

The Wesleyan Methodist Church and the Evangelisation of the Chinese on the Victorian Goldfields in the 19th Century

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Missionary history can be a hit and miss affair. Among the ‘misses’, speaking generally, is the contribution of colonial and dominion auxiliaries of the mainstream British missionary societies.

This paper is concerned with the efforts of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, in the Colony of Victoria, Australia, to evangelize the Chinese who arrived in the colony during the Victorian gold rush that began in 1854. Although the rapid increase in the Chinese population between 1854 and 1856 sounded alarm bells among the European (predominantly British, including Irish) immigrants, the decline in alluvial gold recovery that began in 1857 soon ended large-scale Chinese immigration, while leaving a sizeable number of Chinese in the colony. The story of Victorian (and, more generally, Australian) reaction to the Chinese is, sadly, caught up with racial issues and culminated in the White Australia Policy, instituted in 1888 and reified in the national Immigration Restriction legislation of the new Federal Parliament in 1901.

The story of Australian anti-Chinese attitudes is not, however, central to this paper. In 1854 the leading Congregational minister in Victoria, the Rev. John Legg Poore, and his colleague the Rev. Richard Fletcher, initiated the interdenominational Victoria Chinese Mission to undertake evangelism among the Chinese living on the Mount Alexander Goldfields (now generally embraced by the towns of Castlemaine and Campbell’s Creek). Poore met the ‘Rev’. William Young, a mixed race (Scots/Malay) missionary of the London Missionary Society who had taken leave in Sydney from his London Missionary Society post in Amoy (Xiamen), China, where he had worked under the supervision of the Stronach brothers.

Poore was surprised, early one morning in May 1855, to find three young Chinese standing on his doorstep in Melbourne. They were Ho A Low, a nephew of the senior LMS pastor in Hong Kong (Rev. Ho Fuk-tong); Chu A Luk, believed to be a nephew of the first LMS Chinese pastor (Rev. Liang A Fa); and Wat A Che. The three had been students at the LMS Anglo-Chinese College in Hong Kong and had letters of introduction to Poore from the Rev. James Legge, Principal of the College. They had decided to take ship to Victoria and to use the English-language skills they had acquired at the College to find work in the colony, either as missionaries or interpreters. Wat A Che went on to work, for more than twenty years, as a Government interpreter. Ho and Chu went to work, under the direction of William Young, with the Victoria Chinese Mission at Castlemaine. Two more young men, Leong A Toe, another former student of the Anglo-Chinese College, and Lo Samyuen, a graduate of St Paul’s (Anglican) College in Hong Kong, arrived in 1856.

By the end of 1857, a combination of economic recession and lack of financial support for an interdenominational mission forced the closure of the Victoria Chinese Mission. In the course

of the next two years it was replaced by denominational missions sponsored by the Wesleyan Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian Churches.¹

Financial support for the VCM had come from just three sources. An annual grant from the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society provided about a quarter of the total income, and a regular personal donation, amounting to about half of the total income, was made by the strongly evangelical Anglican Bishop of Melbourne, the Right Reverend Charles Perry. The rest of the money came in dribs and drabs from individuals whose income, in the highly volatile economy of the colony, could change from wealth to poverty almost overnight. The economic ups and downs of the Victorian economy were to prove a major problem for the churches throughout the nineteenth century.²

The Rev. William Boyce had been President of the Australasian Wesleyan Conference in 1855 and 1856 and Australasian Secretary of the Society before accepting a call to return to England where he became Secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society. Boyce reminded British Methodists of the very difficult circumstances of life in the colonies where a very high level of personal resources was required.

If the English friends wish Australia to be thoroughly identified permanently with the foreign Missions work they must make haste slowly, taking into account the peculiar position in which the inhabitants of a new Country are placed from local claims which are of a far more pressing & necessary character than can exist in an old settled Country. A superficial glance at the circumstances of the middle and lower classes in the Australian colonies leaks the impression of the command of greater monied ability as compared with the same classes in England & this is to some extent true but it must be taken in connection with the existence of imperative local claims upon the voluntary givings which are not found to the same extent in England or any other long settled country.³

Methodism in Victoria proved to be a particularly fertile transplant. It flourished through its ability to provide a network of preaching places in every corner of the colony, relying on a highly effective system of local preachers. It quickly became the second largest non-Catholic denomination, attracting many people from the Anglican tradition. The Australasian Auxiliary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (AWMMS) facilitated coordinated missionary work.

