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### Voices of Sydney's Chinese furniture factory workers, 1890-1920

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### Abstract

Chinese furniture factory workers were the focus of a heated debate that helped shape "White Australia." Often considered a threat to the "European," or "white," working class, they were vigorously campaigned against by labour activists and staunchly defended by Chinese merchant elites, the outcome of this contest being the institution of a range of anti-Chinese legislation from the 1880s. While labour activists' claims about Chinese furniture factory workers - and to a certain extent the counterclaims of Chinese elites - have been scrutinised in historical scholarship, workers' own reflections on their lives have not been examined. Drawing for the most part on New South Wales bankruptcy files, this paper explores the world of Sydney's Chinese furniture workers as they described it. It argues that their understandings of their activities were considerably more complex than the assertions made about them.

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## Voices of Sydney's Chinese Furniture Factory Workers, 1890–1920

Peter Gibson\*

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Chinese furniture factory workers in Australia were the subject of a racialised controversy over labour conditions that helped make a “white” nation.<sup>1</sup> Employed in factories opened by migrants from the Pearl River Delta area of Guangdong in metropolitan centres following the gold rushes of the 1850s, they often outnumbered “European,” or “white,” workers in the furniture industry, reaching an Australia-wide peak of approximately 2,000 in 1911.<sup>2</sup> Furniture workers were arguably the largest group of Chinese workers in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australia, and they were the only numerically significant group involved in industrial manufacturing.<sup>3</sup> Owing to their perceived threat to European workers, labour campaigners such as cabinetmaker, furniture trade union representative and then New South Wales Premier William Holman rallied against them, calling for various restrictions on their activities.<sup>4</sup> The late nineteenth and early twentieth

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1. “Chinese” and “Chinese Australian” are contested terms; see Jen Sen Kwok, “Postscript: Beyond ‘Two Worlds,’” in *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance*, ed. Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 290–307. “European,” “British,” “Anglo Celt” and “white” are also contested terms; see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 75–94. “Factory” is taken as any place where four or more “persons” – or one or more “Chinese” – were engaged “working at any handicraft,” as per the 1896 New South Wales *Factories and Shops Act*, 2. (a), (b).
2. *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 3 April 1911, vol. 2, pt 8 (Melbourne: J. Kemp, 1911), 1022. Chinese furniture manufacturers were concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. Chinese workers rarely, if ever, worked in European factories.
3. There were 7,000 market gardeners in Australia in 1911, but a large proportion of these were equal partners in gardening operations rather than employees; see, for instance, Joanna Boileau, “Chinese Market Gardening in Australia and New Zealand, 1860s–1960s: A Study in Technological Transfer” (PhD diss., University of New England, 2014), 75–78.
4. William Holman’s Testimony, 17 December 1891, *Report of the Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force* (hereafter NSWRC) (Sydney: Government Printer, 1892), 432–36. Plank 15 of the electoral platform NSW Labour Electoral League in 1891 was “stamping of Chinese-made furniture”; see “Labour Electoral League,” *Australian Star*, 1 April 1891. “White-Australian” industrialisation also had tremendous symbolic value, meaning that not only the labour movement opposed Chinese furniture factories; see Denise Hutchinson, “Manufacturing,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of Australia*, ed. Simon Ville and Glenn Withers (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 290. Refer also to Phil Griffiths, “‘This is a British Colony’: The Ruling-Class Politics of the Seafarers’ Strike, 1878–79,” *Labour History*, no. 105 (November 2013): 131–52.

centuries were crucial in the struggle for workers' advancement, especially in relation to a "living wage," yet these Chinese workers were seen as unsympathetic to the struggle and were not welcome to participate.<sup>5</sup> Chinese community leaders, including Sydney furniture factory operator John Hoe (冼俊豪),<sup>6</sup> strongly opposed claims that Chinese factory workers were a threat to European workers, insisting that both groups of workers subscribed to the same ideals.<sup>7</sup> Still, labour movement agitation against Chinese furniture factory workers contributed to the implementation of laws which restricted Chinese migration to Australia from the 1880s.<sup>8</sup> Trade union campaigning also resulted in a range of anti-Chinese clauses in industrial legislation, particularly the 1896 *Factories and Shops Acts* in New South Wales and Victoria.<sup>9</sup>

While the "White Australia" policy was in effect, claims that Chinese factory workers threatened European workers were largely accepted at face value and echoed by historians. As early as 1903, William Pember Reeves argued that workers in late nineteenth-century Melbourne's Chinese furniture factories were overworked and underpaid and had even "connived" with their employers in efforts to prevent the enforcement of minimum wages within the furniture industry, thereby undermining European workers.<sup>10</sup>

Since the early 1970s, however, when the "White Australia" policy was dismantled, historians have tended to argue that the allegations against Chinese furniture factory workers were mere stereotypes grounded in anti-Chinese prejudice. Andrew Markus, for instance, suggested in 1974 that many members of the United Furniture Trade Society in Melbourne were motivated by "virulent racial antipathy" when protesting against these Chinese workers in the late nineteenth century, that Chinese workers were not a threat to European workers.<sup>11</sup> Marilyn Lake has similarly stressed the racialised character of labour movement agitation against Chinese furniture factory workers. In 2014, she pointed out that the 1896 Victorian *Factories and Shops Act* must be seen not only as a product of domestic anti-sweating efforts, but also of a global, race-based "anti-slavery" discourse that found a particular relevance with labour agitators – and legislators – in their engagement with these workers in Melbourne.<sup>12</sup> Lake also drew attention to the counterclaims made by Chinese elites, especially barrister William Ah Ket, to allegations that the Chinese furniture

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5. For a catalogue of accusations, see *The United Furniture Trade Society of NSW v. Anthony Hordern and Sons*, Court of Arbitration, November–December 1904, 5340–2/5714, NSW State Records (NSWSR).
  6. I use period Chinese characters and *Hanyu Pinyin* where period transliterations are unavailable.
  7. John Hoe had an interest in Sydney's *Tung Wah Times* (東華報) (hereafter *TWT*), which published articles condemning discrimination against Chinese factory workers; see, for instance, "Maltreatment of Woodworkers" (苛待木工), *TWT*, 9 January 1901. He also participated in a *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*) debate on this issue in 1908; see "The Chinese Question," *SMH*, 1 July 1908; "Chinese in Waterloo," *SMH*, 2 July 1908; "The Chinese Question," *SMH*, 27 July–15 August 1908. European supporters opposed this kind of discrimination, too; see J. L. Clarke, *The Chinese Case against the Chinese Employment Bill* (Melbourne: Arbuckle, Waddell and Fawckner, 1907).
  8. See, for example, Ray Markey, "Populist Politics: Racism and Labor in NSW, 1880–1900," in *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), a special issue of *Labour History*, no. 35 (November 1978): 66–79.
  9. *Victoria Factories and Shops Amendment Act 1887*, 3; *Victoria Factories and Shops Act 1896*, 3 (1a), 23 (1), (3), 56, 57; *NSW Factories and Shops Act 1896*, 2 (a), (c). Similar laws followed in other parts of Australia. The zenith of official discrimination in NSW, providing for Chinese-only working hours, was the *NSW Factories and Shops (Amendment) Act 1927*. While furniture factories were largely unique to Australia throughout the Pacific Rim, garment and boot factories in San Francisco, and the workers therein, attracted comparable controversy; see, for instance, Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1975).
  10. William Pember Reeves, *State Experiments in Australia & New Zealand*, vol. 2 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1903), 61–62.
  11. Andrew Markus, "Divided We Fall: The Chinese and the Melbourne Furniture Trade Union, 1870–1900," *Labour History*, no. 26 (March 1974): 7; Ching-Fatt Yong, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia, 1901–21* (Richmond: Raphael Arts, 1977), 41–45, 63–70.
  12. Marilyn Lake, "Challenging the 'Slave-Driving Employers': Understanding Victoria's 1896 Minimum Wage through a World-History Approach," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 1 (2014): 87–102.

