

Chinese Miners at Greenstone Creek and Sir Garnet Creek

Chinese Tin Mining Camps

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In 2002-03 the undisturbed remains of two mining camps, partly obscured by regrowth forest, were independently discovered in Tasmania's north-east. Both sites were subsequently excavated by archaeologist Parry Kostoglou, with funding provided by Forestry Tasmania. The excavated artefacts are now lodged with the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.



Greenstone Creek Chinese mining camp, after excavation, 2003.

The first camp was located 4.5 kilometres west of Moorina on the banks of Greenstone Creek. The second camp lies 6 kilometres south-east of Pioneer, beside Sir Garnet Creek. Scattered Chinese artefacts lying among the leaf litter on the forest floor indicate that both sites were occupied, at least for a time, by Chinese miners working the nearby creeks for tin.

What does the archaeological and archival evidence reveal about the lives of these miners? Does

it shed light on who they were, where they came from, why they came to Tasmania or what their life in Tasmania was like?

Mining records show that at least six Chinamen, Gong Yean, Kip Yen, Ah See, Lee Loon, Lee Ning and Lou Chung, held mining leases along Greenstone Creek for short periods in the 1880s. The Greenstone Creek mining camp, including the remains of a small hut, was situated on land leased by Gong Yean for 12 months in 1880. It is likely that some or all the Greenstone Creek Chinese miners occupied this hut at some time.¹

The Sir Garnet Creek mining site is spread over two adjoining mining leases owned by Kee Heu between 1906 and 1915. Each mining lease contains the remains of a small hut. The Chinese miners working for Kee Heu at Sir Garnet Creek have not been identified.²

All the Chinese leaseholders named Canton (today's Guangzhou) as their place of birth on their naturalisation certificates. These certificates also listed the ships on which they arrived in Tasmania: Gong Yean came on the *Ingles* in 1868, Kip Yen and Kee Heu on the *Mangana* in 1879, Lou Chung on the *Flinders* in 1879 and Ah See on the *Mangana* in 1881.³

What drove these men from their homes in the Pearl River delta region of southern China to this remote and largely undeveloped part of Tasmania in the late nineteenth century?

At the time, southern China was beset by overwhelming political and social unrest and plagued by widespread famine. The endemic violence and poverty forced huge numbers of men to leave their families and seek work overseas. During the 1850s and 1860s, several thousand flocked to the Victorian and New South Wales gold fields. Following the discovery of alluvial tin along the Ringarooma and Boobyalla Rivers and their tributaries in the 1870s, a number of Chinese miners also ventured to Tasmania. Previous to the discovery of tin, north-eastern Tasmania had been largely unexplored by Europeans and was very sparsely populated.

The majority of Chinese migrants coming to Tasmania were sponsored by their clansmen or by Chinese agents such as Chin Kaw at Launceston. In return for their fare, they were contracted to work on low wages for several years. Others were actively recruited as cheap, reliable labour by European mine owners such as Sam Hawkes at the Arba mine at Ruby Flats near Bransholme. Most, although not all, were young men (Kip Yen at Greenstone Creek was an exception, being 50 years old when he left China). Presumably some were already married and had children although Chinese families did not accompany their men overseas.

Only a very few Chinese miners became successful enough to send for a Chinese wife and raise a family in Tasmania. Some Chinese miners did marry local girls, however. There is no indication of a female presence at either the Greenstone Creek or Sir Garnet Creek mining camps, but it is known that after Kip Yen left Greenstone Creek, he became a storekeeper at Moorina, married an Anglo-Saxon woman and together they had three children.⁴

Although few Chinese miners originally intended to settle overseas, quite a number ended up spending many years in Tasmania. The eventual fate of Kee Heu is unknown, but by the time he surrendered his Sir Garnet Creek mining lease in 1915 he had been in Tasmania for 36 years.

Unfortunately, while it was the wish of most miners to return to China before they died, quite a number are buried in Tasmania, including Ah See, one of the Greenstone Creek miners, who was interred at Carr Villa on 19 November 1926.⁵

Only 13 Chinese were listed in the 1871 Tasmanian census. In 1881, however, when Gong Yean was working his Greenstone Creek lease, there were 844 (mostly in the north-east), and in 1891 there were 901 listed. Between 1886 and 1896, the Chinese outnumbered Europeans on the tin fields of the north-east.⁶

