

Handprints in the Archives: Exploring the Emotional Life of the State

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Using Certificates of Exemption issued by the government of Australia from 1901 to 1958, this article explores how official immigration records can be used to document the emotional life of the state. As part of the government's efforts to discourage Asian migrants from settling permanently in Australia, the 1901 Immigration Act required new arrivals to pass a dictation test in order to be admitted. Those born in Australia, or domiciled there at the time the act was passed, could apply for an exemption from the test if they departed the country temporarily. If approved, residents received a Certificate of Exemption, which they were required to present upon their return. The certificates contained detailed biographical information, identifying photographs and handprints. In exploring how these certificates were used by the state to regulate Chinese migration to and from Australia, including the movement of young children, this article demonstrates how official documents can reveal the deep insecurities that animated the administration of exclusionary immigration policies in the early twentieth century.

À partir des certificats d'exemption délivrés par le gouvernement de l'Australie de 1901 à 1958, l'article ci-après traite de la façon dont on peut utiliser les archives officielles de l'immigration pour rendre compte de la vie affective de l'État. Dans le cadre des efforts du gouvernement visant à dissuader les migrants asiatiques de s'établir en permanence en Australie, la loi de 1901 sur l'immigration a exigé des nouveaux venus qu'ils se soumettent à une dictée pour être admis. Ceux qui étaient nés en Australie ou qui y étaient domiciliés au moment de l'adoption de la loi pouvaient demander d'être exemptés de cette épreuve s'ils quittaient le pays temporairement. Si leur demande était agréée, les résidents recevaient un certificat d'exemption qu'ils étaient tenus de présenter à leur retour. Ces certificats contenaient des renseignements biographiques détaillés, des photographies identificatrices ainsi que des empreintes digitales. En examinant la manière dont ces certificats ont été utilisés par l'État pour régir la migration chinoise à destination et en provenance de l'Australie, y compris les déplacements des jeunes enfants, cet article montre comment les documents officiels peuvent révéler

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les insécurités profondes qui animaient l'administration de politiques d'exclusion en matière d'immigration au début du XX^e siècle.

THE INSPIRATION for this article came from what I initially thought of as a “curiosity”: two small, discrete impressions of a child’s handprint in a government file preserved at the National Archives of Australia (NAA) in Sydney (Figure 1).¹ The prints belonged to Yee Koon On, aged five years old. He submitted them to the Customs Department as part of the federal government’s requirements for non-European residents who wished to depart the country temporarily and be exempt from the exclusionary dictation test. These certificates, and the application process, served to track and regulate the movement of Chinese residents and other non-Europeans to and from Australia. Imprinted on the applications for Certificates of Exemption, the prints were meant to fix the identity of the travelling individual—child or adult. Handwritten inscriptions on the certificate indicate that Yee sailed to Fiji on August 28, 1957. Upon his presumed return to Australia, his hands would have been verified against the prints on file to ensure that he was indeed one and the same, not someone trying to gain access to the country through fraudulent means.

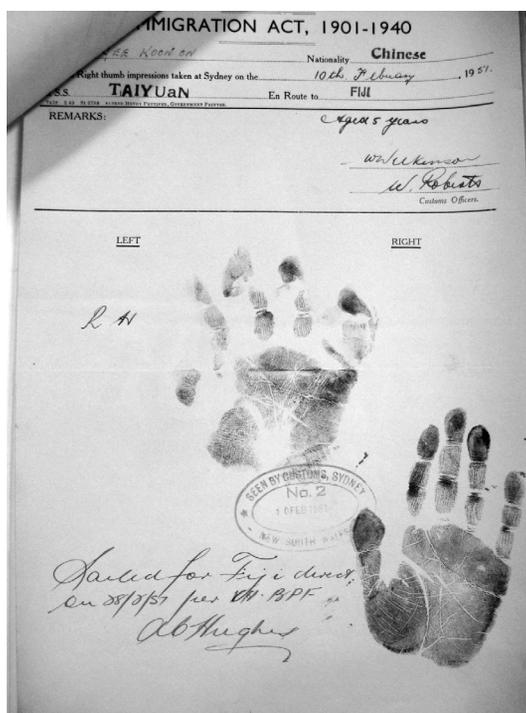


Figure 1: Certificate of Exemption from Dictation Test for five-year-old Yee Koon On. Source: National Archives of Australia, Sydney.

¹ Author’s Research Journal, July 14, 2010.

As I thought through the workshop's call for papers and the idea that different sources might "facilitate particular modes of inquiry in the study of migration and transnationalism," my mind flashed back to this image, and I wondered where starting with the handprints as a source might lead me. Approaching records in search of potential questions is a rather unorthodox way of pursuing historical research, one that opens itself up to all kinds of possibilities, as well as all kinds of conflicting aims and intellectual dilemmas.² What, for instance, is the most interesting question that can be asked of a single set of records?