factory workers resembled “slaves.” This indicated to her that “Chinese workers were just as keen to benefit from higher wages and shorter working hours as their fellow Australians.”<sup>13</sup>

In this paper, I explore how Chinese factory workers narrated their own lives in Sydney in the period from 1890 to 1920. I examine their statements about three aspects of their lives that were often seen to be at odds with the labour movement’s struggle for workers’ rights: their skill; their rates of pay and hours of work; and their social class. I demonstrate that they spoke in far more complex terms than European labour activists and Chinese merchant elites. This reveals, I contend, the existence of a vibrant and distinctive workers’ culture within Sydney’s Chinese furniture factories, which was centred upon the Pearl River Delta counties, yet simultaneously informed by the Australian labour movement.<sup>14</sup>

The voices of Sydney’s Chinese furniture factory workers are drawn from a collection of more than 40 New South Wales bankruptcy records for Chinese furniture manufacturers, transcripts of an 1891 Royal Commission and a 1906 Court of Arbitration case, along with several applications for “Certificates Exempting from Dictation Test” (CEDTs) under the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901. The bankruptcy records contain approximately 150 affidavits of debt in total, on which workers wrote – or had others write on their behalf – information about themselves in attempts to recover money allegedly owed to them by bankrupt employers.<sup>15</sup> These records also include transcripts of testimony given by nearly 20 Chinese workers in bankruptcy court. There are comparable transcripts of testimony from four furniture factory workers in the other legal proceedings just noted. CEDT applications contain workers’ notes on their travel around Australia, and between Australia and China, and, in certain instances, the letters that they sent to immigration officials. Taken together, these sources comprise a rich body of workers’ reflections on their lives that allow unique insights into their world, which has traditionally only been explored by historians through Anglocentric government and newspaper reports and, more recently, public statements by Chinese elites. Nevertheless, the factory workers’ own reflections in the forums mentioned here must be treated with caution. Indeed, such forums were usually highly racialised and could have been intimidating for them, as historians like Nadia Rhook have demonstrated, causing workers to be guarded.<sup>16</sup> They often needed to communicate via interpreters, too, meaning that much of what they said may have been overlooked, or possibly even censored, during translation. I supplement these accounts of workers’ activities with Chinese-language newspaper articles. Workers’ voices are not easily located in Chinese-language newspapers, which were run chiefly by Chinese bilingual merchants, as detailed by historian Mei-fen Kuo.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the voices of their employers can be found, so these articles are extremely useful in gauging the nature of the interactions between the two parties. For contextual information, I also draw on English-language newspapers and reports associated with the operation of the New South Wales *Factories and Shops Act* from 1896, the latter of which contain mostly statistical data on factories and workers.

## Worker Skill

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13. *Ibid.*, 99–100. See also John Leckey, “Low, Degraded Broods? Industry and Entrepreneurialism in Melbourne’s Little Lon, 1860–1950” (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2003), 305–57.
  14. I am inspired in this approach by Carlo Ginzburg’s account of the trial of Domenico Scandella, or Menocchio, a sixteenth-century Friulian miller; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).
  15. *NSW Bankruptcy Act 1887*, 45–47. Bankruptcies were common in industrial manufacturing of this period, including in the furniture industry amongst Chinese and non-Chinese operators alike. Chinese factory bosses attributed their bankruptcies to economic issues, especially a lack of capital, that were only partially related to “White Australia.”
  16. Nadia Rhook, “Speaking in Grids: Race, Law and Audibility in late colonial Victoria” (PhD diss., La Trobe University, 2015), ch. 4; Mark Finnane, “Law as Politics: Chinese Litigants in Australian Colonial Courts,” in Couchman and Bagnall, *Chinese Australians*, 117–37.
  17. Mei-fen Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia: Urban Elites, Newspapers and the Formation of Chinese-Australian Identity, 1892–1912* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013).

A common European claim against Chinese factory workers was that they were “unskilled.” Cabinetmaker and trade unionist Edgar Cutler said to the 1891 Royal Commission in Sydney: “the second and third class work can be done by the average Chinese workman, but he cannot do the best.”<sup>18</sup> For European workers, being “skilled” and capable of doing the “best” work, as opposed to the “second and third class work” allegedly carried out by Chinese workers, was important in making a case for higher pay.<sup>19</sup> Claims of “unskilled” Chinese workers were, however, contested by a number of Chinese community spokespeople, including factory boss John Hoe in a lively *Sydney Morning Herald* debate in 1908. Hoe said that he did not engage “unskilled” labourers in his furniture factory, and that many of his 70 employees were “specialists” and “master cabinetmakers.”<sup>20</sup>

Chinese furniture factory workers themselves regularly expressed that they were “carpenters,” particularly during the nineteenth century. In 1876, to take an early example, 13 out of 14 workers at Chow Young’s factory on Liverpool Street identified as “carpenters” on affidavits filed for back pay when their boss went bankrupt.<sup>21</sup> Nine out of ten workers at Man Sing’s Goulburn Street furniture factory similarly identified themselves as “carpenters” on affidavits of debt in 1890.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Sun Sing Loong, a long-time worker at Ah Toy’s factory off George Street, stated to the 1891 Royal Commission: “I am a carpenter.”<sup>23</sup>

As used by Chinese furniture factory workers, the term “carpenter” had connotations of significant woodworking expertise. “Carpenter” was almost certainly a translation of the Chinese words *mu jiang* (木匠) and *mu gong* (木工). Both words were used to describe furniture factory workers in Sydney’s Chinese-language newspapers and both were evocative of a proud artisanal tradition. The *mu jiang*, who produced all kinds of items out of wood, including houses and furniture, was the archetypal artisan in imperial China, a disciple of the legendary woodworker and god *Lu Ban* and the embodiment of *qiao* (巧), or “technical skill,” as noted by art historian Klaas Ruitenbeek.<sup>24</sup> Sydney’s Chinese-language press often linked *mu jiang/gong* to this notion of *qiao*.<sup>25</sup> In using these words to describe themselves, then, which were translated into English as “carpenter,” many Chinese furniture factory workers were making powerful statements about being skilled artisans. They did not necessarily support the traditional order that gave the *mu jiang* the distinction of being the archetypal artisan in China. Certainly, historian Chi-Kong Lai has highlighted that the Pearl River Delta counties, from where workers (or at least one of their parents if they were Australia-born) had come, were at the centre of efforts to overthrow this order during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>26</sup> Even so, workers appear to have revelled in this distinction, which set them apart from other Chinese migrants, and they even celebrated *Lu Ban* Day in Australia.<sup>27</sup>

The term “carpenter” was linked by one worker to a period of formal training in China. Sun Sing Loong, who identified himself as a “carpenter” in 1891, also stated that he had “served an

18. Edgar Cutler’s Testimony, 6 December 1891, NSWRC, 428.

19. Ben Maddison, “‘The Skilful Unskilled Labourer’: The Decline of Artisanal Discourses of Skill in the NSW Arbitration Court, 1905–15,” *Labour History*, no. 93 (November 2007): 77–84.

20. “The Chinese Question,” *SMH*, 30 July 1908; “The Chinese Question,” *SMH*, 15 August 1908.