By the 1900s, Chinese miners were mostly self-employed or working for Chinese mine owners such as Kee Heu, owner of the Sir Garnet Creek lease. By 1906, after 27 years in Tasmania, he could afford to acquire substantial tin mining interests along tributaries of the Wyniford River, all linked directly to the large water race he owned. He employed several Chinese miners to work his Sir Garnet Creek lease until 1915, after which it was transferred to European miners who continued working the lease until 1925.⁷

The Chinese population on the tin fields fell rapidly in the 1900s, due in large part to low tin prices and, for the first time in Tasmania, legislation restricting the entry of adult Chinese males. Many miners returned to China or moved to the Victorian goldfields. Some settled in Launceston and other large Tasmanian towns as market gardeners, merchants and laundry men. By 1915, when Kee Heu surrendered his Sir Garnet Creek lease, only about 30 Chinese still lived in the Ringarooma district. By then, most of the accessible alluvial deposits were exhausted and miners were increasingly forced to work deep leads or strip marginal deposits using mechanised equipment.

How did the Chinese miners at Greenstone Creek and Sir Garnet Creek spend their days at their remote mining camps, isolated in an alien country by cultural and language barriers and surrounded by an unfamiliar landscape?

Although the Greenstone Creek miners began working only a few years after the first influx of Chinese miners to the north-east, the Chinese community was sufficiently well established by then to enable them to lead similar lives to the ones they had lived at home. The archaeological evidence indicates they ate familiar foods, lived in modest, typically Chinese dwellings and relaxed by smoking tobacco and opium. At least occasionally they visited the nearest Chinese settlement to stock up on Chinese supplies and utensils and relax with fellow countrymen. These findings are consistent with the experience of Chinese miners at other sites in Australia and North America, and suggest that trade networks, supplying familiar foods, beverages and smoking material exclusively to the Chinese, operated between China and Australia by the late nineteenth century.⁸

These settlements, at Branhholm, Moorina, Weldborough (Thomas's Plains), Garibaldi and Gladstone (Mount Cameron), consisted of clusters of ramshackle wooden buildings erected on crown land. They provided a commercial, social and religious focus for the Chinese miners working in the surrounding bush, enabling them to purchase Chinese supplies from Chinese merchants and maintain their cultural traditions and sense of community. Apart from special celebrations, such as the New Year's Day fireworks, the Chinese miners had little interaction with the European community.

In the 1870s most Chinese miners worked on 'tribute' for European mine owners, receiving a fixed price for their tin in return for exclusive rights to mine the lease (in contrast to the European miners who usually worked for wages). However, the depressed price of tin in 1879 caused many European miners to desert the north-eastern tin fields for the newly discovered goldfields at Lisle near the Tamar Valley. Throughout the 1880s, many Chinese miners, including Gong Yean and the others at Greenstone Creek, seized the opportunity to buy these abandoned leases. The leases they purchased were mostly small (20 acres or less) and tended to be on the more isolated tributaries of the main rivers, such as the Greenstone Creek, a seasonal tributary of the Ringarooma River.

The remains of only a few simple tools and minimal infrastructure at Greenstone Creek and Sir Garnet Creek suggest the miners at both sites were engaged in alluvial mining. They used picks and shovels to wash alluvial gravels to a slurry, rakes and shovels to pass the slurry through sluice boxes, and buckets to collect the concentrated ore as it settled in the bottom of the sluice boxes. The ore was then probably bagged and carted on pack horses over perilous hand-cut paths to Boobyalla, from where it was shipped to Launceston.

Mining infrastructure at Sir Garnet Creek was slightly more substantial and included a water race and mine shaft. In addition the Sir Garnet Creek miners had forge facilities to repair damaged mining and domestic tools and equipment.

Living conditions at Greenstone Creek and Sir Garnet Creek were rudimentary, with few creature comforts. That the miners wasted little unnecessary expense or effort on their accommodation is hardly surprising given they probably intended to be in Tasmania only temporarily.

The archaeological remains reveal their huts were built on sloping hillsides above the mine workings. They were small (4.5 x 2.5 metres or less) one-roomed wooden-framed buildings constructed from locally-felled timber. All had tamped-earth floors, stone footings, a stone hearth and drains around some parts of the perimeters of the buildings. There is little evidence of furniture, although the remains of an iron bed were uncovered at Greenstone Creek. The size, design and construction are typical of vernacular dwellings found in rural areas throughout southern China. Similar huts were recorded by Helen Vivian in her 1985 survey of Chinese sites in Tasmania's north-east

and at many nineteenth-century Chinese sites elsewhere in Australia and North America.⁹

All huts had at least one glass window. At Greenstone Creek the walls and roof were clad with split palings and shingles. However, the Sir Garnet Creek huts were built after 1900, when sheet and ripple iron had become readily available. In place of shingles, the Sir Garnet Creek miners opportunistically flattened kerosene tins and riveted water pipes, and used scraps of ripple iron for the roof cladding.