The Castlemaine Mission of the defunct Victoria Chinese Mission had been based on a local mission started by the local Wesleyan Methodist Church, with the assistance of yet another ex-student of the Anglo-Chinese College, O Cheong, who was working as the local Government Interpreter. By the time the AWMMS took over the work in 1859, Chu A Luk had returned to China, Ho A Low (and his brother) had taken an interpreting position in northeast Victoria, and only Leong A Toe was still working in Castlemaine. He was promptly recruited by the Wesleyans and worked in Castlemaine until he returned to China in 1863. A local convert, Leong On Tong, (no relative) replaced A Toe. He was later ordained and served for more than thirty years. A few years after Leong On Tong's appointment, another

¹ Welch, Ian (1980), *Pariahs and Outcasts, Christian Missions to the Chinese in Australia*, MA (unpublished), Monash University.

² The importance of keeping the economic issues in mind is an important corrective in considering 'pious fraud', the tendency of Christian enthusiasts to exaggerate the blessing of God on their efforts. See Butlin, N G, (1964), *Investment in Australian Economic Development, 1861-1900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. See also Boehm, E A, (1971), *Prosperity and Depression in Australia, 1887-1897*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

³ Boyce to Bunting, 20 February 1879, *Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Australian Correspondence*, MSS.

local convert, (James) Lee Moy Ling, was recruited. He too was ordained and served until his death in 1903.

Among the characteristics of the colony was the tendency to cluster together in camps made up of men of similar origins. Names such as Canadian, Californian, and borrowings of names from homelands, including Castlemaine (Irish), Dunkeld (Scottish), and thousands more from all parts of Great Britain, remain as a legacy of the early days. The Chinese were no different. Most of the men came from the Sinning (Taishan) District, about 100 miles southwest of Canton City (Guangzhou) in the Province of Canton (Guangdong). While estimates vary, at least sixty per cent of the men were from Taishan, and possibly more. The next largest group came from the adjoining district of Sinwui (Xinhui), with sizeable numbers from two other districts, Hoiping and Yanping. Together, the 'four districts' were grouped as the See Yup region. Men from the See Yup area comprised well over fifty per cent of all the Chinese who went overseas during the nineteenth century. The other major grouping in Victoria (and Australia generally) comprised men from the 'three districts', or Sam Yup area, just to the west of Canton City. Yet another group came from the region below Canton towards Macau. These were the Heang Shang (Zhongshan) people, implacable enemies of the See Yup men. There were also minorities of Hakka emigrants and men from the adjoining (northern) Fukien Province.

Any attempt to label Victorian colonists simply as 'British', or 'Chinese' or 'European' can lead to serious misunderstanding of the dynamics faced by the churches in their efforts to establish an Australian Christianity and to engage in evangelism. Early work among the Aboriginal people, for example, was a disastrous failure and, despite the efforts of the Moravians, employed by the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches, later years were barely more successful. Work among the Chinese was, by comparison with California (the nearest equivalent), or even China itself, markedly more successful. Indeed, it is arguable that the rate of Chinese conversions in nineteenth century Australia was higher than anywhere else.

The fact that all the Chinese missionaries mentioned earlier were Cantonese and mostly Taishanese, created an immediate obstacle among the other ethnic groups of Chinese. It was no accident that the dominant figure in Victorian Chinese Christianity, Cheok Hong Cheong, was a Taishanese.⁴ The history of Chinese Christianity in Australia, until quite recent years, is inseparable from the history of the See Yup group.

Not surprisingly, given William Young's background, the evangelization of the Chinese in Victoria followed the same broad pattern and used the resources developed by British missionaries in China. But there were important differences. The Chinese in Victoria were a male community. Less than twenty Chinese females immigrated to Victoria during the nineteenth century. It was not that the colonial authorities excluded women; the reality was that the vast majority of the Chinese were short-term immigrants. They came in search of

⁴ See Welch, Ian (1997), 'Cheok Hong Cheong: 1851-1928', *St Mark's Review*, No 171, Spring 1997, pp 23-26.

Welch, Ian, (2000), 'A Life of Cheok Hong Cheong', Paper presented to a Workshop on the Chinese in Australian and New Zealand History, University of New South Wales, February 2000.

Welch, Ian (1995), 'The Anglican Chinese Mission in Victoria, Australia, 1860-1898' in *St Mark's Review*, No 161, Autumn 1995, pp 26-30.