21. Affidavits of Debt, 7 March–7 April 1876, Chow Young Insolvency, 13654–2/9598–12761, 71–96, NSWSR.

22. Affidavits of Debt, 27–28 November 1890, Man Sing Bankruptcy, 13655–10/22675–3020, 33–57, NSWSR.

23. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 11 December 1891, NSWRC, 388.

24. Klaas Ruitenbeek, *Carpentry and Building in Late Imperial China: A Study of the Fifteenth-Century Carpenter’s Manual Lu Ban Jing* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 15–24.

25. See, for instance, “Chinese Invents New Machine” (華人製造新式機器), *TWT*, 29 September 1906 and “Woodworker Union Secretary Interviewed by Sydney Newspaper” (木匠工黨會之司理人對雪梨某報訪事人), *TWT*, 17 January 1903. Advertisements portrayed woodworkers as being highly skilled, too; see “John Hoe’s Wood Factory Advertisement” (俊豪號木廠廣告), *TWT*, 9 February 1924.

26. Chi-Kong Lai, “Xiangshan County and the 1911 Revolution,” *New Asia Review*, 13 (2012): 162–67; see also David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 291–347.

27. Melbourne workers, though, seem to have been more active in promoting their *Lu Ban* Day celebrations; see “Wood Industry Association Announcement” (木行大慶會廣告), *Chinese Times* (愛國報), 1 July 1911.

apprenticeship of three years” making furniture in China before migrating to Australia in 1878.<sup>28</sup> Historian Ching-Fatt Yong has argued that many Chinese factory workers were gold-rush carpenters who had arrived in Australia initially to labour on the goldfields during the 1850s and 1860s, and began making furniture thereafter.<sup>29</sup> Yet, Sun Sing Loong said that he was trained to make furniture and had spent most of his time after arriving in 1878 working in Sydney’s Chinese furniture factories.<sup>30</sup> His home, Gaoyao/ming (高要/明), and the five other Pearl River Delta areas represented in Sydney, all of which were involved in the furniture industry – “Chang Sing (Zengcheng/yi, 增城), Toon Goon (Dongguan, 東莞), Heung Shan (Xiangshan, 香山), See Yip (Siyi, 四邑) and Sam Yip (Sanyi, 三邑),” according to factory boss Yuen Tah – were chiefly rural, with little industrial manufacturing (Figure 1).<sup>31</sup> Hence, Sun Sing Loong and indeed any China-trained woodworkers in Sydney probably needed to travel to regional centres to do apprenticeships. One place with opportunities was Guangzhou, or Canton city, in the upper reaches of the Delta, which had been China’s manufacturing hub for Western export markets since the seventeenth century, as detailed by historians such as James Broadbent.<sup>32</sup> Figure 2, a nineteenth-century depiction of Guangzhou furniture workers, also shows that furniture establishments were usual there.

While none appear to have discussed it on-record, Chinese woodworkers in Sydney normally had their own tools. “The tools belonged to the workmen,” said Elizabeth Street factory boss Lay Jong (鹿童) of his workers in 1893.<sup>33</sup> This was standard practice in Chinese and European factories alike. Chinese workers used a mix of Chinese and European tools, according to Sun Sing Loong.<sup>34</sup> Some workers also used their feet to hold items in position when making furniture, as reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1879.<sup>35</sup> This is also shown in Figure 2, and in a well-known illustration of an unspecified Melbourne Chinese furniture factory in the *Australasian Sketcher* in 1880 (Figure 3).

During the twentieth century, more Chinese workers identified with skilled European furniture trades. When Australia-born factory boss Henry Louey of Surry Hills bankrupted in 1910, for instance, a “turner,” a “stainer” (sic), a “French polisher” and six “cabinet makers” submitted claims against Louey for back pay allegedly owing to them.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Chan King, a failed factory boss who went to work in Wah Lee’s Surry Hills factory, said in English in 1913: “I am a cabinetmaker by trade.”<sup>37</sup>

Increasing identification with European furniture trades by Chinese factory workers was probably due partly to standardised terminology for furniture factory roles which came with government regulation of the furniture industry after 1896. The 1896 New South Wales *Factories and Shops Act* and its later amendments, in addition to discriminating against Chinese furniture manufacturers by making one Chinese employer and employee a “factory,” caused terms for the furniture trades to be set so that minimum wages could be monitored and eventually fixed.<sup>38</sup> These terms came into common usage in both Chinese and European furniture factories. Chinese workers

28. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 390–91.

29. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, 41. Louis Ah Mouy, a spokesperson for the Chinese community in Melbourne, had migrated to Australia to build houses when the first gold rush began in the early 1850s; see Paul Macgregor, “Chinese Political Values in Colonial Victoria: Lowe Kong Meng and the Legacy of the July 1880 Election,” in Couchman and Bagnall, eds., *Chinese Australians*, 72.

30. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 388.

31. Yuen Tah’s Testimony, 2 October 1891, NSWRC, 119.

32. James Broadbent, Suzanne Ricard and Margaret Steven, *India, China, Australia: Trade and Society, 1788–1850* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 2003), 31–64.

33. Lay Jong’s Testimony, 27 July 1893, Lay Jong Bankruptcy, 13655–10/1022864–06597, 40, NSWSR.

34. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 391. It was also normal in San Francisco’s Chinese garment industry for workers to buy their own sewing machines; see Him Mark Lai, “Chinese Guilds in the Apparel Industry of San Francisco,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* 21 (2008): 21.

35. “Among the Chinese,” *SMH*, 8 February 1879; see also “The Furniture Trade,” *SMH*, 1 November 1886.

36. Affidavits of Debt, 9–14 March 1910, Henry Louey Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23603–18391, 77–89, NSWSR.

37. Chan King’s Testimony, 31 March 1913, Willie King Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23691–19488, 66–7, NSWSR.

38. “The Furniture Board,” *SMH*, 14 April 1897. See also *Report on the Working of the Factories and Shops Act* (hereafter *FSA Report*) 1897 (Sydney: Government Printer, 1898), 33.

experienced some pressure from factory inspectors appointed under the Act to make use of these terms.<sup>39</sup> European workers, including the “Englishman” turner who worked at Ah Toy’s factory, could have also influenced Chinese workers in this regard.<sup>40</sup> This influence would have also increased over time with the integration of more European workers – such as Claud Pennell who sued his boss Quong Wing after a workplace accident in 1926 – into Chinese manufacturing operations as Australia’s Chinese population declined from the 1880s.<sup>41</sup>

European furniture trade terminology appears also to have reflected increasing specialisation within the Chinese factories as more were mechanised. Willie Wing, who operated a machine saw and fed coal into a steam boiler at Ah Wong’s factory in Surry Hills, described in the Court of Arbitration in 1906 a delineation of woodwork on the factory floor based on the use of machines. Wing explained in English that he had to saw timber and mind the boiler in one room, then take the timber to the turners in another section of the factory so that they could turn table legs from it on lathes. He also described going to see the polishers in yet another part of the factory to put handles on drawers and the occasional door onto a wardrobe after they had finished polishing these machine-made components.<sup>42</sup> Ah Wong’s workers may have used terms such as “polisher” and “turner” rather than “carpenter,” then, because their understandings of skill were changing as machines became more common and artisanal traditions waned, which was seen among non-Chinese factory workers in Sydney too, according to historian Ben Maddison.<sup>43</sup> It is more than likely that early twentieth-century exhortations by Chinese-language newspapers for Chinese migrants to embrace Western “modernity,” particularly in relation to modern technology, as described by Mei-fen Kuo, encouraged the use of such terminology by Chinese workers as well.<sup>44</sup>

In a handful of instances, workers’ identification as tradesmen in the European sense was due to the fact that they were born – and/or undertook apprenticeships – in Australia. Sidney Jack, who reported working in a number of Chinese factories in Sydney and Melbourne, testified at his bankruptcy hearing in 1909 that he was Australia-born and had undertaken “cabinetmaking and French polishing” training in Melbourne.<sup>45</sup> Jack did not reveal, however, if he was apprenticed in a Chinese or European furniture factory. According to Sun Sing Loong, apprentices were never taken in Chinese factories in Sydney: new workers were assigned “rough work” to do for “a few months,” he stated.<sup>46</sup> In Melbourne, though, a few workers, including Yee Lim and Ah You at Yee Wye’s establishment on Market Lane in the 1880s, identified themselves as “apprentices.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Sidney Jack may have been trained in a Chinese factory.

