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Invisible Australians

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Invisible Australians

Abstract

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A new project combines digital methods and historical narrative to reveal the lives of non-white, non-Indigenous people in early 20th-century Australia.

Kate Bagnall

Willie Leon was a child of Melbourne's Chinatown. Orphaned after his father died on a trip to the United States, from the age of six Leon lived with Mrs Lou and her Chinese businessman husband in Celestial Avenue. He grew up knowing nothing of his own mother or even where he was born—but his later childhood was definitely Australian, albeit one lived in the heart of the Chinese community. Leon's working life began at age 13, when he left the Lou family's care to work in a Bourke Street café. Over the next 20 years he worked as a cook in a series of cafés in Sydney, Lakes Entrance, Gisborne and Melbourne.



Willie Leon, c. 1939.
National Archives of
Australia: B6531, LEFT
COMMONWEALTH/1945-
1947/LEON WILLIE

Gleeson suspected that he was an illegal Chinese resident.

Gleeson took Leon to the Customs Department offices where he gave him the Dictation Test—in German, as was allowed under the Immigration Act. Leon failed the test, as he was surely expected to, and Gleeson arrested him as a prohibited immigrant.

When the matter came before the City Court, the magistrate ordered that Leon be deported. Leon appealed, however, and the Court of General Sessions heard him tell again

the story of his life from age six. He remembered nothing before then. Leon's account was supported by that of other long-term Melbourne residents, who remembered him playing as a young child in Celestial Avenue. Without knowledge of his own parents or birthplace, Leon simply had no other way of proving that he was who he said he was, that he had not arrived recently or unlawfully, that he knew no other life than that in Australia.

Judge Foster in the General Sessions found that Leon had been resident in Victoria before Federation and that, therefore, he could not be counted as an 'immigrant' (or a 'prohibited immigrant') under federal law.

'Commonwealth power only extended to immigrants who came after the founding of the Commonwealth,' he declared (*Examiner*, 28 November 1928).

The story of Willie Leon's prosecution as a prohibited immigrant illustrates the precariousness that surrounded the lives of ethnic Chinese in Australia in the early decades of the 20th century. The White Australia Policy, whether explicitly stated or not, permeated the thinking and practices of many lawmakers, bureaucrats and officials—from parliamentarians who openly spoke of their distrust of the 'cunning and deceptive' Chinese, to Customs officers whose day-to-day work involved investigating and passing judgement on the identities of the Chinese they encountered.

While some Chinese Australians did not suffer the direct effects of institutional discrimination under the Immigration Restriction Act—or under the many other laws that placed restrictions on the rights of Chinese, Asiatics, 'aboriginal natives of Asia', or those 'not substantially of European descent'—they could not fail to be aware of the way in which their country viewed people of their race.

The Immigration Restriction Act was ostensibly designed to keep out unwanted arrivals of any race or nationality—criminals, prostitutes, the physically and mentally ill and the morally suspect, as well as 'coloureds'—yet it disrupted, or had the potential to disrupt, the lives of Australian-born Chinese and other long-established residents like Willie Leon. Leon is one of the thousands of

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'invisible Australians' whose lives Dr Tim Sherratt and I are exploring as part of a new project to investigate the interactions of Chinese Australians, and those of other non-European backgrounds, with the bureaucracy of White Australia.

The administration of the Immigration Restriction Act created an enormous body of records that are today kept in National Archives of Australia offices around the country. These records include tens of



Certificate of exemption from Dictation Test for Ruby Wong Chee, 1908. National Archives of Australia: ST84/1, 1908/141-150

thousands of certificates exempting from the Dictation Test, together with related application forms, photographs, correspondence, registers and indexes documenting the residency and travels of non-Indigenous, non-European people in Australia over the first half of the 20th century. In the Invisible Australians project we will extract biographical information found in these administrative records to develop a better understanding of who exactly was affected by the White Australia Policy, and how. It can be easy to think that the policy was all words and ideas, abstract discussions about the shaping of a nation and its population, but in reality it had significant consequences for people who were, in fact, Australians. The administrative case files of individuals and families provide biographical and genealogical information—much of which is found nowhere else—as well as details of how these people interacted with the bureaucracy, including how they negotiated and resisted the restrictions placed upon them.

In time, the biographical information we extract will be linked to that found in other historical collections—for example, probate records, cemetery transcriptions, naturalisation papers and historical newspapers.

These might sound like grand plans for a project that we are undertaking independently and, so far, without any external funding. But a further part of the project will be exploring how crowdsourcing and emerging digital methods can facilitate both the extraction of the data and the formation of links between the records. For example, many of the records contain structured data, so we plan to develop a transcription tool that allows anyone to view a record online and simply copy the details to add to the Invisible Australians database.

Tim is also exploring innovative machine processing techniques. The *Real Face of White Australia*, for example, demonstrates how identity photographs can be automatically extracted from archival files and assembled in a way that allows people to connect with and explore the records online. Although only an experiment at this stage, this work has attracted significant international attention within the fields of digital humanities and archives.

Invisible Australians is all about connections—between datasets, archival collections and, most importantly, between the stories of past lives and us today. People like Willie Leon lived 'small lives' and left only faint traces in the historical record. In many cases, there are descendants and eager family historians ready to reclaim their stories, but perhaps not with Willie Leon. He never married and, after the court hearing, appears to have slipped quietly back into his life in inner-city Melbourne. Two decades later, aged in his 50s, he left Australia.

Invisible Australians hopes to reveal and tell the stories of the many thousands of people like Willie Leon who encountered the bureaucracy of White Australia. Without the stories of these individual lives, White Australia can all too easily stay in the realm of rhetoric and imagination.

Dr Kate Bagnall is an independent historian who lives and works in Canberra. For more on Invisible Australians go to www.invisibleaustralians.org or follow along on Twitter @InvisibleAus.