As both Greenstone Creek and Sir Garnet Creek are seasonal watercourses, the Chinese miners needed to collect and store water during the summer months. At Sir Garnet Creek, water was diverted from the water race situated uphill into a circular man-made depression near one of their huts. Fragments of a large globular jar probably used for water storage were found in the bottom of this pit.



Soy sauce jar found in felled tree stump at Greenstone Creek Chinese mining camp, 2003.

Their diet was seemingly well-balanced, including fresh meat and vegetables, preserved Chinese foods and a variety of canned and bottled European foods and sauces. The archaeological evidence suggests their preferred beverages were tea, Chinese beer and rice wine, and bottled European beer, Schnapps and gin.

Dried and preserved foods dominated their diet, much as they would have done at home in southern China. A variety of utilitarian, mass-produced brown, glazed ceramic containers, including large globular jars, spouted jars and liquor bottles were found at both Greenstone Creek and Sir Garnet Creek. Similar storage vessels have been found at contemporary overseas Chinese sites throughout Australasia and North America. It is thought foods such as preserved eggs, vegetables and bean curd, salted radish and garlic, pickled lemons and oil were transported and stored in these containers.¹⁰ When emptied, most containers were tossed into the nearby rubbish dumps and only occasionally appear to have been reused. Preserved Chinese foods were occasionally supplemented with European tinned produce.

The large globular jars possibly held a beer-like brew, or perhaps soy sauce or preserved goods such as eggs. At Sir Garnet Creek, one of this type of jar was re-used for water storage.

Numerous intact and fragmentary spouted jars, commonly referred to as soy sauce bottles, were found at both sites. These dark brown, glazed bottles possibly contained soy sauce but also might have held other liquids such as vinegar.

Liquor bottles, also called Tiger whiskey and Mao Tai bottles, stored Chinese liquor used for both cooking and drinking. These bottles were made in three parts and glazed in various shades of brown.

The Sir Garnet Creek miners enjoyed a greater variety of preserved foods. Possibly the range of imported goods had increased in the Chinese settlements by the 1900s, or perhaps the mine owner Kee Heu could afford expensive foods. Storage vessels found only at Sir Garnet Creek include small green, glazed jars, sometimes called

ginger jars, and a large, wide, barrel-shaped vessel. It has been suggested that the green, glazed jars contained more luxurious foodstuffs such as preserved ginger.¹¹



Ceramic vessels found in rubbish dump, Sir Garnet Creek Chinese mining camp, 2004.

Possibly the miners grew their own vegetables, although no gardens were positively identified at the mining sites. A flat area of land near one of the Sir Garnet Creek huts, apparently cleared in historic times, might have been a garden. The Chinese were known as enthusiastic gardeners.

Surprisingly, only a couple of cow bones and no chicken bones were uncovered from the sites. However, rabbit traps found at Sir Garnet Creek and ammunition at Greenstone Creek suggest

that local game contributed a protein source.

Meals were cooked at stone hearths, and prepared using European metal utensils which were bought locally. Fragments of Dutch ovens, frypans, enamelled 'billy' cans and a kettle were found at the sites.

At both sites, miners ate from distinctively Chinese tableware, only occasionally resorting to European tableware. (A small number of European serving dishes and cups were found at both sites. These might have been used by the Chinese miners, although both sites were occupied or visited by European miners after the Chinese left.) The tableware is generally poor quality porcelain with a light bluish-green celadon glaze. Chinese porcelain wares found at both sites included spoons, liquor cups, tea bowls and rice bowls. At Sir Garnet Creek the assemblage also included teapots and large serving bowls.

This type of tableware is common on nineteenth-century overseas Chinese sites. According to Muir, 'there seems to be a distinctive range of forms that were used by the overseas Chinese in Australia, New Zealand, the USA and south east Asia, including bowls, spoons, teacups, liquor cups and teapots. It is thought they were manufactured at Swatow, a port on the south China coast'.¹² Traditionally Chinese in form, decoration and function, they are quite different from the porcelain ware exported from China for the European market.