Many Chinese woodworkers made no clear effort to link themselves to a specific conception of skill at all. Willie Wing talked about the skill of his co-workers at Ah Wong’s factory, although he did not identify himself as “skilled.” He said in English that he needed to “saw wood” and “put coal on and keep steam up,” as well as assist the turners and polishers.<sup>48</sup> Wing did not state that he

39. On inspectors’ efforts to publicise the 1896 Act in Chinese factories, see, for example, *FSA Report 1897*, 24; *FSA Report 1898* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1899), 23.

40. Nora Ah Toy’s Testimony, 31 December 1891, *NSWRC*, 463.

41. Pennell v. Quong Wing, trading as W. Rising and Co., 18–19 October 1926, 2713–6/1309, *NSWSR*.

42. Willie Wing’s Testimony, 9 March 1906, *Furniture Trade Union v. Ah Wong*, Court of Arbitration, 5340–2/74–18, 167–75, *NSWSR*.

43. Maddison, ““The Skilful Unskilled Labourer,”” 73–86. Chinese furniture factories, however, mechanised less than European ones; see *FSA Reports 1897–1930*.

44. Mei-fen Kuo, “Confucian Heritage, Public Narratives and Community Politics of Chinese Australians at the Beginning of the 20th Century,” in Couchman and Bagnall, *Chinese Australians*, 156. Factory mechanisation was another source of increased Chinese-European worker interaction. Indeed, factory operator Zhao Hao Tian (趙浩天) from the Gaoyao area told the *Tung Wah Times* in 1909 that he had employed a European machinist to help him mechanise his operation; see “Chinese Invents New Machine (華人新欸機器之發明),” *TWT*, 23 January 1909.

45. Sidney Jack’s Testimony, 30 March 1909, *Jack Lem Bankruptcy*, 13655–10/23574–17992, 111–12, *NSWSR*.

46. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 391.

47. Yee Lim’s and Ah You’s Affidavits of Debt, 27 April 1889, *Yee Wye Insolvency*, 762–335, 123, 162, Public Records Office of Victoria.

48. Willie Wing’s Testimony, 167.



was a “carpenter” or “cabinet maker” when he testified in the Court of Arbitration in 1906. A number of workers who filed affidavits of debt when their employers went bankrupt did not specify their roles, either, including the nine workers at Australia-born Harry Kow’s factory on Macquarie Street in 1907.<sup>49</sup>

Not identifying themselves as highly skilled woodworkers normally reflected the realities of workers’ roles. Chinese factories did need workers to “saw wood” and “put coal on and keep steam up,” as Willie Wing put it: not all roles required great skill. Additionally, factories did not always offer woodworkers the chance to work regularly. Sing Leng (連勝) said at his bankruptcy hearing through a court interpreter in 1895: “I work in a cabinetmaker’s shop sometimes.”<sup>50</sup> In these instances, workers had to maintain employment in Sydney’s Chinese market gardens and shops as well, so they did not necessarily consider themselves woodworkers at all, let alone highly skilled ones. Further, as noted by historian Joanna Boileau, most migrants had been farmers before their arrival in Australia, with minimal experience in woodworking.<sup>51</sup>

According to some workers, the quality of furniture produced varied greatly by factory. Sun Sing Loong stated in 1891 that Chinese factories in Sydney’s city centre did “good work” using “all good timber,” but that a number of those in the southern suburb of Alexandria produced cheap items, with old packing cases “for the interior parts of the furniture.”<sup>52</sup> Undoubtedly, the different classes of furniture required different degrees of worker skill. Almost all furniture was manufactured in European styles for European tastes, to be sold in department stores, such as Marcus Clarke and Co. in Sydney, or at auction.<sup>53</sup>

A number of furniture factory workers identified with white-collar roles, or as cooks. “I was a sort of clerk at Loon Cheong’s,” testified Ah Hing in English about his employment at Loon Cheong and Co.’s factory on George Street when it ceased trading in 1883.<sup>54</sup> In 1906, Seck Fan similarly stated via an interpreter in the Court of Arbitration that he was engaged “bookkeeping” at Ah Wong’s factory in Surry Hills.<sup>55</sup> Ah Fat explained that he worked as the “manager” of Ah Wong’s factory.<sup>56</sup> Ah Wah testified that he was the cook at the Sun Hap On and Co. factory on Sussex Street in 1896.<sup>57</sup> Yit Yung (葉) identified himself as a cook as well, at the Sun Kwong Loong and Co. factory in Surry Hills in 1915.<sup>58</sup>

Non-woodworkers in the Chinese factories discussed various notions of skill. Seck Fan emphasised his bookkeeping competence in the Court of Arbitration in 1906. “I keep a book for every man,” he declared through a courtroom interpreter of his meticulous practices.<sup>59</sup> His literacy and numeracy probably made him unlike many of his co-workers, giving him confidence derived from the *wen* (文), or scholarly, masculine ideal of imperial China, described in detail by literature scholar Zhong Huang.<sup>60</sup> Seck Fan was being grilled over the underpayment of a European turner at Ah Wong’s factory, however, so he could have also felt the need to defend himself. Ah Fat the manager discussed combining managerial and woodworking expertise: “sometimes I look over my men, sometimes I fix furniture,” he said.<sup>61</sup> Ah Fat also discussed his ability to buy and sell, to “go round and get orders, and sell furniture,” as he put it, as if these were tasks that could not be

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49. Affidavits of Debt, 17 February 1908, Harry Kow Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23541–17604, 6–15, NSWSR.

50. Sing Leng’s Testimony, 5 March 1896, Sing Leng Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23072–10431, 3, NSWSR.

51. Boileau, “Chinese Market Gardening in Australia and New Zealand,” 46–85.

52. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 390.

53. *Ibid.* On sales to Marcus Clarke and Co., see, for example, Harry Kow’s Testimony, 18 February 1908, Harry Kow Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23541–17604, 46, NSWSR.

54. Ah Hing’s Testimony, 28 May 1883, Ack Chow Insolvency, 13654–2/9993–17928, 14, NSWSR.

55. Seck Fan’s Testimony, 9 March 1906, Furniture Trade Union v. Ah Wong, 175.

56. Ah Fat’s Testimony, 9 March 1906, Furniture Trade Union v. Ah Wong, 149.

57. Ah Wah’s Testimony, 20 March 1896, Sun Hap On Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23079–10554, 4, NSWSR.

58. Yit Yung’s Testimony, 10 August 1915, Jan Way Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23778–20439, 156, NSWSR.

59. Seck Fan’s Testimony, 183.

60. Zhong Huang, “Representations of Chinese Masculinity in Chinese Australian Literature, 1978–2008” (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2012), 43–44.