Welch, Ian, (2003), *Alien Son, the Life and Times of Cheok Hong Cheong, 1851-1928*, PhD thesis, Australian National University.

quick earnings and intended to return home as soon as they had achieved their goal, usually about the equivalent of £50 to £100 in British currency value. The majority were married men, and had left their families in China. Quite a few of the men, even if married in China, found European wives, and by the 1900s there were more than a thousand children of these marriages, including quite a number of men who, despite the prejudices of the times, volunteered for the First Australian Imperial Force (1st AIF), and served in Gallipoli and later in France.⁵

Chinese emigrants were at first rarely willing to accept Christianity. There were two main reasons. First, Christianity was the religion of foreigners and foreigners were enemies of Chinese. To secure their opium and commercial markets in China, the British had not hesitated to make war on China. Of course, the fact of British imperialism had also made it possible for the Chinese to emigrate, but that was a matter of simple convenience, a by-product that was not intended by the British but systematically and intelligently exploited by the merchant-elite of Guangdong Province. The second factor was that family and custom were so integrated in China that accepting Christianity meant, in effect, rejecting the foundational structure of society, the family. An essential element of Chinese family life was the worship of ancestors, a practice denounced by Christian missionaries. Leong a Ping said in his testimony:

Although I had heard Leong A Toe preach the gospel once or twice, I did not retain it in my mind, because I heard that he taught men not to worship idols or tombs, and I felt displeased at that and told him I was a Chinese, and why should I follow a foreign religion... I began to argue with him. He said what he spoke was true. I said it was untrue. And again, when he said a thing was untrue, I said it was true.⁶

A man who accepted Christianity while abroad was not only seen as siding with the foreigners, he was also seen as rejecting the most fundamental aspects of being a true Chinese.⁷ But perhaps the biggest difficulty facing the missionaries was the mobility of the Chinese. Gold rush Victoria was full of stories of great 'new' strikes in various places, a trend that continues today, with quite large nuggets being found, largely as a result of electronic searching devices, on long abandoned fields.⁸ Men rushed from place to place in the hope of finding quick wealth. For the missionaries, employed and supervised by local circuits although paid from a central fund, this meant that promising contacts often disappeared overnight. Being a missionary on the Victorian goldfields could be, to say the least, a very difficult and frequently frustrating and disappointing occupation.

The work of the Chinese missionaries involved endless visits to the Chinese living in the dozens of encampments scattered across the Victorian goldfields. These varied in size from perhaps less than a dozen men to very large villages of several thousand, especially in the heyday of the 1850s. With the decline of the Chinese population after 1857, as men took their earnings and went home, the bulk of the remaining Chinese in Victoria settled into

⁵ See on-line resources at <http://www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au/resources.shtml/> This site includes a baptism list of Chinese Christians during the 19th century.

⁶ *The Wesleyan Chronicle*, 20 December 1865, p 184

⁷ Welch, Ian, (1995), 'The Chinese Question: The Church, Conversion and the Chinese in Nineteenth Century Australia', Paper presented at a conference, Studying Christianity in Australia, Macquarie University, Sydney, 12 July 1995.

⁸ A good way of coming to terms with modern gold finding techniques is to read the articles at www.goldnet.com.au/goldmag/default.asp

‘Chinatowns’ in the larger towns. The major centres were Castlemaine, Bendigo, Ballarat, Beechworth and by the 1870s, Melbourne.

The missionaries spent their week visiting the men and engaging in discussions. Sometimes these were on directly religious subjects, in which the futility of idolworship was a favourite topic, or else they dealt with day to day issues of coexistence in a predominantly European society. Following the pattern first established by Willima Young with the VCM in 1855, the Victorian Chinese missionaries were required to prepare a weekly journal and to submit these journals monthly to their supervising ministers. Many of these reports were later published in the church papers. This extract comes from Leong A Toe’s journal for a week in April 1863, shortly before his return to China. It contains a very interesting attempt to explain the different appearance of different ethnic groups:

Journal of Leong A Toe from Saturday April 11th to Friday April 17th 1863

On Saturday five men came to my house and I explained the Catechism to them. One or two were pleased and I gave books to them.

Sunday forenoon. I went to Campbell's Flat. In one tent there were seven men, and I preached to them how God created Heaven and Earth and all things and men in six days, so that all people ought to worship God and not worship images and sin against his law. One answered and said, 'You say All things come from God', He said, you say many.' Some people are black some are white they live in different countries and not speak same language, they do not worship the same God. They do not come from one pair.' I say to him, Who was the God of China and who were the first parents of Chinamen. He say, So long a time from then to now, he not know the first parents, but the Chinese are different from all other people. I said, you are not a wise thought. You do not know the true God and do not know the climate of the world. If anybody live in the torrid zone, they are of black skin and complexion, if they live in the temperate zone they are white or light skinned and intelligent. If any people live in the frigid zone they are dwarfed and of little knowledge. You see the Europeans are white and so intelligent, they are living in the temperate zone, as Chinamen. How is it that the Chinese are not so intelligent as the Europeans. Because the Europeans have the truth of God and they believe in Christ the Saviour therefore their wisdom and intelligence comes from the true God. If you country people cast away 'devil worship' and images and worship the living God then they will have intelligence like those who live in other countries.⁹

