined to be the site of the posh hotel Lenna. He later bought a small garden and hawked his goods door-to-door. Over the next three-score years, as a storekeeper in Launceston, a market gardener in Marshtown, New Zealand and again in Hobart, he prospered through tireless work. He made several sojourns to Sunwei, married, raised a family, moved from the village and built a two-storey town house in the city. There, when he was fifty-five, the youngest of his three sons, my father, Pak Koon, was born. By the 1930s Grandfather Chung had long joined and taken over the Hobart firm Ah Ham & Co. So great was the demand for the fresh produce from its market garden and for the fruit and vegetables sold in its shop that Ah Ham and Co. employed up to thirty Chinese gardeners, carriers and assistants.

Just as my maternal grandfather Gin adopted the surname Henry, my paternal grandfather Chung anglicised his name: Chung Shing Loong became Willi Chung Sing. In 1932, when Willi brought out to Tasmania the 11-year-old

Pak Koon, he called him Charles. At St Virgil's College the new pupil shortened his family name: he was known simply as Charles Chung. The pronunciation changed from the original *Joong* to the more Western *Chung* rhyming with *hung* .

By the 1940s Charles was working at Ah Ham when he courted my mother. When they married, his father, a generous man whom Dorothy remembers fondly, set them up in a new shop, W Chung Sing & Co at 99 Liverpool Street - just a block away from Henry & Co.

Mother helped establish Chung Sing & Co while weaning her first baby Lehene. But relations between our parents deteriorated and Dorothy returned to Henry & Co. Their divorce in 1946 was the first Chinese divorce in Australia - a scandal splattered over *Truth* . I was but 16 months old.



Lehene (left) and Helene Chung (right) at Seven Mile Beach, 1946 (photographer: Charles Chung, Chung Martin)

collection)

Ahead of her time, mother would later take up hairdressing, work as an artist's model in Melbourne and Sydney, and live in turn with artist Gordon Walters, radio announcer Rex Walden and then author and Egyptologist Leslie Greener - all three 'foreign devils'. She swore she'd never remarry, but relented. So, when I was 23 in 1968, the mother who'd always insisted on her maiden name, Miss Henry, became Mrs Greener.

This unconventional upbringing introduced me at an early age to the Western bohemian-intellectual world of art, books and ideas and led me to a career in journalism with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

WELDBOROUGH 1980s

A century after great-grandfather's arrival, by the time I visited Weldborough it was a sleepy hollow. There was the pub where I stayed, long-time oral historian Bill Butt, the last surviving part-Chinese - 75-year old Ron Chintock - and not much more. The total population in 1987 was 59. Ron Chintock was then believed to be half-brother to the film star Merle Oberon who played Cathy to Laurence Olivier's Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Until the revelation that Merle Oberon was of Indian origin, even in death she was unrivalled as 'the most famous Tasmanian of Chinese heritage'.



Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon in Samuel Goldwyn's

production of Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights*, directed by William Wyler, 1939 (St Helens History Room)

At another Chinese mining settlement, Garibaldi, I was shown the remains of three pig ovens by the curator of St Helens History Room, Peter Burns. Chinese New Year was impossible without fireworks and roast pork. The pigs for Weldborough's festivities came from Pyengana. To fetch them, the Chinese walked ahead, dropping wheat for the pigs to follow along the five-mile track.



Garibaldi pig oven with author and Peter Burns, 1987 (photographer: John Martin, Chung Martin collection)

At Weldborough cemetery are the derelict graves of Chinese. Although most tin miners returned to China, at Moorina cemetery is a monument in their honour, together with a stove in which to burn offerings to their spirits: testament to the fortitude of the Chinese and their contribution to the development of Tasmania.



Weldborough cemetery, 1987 (photographer: John Martin, Chung Martin collection)



Moorina monument, 1987 (photographer: John Martin, Chung Martin collection)

NOTE:

This is edited from 'One Village - Two Names: A Tasmanian Chinese on a Wild Dragon Chase', a paper presented at the [Chinese Heritage of Australia Federation Conference](#), Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne, 1-2 July 2000.

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See also:

Diana Giese, Interview with Dorothy Henry Greener, [National Library of Australia](#), 29 May 2000, TRC 4579; Diana Giese, Interview with Helene Chung Martin, [National Library of Australia](#), 29 May 2000, TRC 4578; and other Diana Giese NLA Henry family interviews.

Helene Chung Martin wikipedia entry -

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helene_Chung_Martin#External links](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helene_Chung_Martin#External_links)