61. Ah Fat’s Testimony, 152.

performed by other workers, requiring a business acumen that many did not possess.<sup>62</sup> Such acumen was widely celebrated amongst Chinese overseas, and to a certain extent in China after the 1911 revolution, as historian Ching-Hwang Yen has pointed out, but mercantile skill was not a traditional source of prestige in China.<sup>63</sup> Factory cooks rarely discussed culinary expertise, although Yit Yung said in 1915 that he had experience in a restaurant setting. “I was working in a Chinese restaurant called Chung Wah Jang,” he testified in court of his job in Sydney before finding work at the factory, invoking an image of professionalism.<sup>64</sup>

## Rates of Pay and Hours of Work

European labour movement activists also regularly accused Chinese furniture factory workers of being overworked and underpaid. During the course of the Royal Commission in 1891, cabinetmaker Edgar Cutler alleged that earnings in the Chinese factories were extremely low, less than five shillings a week sometimes: scarcely ten per cent of European workers’ wages.<sup>65</sup> These claims were commonplace, and low remuneration was supposed to have been coupled with long working hours.<sup>66</sup> European workers aspired to a “living wage” that would allow them to support families, and the free time to enjoy family life: impossible if they had the pay and working hours alleged within the Chinese factories.<sup>67</sup> Chinese community leaders disputed these allegations, too. John Hoe insisted in 1908 that his employees were well paid and worked the same hours as their European counterparts in the furniture industry, and that Chinese workers in general were far from “cheap.”<sup>68</sup>

Chinese woodworkers frequently stated that they received a set weekly wage. All ten workers at Man Sing’s Goulburn Street factory reported receiving wages on affidavits of debt in 1890.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, all of the eight workers at the Chong Sing and Co. factory in Surry Hills stated that they were wage earners in 1893.<sup>70</sup> Ding On (定安) the cabinetmaker similarly testified that he earned a weekly wage at the Sun Kwong Loong and Co. factory in Surry Hills in bankruptcy court in 1915.<sup>71</sup>

Chinese woodworkers reported receiving wages that were nearly always significantly less than the minimums paid in European furniture factories. During the 1870s and 1880s, this meant less than £2 weekly.<sup>72</sup> The highest-paid wage-earning woodworker of this period to lodge a claim for back pay was “joiner” Mok Leong Shing of the Sun Hang Leong and Co. factory on Pitt Street in 1883. He reported receiving £1.11d.6s: considerably less than the £2.<sup>73</sup> In the late 1890s and early 1900s, however, Chinese woodworkers reported being paid more: a consequence of their industrial action, the 1888 *Chinese Restriction and Regulation Act*, which effectively froze the Chinese worker pool, along with the 1896 *Factories and Shops Act*, which facilitated the institution of formal and enforceable minimum rates of pay from 1904.<sup>74</sup> Even so, Chinese woodworkers’

62. *Ibid.*

63. Ching-Hwang Yen, *Ethnic Chinese Business in Asia: History, Culture and Business Enterprise* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2013), 31–33.

64. Yit Yung’s Testimony, 156.

65. Edgar Cutler’s Testimony, 428, 431.

66. See, for instance, “Mongolian Sweating,” *Worker*, 4 February 1905.

67. Lake, “Challenging the Slave-Driving Employers,” 100–102.

68. “The Chinese Question,” *SMH*, 30 July 1908. See also Chinese Chamber of Commerce, *A Chinese Appeal* (Sydney: Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1926), 14–16.

69. Affidavits of Debt, 27–8 November 1890, Man Sing Bankruptcy, 33–57.

70. Affidavits of Debt, 10–3 April 1893, Leong Dong Bankruptcy, 13655–10/22844–6266, 9–24, NSW SR.

71. Ding On’s Testimony, 10 August 1915, Jan Way Bankruptcy, 151.

72. This refers to the minimum remuneration for adult journeymen; see “Blessings of Protection,” *Evening News*, 15 July 1879; “The Furniture Trade,” *SMH*, 30 October 1886. See also William Holman’s Testimony, 433.

73. Mok Leong Shing’s Affidavit of Debt, 12 December 1883, Kum Leong Insolvency, 13654–2/10028–18374, 12, NSW SR.

74. Judgement of Court, *The United Furniture Trade Society of New South Wales v. Anthony Hordern and Sons*, 2/5714–11/12–1904, 9, NSW SR. Historians such as Joe Isaac have disputed the impact of minimum wage law,

wages still seem to have lagged behind European minimums, even though Chinese and European workers were meant to receive the same pay under the *Factories and Shops Act* and its subsequent amendments. Woodworkers at Henry Louey's Surry Hills factory in 1910, and those at Charles Lum's Alexandria establishment in 1914, reported that they were paid the legally-mandated minimums, which were £2.16d weekly in 1910 and £3 in 1914.<sup>75</sup> Still, these were the only ones who ever reported receiving what European workers took for granted: most reported being paid less, which was a legitimate cause for concern amongst workers' advocates, Chinese and European.<sup>76</sup> Similar was seen in Melbourne, as insolvency records reveal, even though Chinese factory proprietors there consistently reported to factory inspectors that workers did receive the minimum wages.<sup>77</sup>

Other Chinese woodworkers stated that their bosses employed them on piece rates, which was more common in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth.<sup>78</sup> At George Suey's factory in Alexandria in 1911, for instance, six workers reported that they were employed on piece rates and two said that they received wages.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Ying Sing, once a partner in the Sun Hap On and Co. factory on Sussex Street, also explained through an interpreter in 1896: "I am doing piece work at Wing Sing's."<sup>80</sup>

Earnings on piece rates as reported by Chinese woodworkers sometimes exceeded European workers' pay, but these usually also led to underpayment by European standards. Louie Fook, the highest-paid pieceworker at George Suey's Alexandria factory in 1911, reported on an affidavit that he had made two toilet pairs (a dressing chest and a washstand), two hallstands and a wardrobe over an 18-day period and was owed £7.10d for these items.<sup>81</sup> This was nearly £3 per week: more than the award rate of £2.16d in 1911.<sup>82</sup> In most instances, however, pieceworkers reported earning less than the minimum wages. Some even reported apparent exploitation. Hing Pound, a factory operator who went bankrupt and then went to work for Lee Fee at Waterloo in 1909, was one case. "I am making toilet tables. I get £1/7/- for each table. I can make one table a week if I work hard," he despaired via an interpreter.<sup>83</sup> Hing Pound might have exaggerated his poverty in bankruptcy court in 1909 in an effort to safeguard his assets. Even so, piecework, while beneficial to faster workers, almost certainly disadvantaged slower workers. According to Ding On, pieceworkers all kept "little books" where they recorded their work, which must have afforded them a measure of protection.<sup>84</sup> "Little books" were also used by pieceworkers in Melbourne, a number of whom

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although Andrew Seltzer and Jeff Borland have shown that such laws were successful at increasing wages in Melbourne; see Joe Isaac, "The Economic Consequences of Harvester," *Australian Economic History Review* 48, no. 3 (2008): 280–300; Andrew Seltzer and Jeff Borland, "The Impact of the 1896 Factory and Shops Act on Victorian Labour Markets," *IZA Discussion Paper Series*, no. 10388 (November 2016).