Most of the Chinese were polite listeners. The Bible stories provided some enjoyment for men from a culture in which oral/aural theatrical performances, often with religious themes, were a major, arguably the only, source of village entertainment. A good yarn, from whatever sources, was better than another day of boredom. The lives of many, if not most, of the Chinese in Victoria involved immensely hard work for very poor returns. In country areas, most lived in rough shacks made of scrap materials. In the cities, they tended to congregate in low-rent, low standard housing and were frequently accused (usually without foundation) of overcrowding and being a source of disease. Because they were overwhelmingly male, homosexuality and prostitution were viewed as peculiarly Chinese ‘sins’. To overcome their loneliness opium smoking was almost universal. That added fuel to the fire as moral reformers linked opium to the seduction of young European women. It was, after all, easier to accuse the Chinese of sinful living than to acknowledge the role of wealthy European churchgoers in the renting of sub-standard property, to take just one example. It was easier to

⁹ Journal of Leong A Toe, mss, held by Ian Welch

link endemic disease to the Chinese than to acknowledge the failure of governments to provide sanitary infrastructure, clean water and effective sewage systems.

Despite the obstacles, the Methodist missionaries, like their Anglican and Presbyterian counterparts, did make progress. They relied heavily on publications prepared in China, although many of their clients were men with very low levels of literacy.¹⁰ The testimonies of converts, mostly from Methodist accounts, show that loneliness was a major reason why the missionaries succeeded. As men were persuaded to join the small groups of Chinese Christians meeting at the catechist's house during the week, they found a 'family' support that was otherwise lacking. And it was not only Chinese who offered friendship. Over and over again, the testimonies published at the time of baptism referred to the kindness and acceptance offered to them by European Christians.¹¹ The following extracts are typical:

Ham Yeng Tang said: Last year, I met with a European Christian, Mr. Philip Bennett, of Campbell's Creek, who was very friendly with me, and invited me to go to the Wesleyan Church, in Campbell's Creek, to hear the Gospel. After the service, many of the Christian friends came and spoke to me and appeared very glad to see me at Church. This I was surprised at. I thought there must be something in this religion to induce these persons, who were strangers to me, to be so kind to me, who could neither speak nor understand English.¹²

Chung Ah Shaw of Maldon gave a similar story, involving a Chinese Christian.

Not long ago, I became a gardener. A good many English friends invited me to go to Church, but I would not go. A Christian Chinaman, James Ham King Yong, a gardener, was very kind, and asked me to go with him and hear the truth, but I did not understand much English and could gain much information. I only knew that church did the people good, therefore I went every Sunday until now, about four years. Some English friends loved me like a brother; therefore I thought this truth is good.¹³

Perhaps the most direct, and simplest of all, was the testimony of Tse Tak.

When we went to Church, all Christian friends loved us very much, but this blacksmith most of all. Every Sunday he taught me English, and the Truth in his house, and his wife was to me as a mother.¹⁴

The most difficult feature of the Victorian Missions to the Chinese was their marginalization within the church and within the wider Victorian community. William Young was only one of many Victorian Christians who referred to the text from Acts 17:26: 'From one man [God] made every nation of man' (New International Version); or as the King James Version, the universal Protestant Christian translation for most of the nineteenth century, put it, 'God has made of one blood all the nations of the earth.' The differences between Chinese and Europeans arose through their vastly different education, cultural formation and the very

¹⁰ Welch, Ian, (2000), 'Chinese Protestant Christian Tracts in 19th Century Australia', paper presented to the Annual Conference of the Australian Historical Association, Melbourne, April 2000.

¹¹ Welch, Ian, (2001), 'The Testimonies of Chinese Christian Converts in Nineteenth Century Australia', Conference of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia, Australian National University, Canberra, 4-7 July 2001.

¹² *The Wesleyan Chronicle*, 20 December 1865, p 184.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

different impact of nineteenth century events upon the two cultures. Unfortunately, nineteenth century usage and the pseudo-scientific theory of racism tended to obscure the biblical view and most Europeans, evangelical or not, identified physical appearance and cultural differences with inferiority, particularly when linked to poverty and social status.

The Chinese Methodist Church survived in Victoria, due mainly to the loyalty of its two leading figures, the Rev. Leong On Tong and the Rev. James Moy Ling. Both had received a better than ordinary Chinese village education, both spoke fair English, and both had experienced a convincing conversion. Although personally very different, they overcame the low level of denominational interest. The Chinese Methodist Church in Little Bourke Street, opened in 1865, and now absorbed into the Melbourne City Parish of the Uniting Church in Victoria, remains the oldest surviving Chinese church in Australia.

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