While the Chinese porcelain was generally undecorated, brightly coloured overglaze polychrome porcelain fragments were recovered from both sites. A few liquor cup fragments, decorated with a simple green and pink floral design, were excavated at Greenstone Creek, while serving bowls, decorated with the 'Four Seasons' pattern, were found at Sir Garnet Creek. This pattern is one of the most common overglaze patterns found on overseas Chinese porcelain. According to Smith, bowls with 'the 'Four Seasons' design are considered more expensive'.¹³ An almost identical bowl found is illustrated on the Asian American Comparative Collection web site.¹⁴

Two cylindrical white porcelain teapots were found at Sir Garnet Creek, one is undecorated while the other is highly decorated with an unidentified pattern. According



Conserved Chinese overglaze porcelain vessels found at Sir Garnet Creek Chinese mining camp. Left, 'Four Seasons' bowl, right, decorated teapot.

to Muir, 'serviceable and beautiful teapots were desired by southern Chinese people, and they could often be the most expensive and treasured kitchen item a family owned'.¹⁵

Most of the ceramics were found as small fragments, and the collection requires detailed examination to establish the range and frequency of different forms and decorative styles. Some items have degraded marks on their base – were these made up to imitate traditional marks, or do they offer clues about the place and date of manufacture?

Opium related artefacts found at both sites suggest the miners frequently relaxed by smoking opium. Excavated opium paraphernalia included a pipe saddle (part of opium pipe), a glass opium lamp, opium tins and ceramic pipe bowls in two varieties, red earthenware and less commonly dark grey inscribed with Chinese characters. In addition many medicine bottles were recovered, perhaps 'Hatton and Laws' cough medicine provided an alternative supply of opium?

While living conditions might have been rudimentary, our Chinese miners treasured their few personal possessions, keeping them in locked wooden trunks. Personal items found at the sites include coins (possibly used as gambling tokens), a European inkpot, a clock mechanism and various Chinese locks.

In conclusion, the archaeological evidence suggests that, in many respects, the Chinese miners lived a typically Chinese life in the Tasmanian bush that changed only slightly over time. They built modest traditional dwellings, ate Chinese foods from Chinese tableware whenever possible and relaxed by smoking opium and drinking alcohol. From time to time, they gathered in the local Chinese settlement to purchase Chinese supplies, socialise and celebrate festivals. They were remarkably self reliant, forced by circumstances and tradition to lead an isolated life with limited social or industrial interaction with European miners.

At first glance, their material possessions are similar to those found on contemporary overseas Chinese sites elsewhere in Australasia and North America. Regional differences may be revealed by a more detailed examination of the family relationships and the material remains.

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- ¹ Parry Kostoglou, *Archaeological Excavation. Greenstone Creek Historic Chinese Tin Miners' Camp*, Archaeological Services Tasmania, Report to Forestry Tasmania, 2003, pp. 10-12.
- ² Parry Kostoglou, *Archaeological Excavation. Historic Chinese Tin Miners' Camp Sir Garnet Creek*, Archaeological Services Tasmania, Report to Forestry Tasmania, 2004, pp. 15.
- ³ Kostoglou (2003) p. 19; Kostoglou (2004) p. 22.
- ⁴ *Tasmanian Pioneer Index 1803-1899*, Kep Yen and Elizabeth Woods had three children between 1886 and 1890; Kostoglou (2003), p. 19.
- ⁵ Kostoglou (2003), p. 19.
- ⁶ R Hunt, *Social life on the tinfields of North East Tasmania 1874-1930*, Bachelor of Arts, Honours Thesis, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1981; B V Easteal, *The Chinese in Tasmania, 1870-1900*, Bachelor of Arts, Honours Thesis, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1966, p. 44.
- ⁷ Kostoglou (2004), p. 22.
- ⁸ Lindsay M Smith, 'Identifying Chinese ethnicity through material culture: archaeological excavations at Kiandra, NSW', *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, 21, 2003, pp. 24-25.
- ⁹ Helen Vivian, *Tasmania's Chinese heritage: an historical record of Chinese sites in North East Tasmania*, report to the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 1985.
- ¹⁰ Anne-Louise Muir, 'Ceramics in the collection of the Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne', *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, 21, 2003, p. 44.
- ¹¹ Muir, p. 46.
- ¹² Muir, p. 43.
- ¹³ Smith, p. 27.
- ¹⁴ Wegars, P, 'From Old Gold Mountain to New Gold Mountain: Chinese archaeological sites, repositories and archives in western North America and Australasia', *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, 21, 2003; Wegars, P, *Asian American Comparative Collection*, <http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/LS/AACC/index.htm>, 2003.
- ¹⁵ Muir, p. 46.