75. Affidavits of Debt, 9–14 March 1910, Henry Louey Bankruptcy, 77–89; Affidavits of Debt, 6 November 1914, Charles Lum Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23741–20077, 56–71, NSWSR.
76. The popular "credit-ticket system" of the gold rushes, whereby passage to Australia was paid for Chinese workers by employers on the understanding that they would have to work off the cost, is unlikely to have been in use in the factories because this system had all but ceased to exist in Australia by 1880; see, Macgregor, "Chinese Political Values in Colonial Victoria," 89.
77. My claim is based on earnings data provided by 93 Melbourne furniture factory workers in court. See also *Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories, Work-Rooms, and Shops 1900* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1901), 14.
78. David Faure has talked briefly about subcontracted workforces in factories in China, particularly in Shanghai, where successful Chinese Australians did business, yet such arrangements do not seem to have been usual in Australia. Workers appear in most cases to have worked directly for factory proprietors. See David Faure, "Beyond Networking: An Institutional View of Chinese Business," in *Chinese and Indian Business: Historical Antecedents*, ed. Medha Kudaisya and Ng Chin-keong (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 35.
79. Affidavits of Debt, 7 October 1911, George Suey Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23646–18951, 25–40, NSWSR.
80. Ying Sing's Testimony, 5 March 1896, Sun Hap On Bankruptcy, 29.
81. Louie Fook's Affidavit of Debt, 7 October 1911, George Suey Bankruptcy, 32.
82. "Furniture Trades Award," *SMH*, 10 September 1909.
83. Hing Pound's Testimony, 17 March 1909, Hing Pound Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23578–18024, 45, NSWSR.
84. Ding On's Testimony, 151.

submitted translations of their books at court hearings for consideration regarding claims for back pay.<sup>85</sup>

White-collar workers, as well as cooks, reported that they received weekly wages, which were usually better than industry minimums. In 1883, Ah Hing, who said that he was “a sort of clerk” at Loon Cheong and Co.’s George Street factory, stated that he was paid £3 every week: more than most Chinese and many European woodworkers.<sup>86</sup> Yit Yung, the cook at the Sun Kwong Loong and Co. furniture factory, likewise reported that he received £3.3d every week in 1915: more than the £3 minimum wage for cabinetmakers that year.<sup>87</sup>

Most of Sydney’s Chinese factory workers, who did indeed report being underpaid, were almost certainly aware that employers were breaking the law by paying less than the minimum wages. Chinese-language newspapers encouraged ignorance amongst workers of their legal rights: Sydney’s *Tung Wah Times* dismissed mandated minimum rates simply as “too high” and the cause of Chinese workers’ unemployment in 1913.<sup>88</sup> Even so, European trade unionists and factory inspectors alike were active in making Chinese workers aware of labour legislation. Factory inspectors visited the Chinese factories regularly, and the 1906 Court of Arbitration case against Ah Wong regarding the underpayment of a European turner was launched by the United Furniture Trade Society, that is, purportedly after its own campaign to raise awareness about minimum wages within the Chinese furniture sector.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, the fact that European workers worked alongside Chinese workers in the factories also made ignorance of their legal entitlements highly unlikely.<sup>90</sup>

Chinese workers themselves compared their rates of pay in Sydney with those of workers in China, which would have made their own earnings more attractive. Sun Sing Loong explained in 1891 that most of the Chinese factory workers in Sydney would not have earned “enough to keep themselves in food” in China.<sup>91</sup> Not only were they feeding themselves in Sydney but they were also often lifelines for their families in the Pearl River Delta counties. Several furniture factory workers discussed the importance of their pay in this regard. Ah Wah, cook at Sun Hap On and Co.’s factory on Sussex Street, said in 1896 that he sent money to his father in China “to do business with.”<sup>92</sup> Ding On the cabinetmaker also stated that he sent “£214 odd” to his family in China in 1915 when information came from “the Viceroy of Canton and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce” that floods had devastated his hometown.<sup>93</sup> Earnings in Sydney were also sufficient for workers to return to China regularly, and many, such as Sydney and Melbourne cabinetmaker and cook Hong Bow, pictured in Figure 4, reported doing so in applications for CEDTs. Hong Bow stated that he had travelled to China three times between 1911 and 1925, and had stayed there for a year each time.<sup>94</sup> Ching Yow (陳有字), a wood carver at the Hung Hon furniture factory in Surry Hills, was less mobile, although he reported taking a considerable sum – £347 – with him on a trip to China in 1904 to take care of his ailing father.<sup>95</sup> Comfortable retirement in China was also realistic with workers’ earnings. Sun Sing Loong said in 1891 that he was saving his money to retire there: “I would like to get £200 ... I would buy rice fields, and get the rents from them.”<sup>96</sup> The

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85. See, for instance, Workers’ Affidavits of Debt, 3 May 1889, Quong Lee Insolvency, 762–338, 49–55, Public Records Office of Victoria.

86. Ah Hing’s Testimony, 14.

87. Yit Yung’s Testimony, 165.

88. “Oppressed Chinese Overseas Woodworkers’ Severe Rules” (取締華僑木工之苛例), *TWT*, 13 December 1913.

89. “Furniture Trade,” *SMH*, 9 January 1906.

90. *FSA Report 1897*, 1.

91. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 389.

92. Ah Wah’s Testimony, 5–6.

93. Ding On’s Testimony, 155.

94. Hong Bow CEDT Application, B13/0–1925/10543, National Archives of Australia (NAA) Melbourne. See also CEDT applications by Hong Sing, B13/0–1924/26848, NAA Melbourne; also Louey Foo, B13/0–1925/10588, NAA Melbourne.

95. Ching Yow CEDT Application, SP42/1–B1907/2726, NAA Sydney.

96. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 390.

desire to return to China like this, with “wealth and glory,” was common among Chinese overseas, as pointed out by historians such as Michael Williams.<sup>97</sup>

Employer-subsidised factory accommodation and food probably also helped mitigate discontent over “low” pay. Most workers stated that they lived at the factories. Workers at Man Sing’s factory reported living there on their affidavits of debt in 1890.<sup>98</sup> Hing Pound testified similar in 1909: “I live at the factory.”<sup>99</sup> Living on-site was legal in Sydney until 1927, yet illegal in Melbourne from 1896, so this practice was seen less in Melbourne after 1896, although factory proprietors still provided employees with accommodation elsewhere.<sup>100</sup> Factory lodgings included food prepared by cooks with the staples of Cantonese cuisine – salted fish, Cantonese sausage, rice, noodles, tofu, lychee nuts, black fungus, bamboo shoots, lotus root – and workers appear to have had access to certain special items like shark fins, bird nests, lobsters and abalone, at least according to their employers’ financial records.<sup>101</sup> Many workers do not seem to have been charged for such arrangements, yet some said that this did take place. “10 shillings a week was deducted for my food,” testified Ding On regarding his pay and living arrangements at the Sun Kwong Loong and Co. factory in 1915.<sup>102</sup> Still, in contrast, most European workers spent more than £1 a week on rent and food in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Sydney.<sup>103</sup> Factory living also gave Chinese workers fellowship and safety from “larrikin” attacks, and, in most instances, as with Chung Lee’s premises in Darlinghurst (Figure 5), the convenience of a central location within the city.<sup>104</sup> Factory dormitories were often cramped, though, according to several European observers: hardly suitable for those Chinese workers who sought to have active family lives in Sydney, which indeed some did, but in their own homes, usually with European women.<sup>105</sup>

No workers appear to have discussed what constituted a full working week on record in the late nineteenth century, but several Chinese employers at the 1891 Royal Commission suggested that a full factory working week left workers with little free time. Sun War Hop, who ran a factory on Castlereagh Street said that his employees worked “from six o’clock in the morning to half-past five o’clock at night,” six days per week, which amounted to almost 70 hours.<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Street operator Chow Kum (周錦), a representative of Sydney’s See Yip community also said that his employees worked “from daylight till dark,” six days per week.<sup>107</sup> According to Chow, this was the “same as in China,” so the workers may not have been phased, but most European furniture factory workers balked at these hours because they worked significantly less – close to 48 hours weekly – in 1891, according to William Holman.<sup>108</sup>

97. Michael Williams, “Destination Qiaoxiang: Pearl River Delta Villages and Pacific Ports, 1849–1949” (PhD diss., Hong Kong University, 2002), 106–64.

