A wretched voyage

The transport of the Chinese miners to Australia was a lucrative trade for the Captains of the British, American and Dutch ships. They set out to carry as many Chinese passengers as possible on each voyage. When the goldseekers finally joined their ships, which were to make the voyage to Australia between November and March to avoid the monsoons, the sight of the ship's Captain and crew was, for most, the first contact they had ever had with Europeans. It was a wretched passage. They were treated very badly, being required to sleep on deck or head to toe in bunks that were little better than narrow shelves in the hold of the ship. Often the Chinese were confined below decks because the uneducated crews were terrified of these strange people. The Captains were worried that the sailors would mutiny as they were outnumbered by the Chinese and feared for their own safety.

Due to the crowding and confinement, many of the Chinese lost their lives onboard or arrived at their destination dying from eastern diseases such as fevers or dysentery. The number of deaths was so scandalous that the British Consul of Amoy recorded that on one ship the lack of supply of good food and water had led to the loss of 70 Chinese in a few days. He also noted that a ship named the *Glentanner* had recorded a frightening number of Chinese deaths[1]. Thereafter the British Consul tried to set ruled laying down strict standards for the passage, which were to be maintained by the ships. Of *the different nationalities, the American ships undoubtedly were the cleanest*[2]. The ship's Captains were keen to make the run from Hong Kong to Australia as fast as possible, and the need for speed was even more important for the ships that supplied food to the Chinese as part of the fare. If the passage was a quick one, the Chinese would not consume as many rations, and the Captain could retain an extra profit.

Trouble in Victoria

The ships originally sailed to port Phillip in Victoria where the Chinese disembarked and set off on foot to the goldfields. However the Chinese soon became unpopular due to their numbers, different appearance and habits. This was in spite of there being many other foreign nationalities mining in the goldfields. Angry mobs shouted and threw things at them when they disembarked at the Melbourne wharves[3]. The Victorian Government bowed to pressure in 1855, by passing the Victorian Government Act 35 which limited the number of Chinese that could be carried on ships to one passenger for every ten tons of the ship's weight[4]. The Act also imposed a £10 poll tax to be paid by the ship's Captain for each of their Chinese passengers on landing at a Victorian port and levied a heavy duty on Opium[5]. This poll tax posed a problem for the Captains. They could not offload their passengers at Port Phillip Bay without incurring this cost and possible being fined for carrying too many passengers. Meanwhile the Captains were filling ships and there were more Chinese sojourners signing up to loans and waiting with their agents to join the ships in Hong Kong. The Captains needed a place to drop their human cargo that was close to the Victorian goldfields. They had considered off-loading the goldseekers in New South Wales, but tales were told of trouble with cannibalism amongst the aborigines. This was one of the

[1] Sprengal Wilf; *Robe's Chinese Invasion*, 1986, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 5

[2] Smeaton, Thomas Drury; *Our Invasion by Chinese*, 1865 (when he was Manager of the Robe branch of the Bank of South Australia), Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

[3] Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page 121

[4] Bermingham, Kathleen; *The Fourth of Eleven Tales of Robe*, 1973, Kathleen Bermingham, Robe, South Australia, page 25

[5] *Influx of the Chinese*, supplied by the South Australian Archives Department, 1941 from noted by HD Melville, Subcollector of Customs & Harbour Master 1856-1868, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

reasons that South Australian government was more amenable as they allowed they Chinese to land free and charged only 5% ad *valoreum* duty on their Opium[6].

Disembarking in South Australia
The first strategy was to land the Chinese at Port Adelaide, where the poor unfortunates undertook a journey of more than 700km. They first followed the Tolmer's Gold Escort route, via the Adelaide Hills, Wellington, then through the middle of arid country to Tatiara, Scott's Woolshed at Bordertown, Little Desert, and then over the border and on to Castlemaine and Bendigo. However, they found the tracks confusing and there were long staged where no water was available as there were no roadside wells or watering holes. They tried an alternative route via the Coorong, which while it took longer, the track was more frequented by bullockies and other travelers and there were inns and shanties along the way. They dug wells to ensure a supply of water for themselves and their country men who followed. Chinese wells can still be found along the Coorong and there is a good example at Chinaman's Well.

South Australia's Port
Robe was proclaimed as South Australia's third port on 13 February 1847[7]. By 1856 Robe was South Australia's second major colonial wool export port. To prepare for its growing importance as a port, Robe had built a second, much improved jetty in 1854 and erected a 40 foot shipping marker, the Obelisk, in 1855, to guide ships through the limestone reefs into the port. Local entrepreneur, George Ormerod was establishing himself as a shipping magnate, and had founded the Ormerod Shipping House, a Bond Store for wool, and built Moorakyne House fore himself and the Ormerod Cottages for his workers. Responding to export demand, the South Australian government had appointed Henry Melville the Harbour Master and Received of Wrecks to oversee the orderly conduct of the port and the management of customs. At this time the inhabitants of the township of Robe numbered between 100 and 200 persons with the town's settlement stretching from Hagen Street to Union Street, and from Victoria Street to what is now Lord Syleham Street.

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[6] *Influx of the Chinese*, supplied by the South Australian Archives Department, 1941 from noted by HD Melville, Subcollector of Customs & Harbour Master 1856-1868, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered
[7] *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, 1995, District Council of Robe, Millicent Print, Millicent, South Australia, pages 25-28