98. Affidavits of Debt, 27–8 November 1890, Man Sing Bankruptcy, 33–57.

99. Hing Pound’s Testimony, 17 March 1909, Hing Pound Bankruptcy, 44, 46.

100. *NSW Factories and Shops (Amendment) Act 1927*, 5. 49 (4); *Victoria Factories and Shops Act 1896*, 19.

101. See, for instance, Kwong Sing Loong and Co.’s Accounts, 16 February 1889–5 December 1889, Ah How Bankruptcy, 13655–10/22653–2602, 2, NSWSR. Practically identical arrangements have also been identified by Him Mark Lai in San Francisco garment factories; see Him Mark Lai, “Chinese Guilds in the Apparel Industry of San Francisco,” 20.

102. Ding On’s Testimony, 152.

103. “The Rent Problem,” *SMH*, 19 March 1912; “Cost of Living,” *SMH*, 2 March 1915. Certain retail stores, including David Jones, provided senior employees with accommodation and food during this period, yet the practice was not widespread; see, Peter Bastian and Victor Quayle, “An Ambivalent Relationship: Thomas Caddy, the Drapers’ Association and the Sydney Trades and Labor Council’s Forgotten Cooperation over Early Closing,” *Labour History*, no. 110 (May 2016): 23.

104. On “larrikin” attacks in Sydney, see, for example, Philip Bramble, “‘Too Muchee Dam Lallikin’: Chinese and Larrikins in 19th Century NSW,” *Locality* 11, no. 2 (2001): 19–23.

105. One example is William Yee Sing, who lived, unhappily it would appear, with his European wife, Alice; see “Murder and Suicide,” *Evening News*, 15 November 1920. Regarding cramped dormitories, see, for instance, “The Furniture Trade,” *SMH*, 1 November 1886.

106. Sun War Hop’s Testimony, 12 December 1891, *NSWRC*, 396.

107. Chow Kum’s Testimony, 12 December 1891, *NSWRC*, 394.

108. William Holman’s Testimony, 434.

Some Chinese workers, however, discussed shorter full-time working weeks in the twentieth century. In 1906, Willie Wing stated that he worked six days a week in Ah Wong's factory. Most days, he explained, were "nine till five," with a half day on Saturday.<sup>109</sup> Ah Fat, manager at Ah Wong's, stated that he worked the same days, but that his hours of work were irregular and dependent on how much custom the factory had at any given time. "Sometimes I go eight o'clock, sometimes nine o'clock ... sometimes ten o'clock ... cannot say what days, any day," he said of his starting times.<sup>110</sup> According to factory inspectors, the average working week was slightly longer in Chinese factories than in European ones – 53 hours against 48 – in 1899.<sup>111</sup> As with rates of pay, working hours appear to have improved over time due to a combination of industrial action, immigration restrictions and industrial legislation. Sydney's Chinese-language press was also insistent that workers not work at night, nor on Sundays, after the 1896 *Factories and Shops Act*. Numerous notices were published, in stark contrast to the silence on minimum rates of pay.<sup>112</sup> Mei-fen Kuo has pointed out that the push by Sydney's Chinese-language newspapers for Chinese migrants to observe clock time and the eight-hour day was to help mitigate "anti-Chinese labour sentiment."<sup>113</sup> Warnings about Sunday work were probably also an effort to satisfy Christians, who were influential members of the Chinese community and a source of support for it outside the community, as historian Denise Austin has described.<sup>114</sup>

Several workers also said that they worked one or two days a week in the factories. Lay Jong, who testified that he went to work for Sun War Hop after he went bankrupt in 1893 also stated that he worked "one or two days a week" at "eight shillings a day."<sup>115</sup> Sing Leng, too, remarked that he worked "sometimes" in a "cabinetmaker's shop" in 1895 and Jan Way (威象), testifying in 1915 as an investor in the Sun Kwong Loong and Co. factory in Surry Hills, said that he worked "sometimes one day a week, sometimes two days" as a cabinetmaker at Hang Jan and Co.'s factory on Elizabeth Street.<sup>116</sup>

## Social Class

Chinese furniture factory workers were alleged by labour movement activists to have been a kind of underclass as well. Edgar Cutler conjured images of so-called "coolies" working in the Chinese furniture factories at the 1891 Royal Commission, suggesting that Chinese workers were obsequious and incapable of challenging their employers.<sup>117</sup> A unified, empowered and dignified working class was a key goal of the labour movement, yet European trade unionists only ever claimed to have seen the antithesis of this realised within the Chinese factories. That there was an underclass in factories and on market gardens was even argued by the "desirable" class of Chinese migrants in Sydney, that is, the members of the merchant elite, including John Hoe, in attempts to improve their own image.<sup>118</sup> Chinese merchants, however, were always careful to minimise the threat of this "underclass" to European workers.

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109. Willie Wing's Testimony, 175.

110. Ah Fat's Testimony, 152.

111. *FSA Report 1899* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1900), 21.

112. See, for example, "Woodworker Notice" (木工須知), *TWT*, 30 September 1899; "Woodworkers Must Take Care" (木工宜慎), *TWT*, 30 June 1906; "Chinese Woodworker Notice" (華人木行注意), *TWT*, 30 June 1906.

113. Kuo, "Confucian Heritage," 145.

114. Denise Austin, "Citizens of Heaven: Overseas Chinese Christians during Australian Federation," in *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation, and Chinese Communities in Australia, 1860–1940*, ed. Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (Kingsbury: Otherland Literary Journal, 2004), a special edition of *Otherland*, no. 9 (December 2004): 75–88. On Christian support for John Hoe's factory, see, for instance, "How Would You Vote?," *Sunday Times*, 5 July 1908.

115. Lay Jong's Testimony, 27 July 1893, Lay Jong Bankruptcy, 47–48.

116. Jan Way's Testimony, 7 September 1915, Jan Way Bankruptcy, 213.

117. Edgar Cutler's Testimony, 431; "Why the Chinaman is Cheap," *The Worker*, 22 October 1904.

118. See, for instance, "The Chinese Citizens in Reply," *SMH*, 22 August 1904.

According to the Chinese workers themselves, there was a high level of social mobility in the factories. Several said that they had once been factory bosses. Chan King, Sidney Jack, Sing Leng, Hing Pound and Lay Jong all identified themselves as former factory proprietors. Several operators also explained that they had been factory workers before becoming bosses. “I worked three years for wages, and the balance of the time I have been an employer,” testified Lay Jong through an interpreter at the 1891 Royal Commission of his life in Sydney after arriving in 1876.<sup>119</sup> Proprietor Charles Lum also said that he had been a factory worker: “before I started this business I was a clerk for John Hoe at £3 a week.”<sup>120</sup> Sun Sing Loong reported the same.<sup>121</sup> This kind of social mobility was due to the modest capital investments required for factories – a few hundred pounds in most cases – which placed proprietorship within reach of workers.<sup>122</sup> “If I had any money I would look out for a business for myself,” admitted Yit Yung the cook of his ambition in this respect.<sup>123</sup> Many European furniture factory workers became bosses as well, but did not have the same opportunities as Chinese workers because most European factories, particularly during the twentieth century, involved much larger capital investments.<sup>124</sup> The idea of having businesses for themselves may have been more familiar to Chinese workers, too, that is, given the agricultural backgrounds of most. Indeed, as historian Kent Deng has described, a feature of China’s economic development from the fourteenth century was the “entrepreneurialisation of the peasantry.”<sup>125</sup>

Some in the factories also spoke of unclear distinctions between bosses and workers in daily factory life. Ying Sing said that he was one of five partners in the Sun Hap On and Co. factory on George Street in the 1890s, but that he also worked there as a sandpaper man.<sup>126</sup> Low Wing, a partner in the Sun Tong War and Co. factory on Sussex Street, described similar. “I was a cook ... I also used to measure and cut up the timber,” he said in 1901.<sup>127</sup> This kind of engagement between bosses and workers was in contrast to what historian Wellington Chan has called the “Chinese Confucian benevolent authoritarianism” that typified the running of Shanghai’s so-called “Four Great Companies”: department stores opened by successful Chinese Australians in the early twentieth century.<sup>128</sup> It was also unlike the “well-defined chain of command” attributed to Chinese miners by historian Barry McGowan.<sup>129</sup>

Workers seldom discussed native-place ties on-record, although these too helped work against pronounced class divisions within Sydney’s Chinese furniture industry. In the late nineteenth century, as Mei-fen Kuo has pointed out, Chinese businesses in Sydney, including furniture factories, operated on native-place bases: bosses and workers usually came not only from the same Delta counties but also from the same towns and families.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, Chow Kum’s factory employed workers from the same “village of fighting men,” according to at least one local government official in Sydney.<sup>131</sup> During the twentieth century, when commercial organisation of this kind became less prevalent, and native-place ties became less important, Chinese national identity probably also took precedence over class for some workers. Certainly, Sydney’s Chinese newspapers appealed to workers’ sense of Chinese nationalism when criticising racialised

119. Lay Jong’s Testimony, 12 December 1891, *NSWRC*, 393.

120. Charles Lum’s Testimony, 26 October 1914, Charles Lum Bankruptcy, 4.

121. Sun Sing Loong’s Testimony, 388.

122. See *NSWRC*, 475–81.

123. Yit Yung’s Testimony, 163.

124. E. J. Forbes and Sons had £20,000 start-up capital, see “Notes and Comments,” *SMH*, 28 April 1911.

125. Kent Deng, “A Critical Survey of Recent Research in Chinese Economic History,” *Economic History Review* 53, no. 1 (2000): 1–28.

126. Ying Sing’s Testimony, 28.

127. Low Wing’s Testimony, 3 November 1901, Tin Yow, Low Wing Bankruptcy, 13655–10/23338/14814, 69–70, *NSWSR*.

128. Wellington Chan, “Personal Styles, Cultural Values and Management: The Sincere and Wing On Companies in Shanghai and Hong Kong, 1900–41,” *Business History Review* 70, no. 2 (1996): 141–66.

129. Barry McGowan, “The Economics and Organisation of Chinese Mining in Colonial Australia,” *Australian Economic History Review* 45, no. 2 (2005): 119–38.

130. Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia*, 17–51.

131. *NSWRC*, 481.

legislation, encouraging antipathy between Chinese and European factory workers in the same way that European labour activists did, detracting from the notion of a “working class.”<sup>132</sup>

Still, workers did engage in industrial action, yet this too contradicts the image of a “servile” underclass within the factories, although no workers discussed this on-record, either. In 1908, the “Sai-ga-Hong” (西家行) – the Chinese woodworkers’ union of 300 members – called a strike. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Chinese factory operators sought to make workers cover the increasing costs of factory accommodation and food, so they struck, holding out for two months before resuming work without this expense, and the right to elect their own foremen.<sup>133</sup> Judging by the number of workers involved – nearly half of those in Sydney – it necessitated considerable cross-county cooperation and a significant degree of “working-class” consciousness.<sup>134</sup> Chinese workers also ignored exhortations by Sydney’s Chinese-language newspapers at the time not to emulate “lazy” European trade unionists.<sup>135</sup> When workers attempted to affiliate with the Trades and Labor Council in Sydney in 1908, however, they were refused.<sup>136</sup> Lack of support by European trade unions was also seen when Melbourne’s Chinese factory workers launched several strikes years earlier, and even the Chinese workers of Sydney were unsupportive: a number went south to replace the striking Melbourne workers in 1903.<sup>137</sup> Industrial action among Chinese factory workers in Australia was considered novel around the world during this period and was reported on in Chinese migrant destinations such as Singapore as having been directly influenced by the Australian labour movement.<sup>138</sup> Nonetheless, as historians Him Mark Lai and Russell Jeung have noted, employers’ (*dongjia*, 東家) and employees’ (*xijia*, 西家) organisations were quite active in the Pearl River Delta counties, and in the United States, in this period.<sup>139</sup>

## Conclusion

Chinese furniture factory workers’ reflections on their lives in Sydney were far more complex than the allegations of European labour activists, and the counterclaims of Chinese elites. These workers identified with numerous conceptions of expertise: “skilled” and “unskilled”; traditional and modern; Chinese and European; blue-collar and white-collar. Likewise, workers reported varied rates of pay and hours of work. Low earnings by European standards were common, as were long working weeks, but these compared favourably to standards in China and were made yet more appealing by employer-subsidised factory accommodation and meals. Workers also reported increased earnings and decreased working hours over time, both being enabled largely by industrial legislation and immigration restrictions. Social class was a similarly complex aspect of Chinese factory workers’ experiences, according to them. Several spoke of a high degree of social mobility and unclear distinctions between employers and employees on the factory floors. Native-place ties and Chinese factory workers’ strikes complicated the issue of class even further.

The complexity of workers’ statements reveals a vibrant, dynamic and distinctive working culture within the Chinese factories. This culture appears to have centred on the counties of the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong because most workers described their lives with reference to their homes there. They also spoke with little apparent concern for key labour movement ideas about

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132. Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia*, 215–56.

133. “Chinese Strike,” *SMH*, 8 April 1908; “The Chinese Strike,” *Evening News*, 9 April 1908; “The Ranks of Labour,” *Evening News*, 8 July 1908; “Second Round of Strikes” (罷工二紀), *TWT*, 21 March 1908.

134. *FSA Report 1908* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1909), 36.

135. “Woodworkers’ Strike Ends” (木匠罷工後業), *Chinese Australian Herald* (廣益華報) (hereafter *CAH*), 27 June 1908; “Second Round of Strikes” (罷工二紀), *TWT*, 21 March 1908. Both the *CAH* and *TWT* also criticised strikes by Chinese factory workers in Melbourne in 1903, see “Woodworkers Strike” (木行罷工), *TWT*, 14 November 1903; “Chinese Woodworkers Strike” (華人木匠罷工), *CAH*, 21 November 1903.

136. “Chinese Strike,” *SMH*, 8 April 1908.

137. Markus, “Divided We Fall,” 1–10; Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, 43.

138. “Chinese Labour,” *Straits Times*, 17 October 1911.

139. Him Mark Lai and Russell Jeung, “Guilds, Unions, and Garment Factories: Notes on Chinese in the Apparel Industry,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* 21 (2008): 1–10.



appropriate working conditions, especially in relation to their rates of pay. At the same time, however, Chinese workers framed their experiences like European workers, drawing on European notions of skill in particular, indicating that this Chinese factory working culture also incorporated vital elements of the labour movement's struggle for workers' advancement.

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