Some potential research avenues appeared more obvious than others. The regulation of migrant bodies through the lens of Foucauldian biopolitics, in which the state's control of the physical body simultaneously creates and enhances normative values as well as state authority, was perhaps the most obvious line of inquiry.³ The handprints in the archives certainly lent themselves to analyses of how, from the late nineteenth century, official power sought to manage the movement of people across borders through various regulatory regimes.⁴ Fingerprints and handprints, not to mention the current use of DNA and blood testing, became an important element of this regulatory work. Given the close association of fingerprints with various forensic investigations and the use of criminality to create normative values, a key aspect of how biopolitics operates, the notion of a forensic history also presented itself as a possible line of inquiry.⁵

The term forensic comes from the Latin, *forēnsis*, meaning "of, or before, the forum." There are two modern usages and definitions: the first, as a form of legal evidence; and the second, as a kind of public presentation. Unlike forensic anthropology or forensic medicine, growing fields that have benefited from significant popular attention, forensic history has only been explored in very cursory ways. Robert Williams refers to history as a "crime scene investigation" in which historians play "the role of a detective, perhaps even a medical examiner."⁶ He argues further that "forensic historians examine cases that are relevant in a court of law or in public discussion and debate," but then concedes that there is "as yet no real field of forensic history."⁷ Nevertheless, the idea of forensic history, as a philosophical approach to uncovering and presenting evidence from the past, seeps into discussions of historical work in subtle ways. Historian Antoinette Burton, for instance, conjures up the notion of forensics as a way of

2 Katherine Biber writes, "[A] photograph is *proof*, but only when we begin with a problem, or a doubt. We must already have a question." See *Captive Images: Race, Crime, Photography* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 14. I think the same applies to other kinds of source materials.

3 Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (New York : Picador, 2003).

4 See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (London: Picador, 2010) and *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (London: Picador, 2009).

5 Norms are not inherent to any given society but, rather, are created through the terms by which societies define both crimes and punishment. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House LLC, 2012).

6 Robert C. Williams, *The Forensic Historian: Using Science to Reexamine the Past* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2013), p. 1.

7 *Ibid.*

addressing digital ephemera.⁸ Ewa Domanska makes a related suggestion: “[I]f the remains are described as evidence, it is only natural that the archaeologist who excavates them, the anthropologist who examines them, and the historian who writes about them should play the part of detectives.”⁹ Although an exploration of biopolitics in early-twentieth-century Australia and the production of a forensic history of migration that would re-create the work of officials seeking to regulate the movement of migrants were both compelling avenues of research, in the end I opted to pursue a different line of inquiry based on the scope and complexity of the regulatory process. Specifically, what did the production and preservation of handprints reveal about the emotional life of the state and the anxieties that underpinned the operation of exclusionary immigration regimes under the White Australia policy? My focus was therefore on the racialized aspects of the history of exclusion, though the records certainly offer the possibility of examining anxieties relating to the gender and marital status of migrants.

In recent years, transnational historians such as Madeleine Hsu and Kate Bagnall have made great strides in demonstrating how Chinese migrants pursued lives beyond the narrow confines of the nation state. They have demonstrated how what was once perceived as a linear trajectory from arrival to assimilation and integration was in fact more complex, in that Chinese migrants maintained multiple loyalties and ties.¹⁰ Connections with family, village, clan, and commercial networks helped migrants overcome exclusionary legislation and shaped the permanency of their residence in white settler societies. Heeding Bagnall’s observation that the development of “administrative processes” in pursuit of a White Australia “was an iterative process, where officials responded to the actions of Chinese and Anglo-Chinese Australians who, in turn, responded to and negotiated changing legislation and government policies,” I thought it best to consider how the handprints in the archives might reveal something about the emotions that animated this iterative process.¹¹

Prompting my interest in the emotional life of the state was the question of why a government would invest time, money, and resources to record and preserve migrant handprints, including those of young children. Chinese infants were processed in the same way as adults at a time when middle- and upper-class

8 Antoinette Burton refers to the need for an “investment in forensics and a deep-seated faith in the capacity of science to read certain types of archives (corpses, crime scenes, DNA samples) that are highly material and embodied, in contrast to or perhaps in tension with the ascendancy of the kind of virtual space that Internet access has accelerated.” See *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 5.

9 Ewa Domanska, “The Material Presence of the Past,” trans. Magdalena Zapędowska, *History and Theory*, vol. 45, no. 3 (October 2006), p. 344.

10 Madeleine Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Kate Bagnall, “Paper Trails: Anglo-Chinese Australians and the White Australia Policy” (paper presented at the 5th WCILCOS International Conference of Institutes and Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies Chinese through the Americas, May 16-19, 2012, Vancouver).

11 Kate Bagnall argues that, for Chinese Australians, complying with the requirements for the Certificates of Exemption from the Dictation Test was a way for a Chinese father to demonstrate to authorities that “he wished to abide by and comply with the regulations, suggesting perhaps that he was less likely to try to dupe officials by substituting a different child for his own or by selling his own child’s papers” (“Paper Trails,” p. 1).

reformers perceived childhood for white children as a special time of innocence.¹² What was at stake? What mood compelled federal officials to record handprints upon residents' temporary, and sometimes permanent, departure from Australia? Using the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed's understanding of fear as an explanatory mechanism for the behaviour of individuals as well as that of the state, I use the handprints in the archives to investigate the emotions that animated the regulation of Chinese migration to Australia at the turn of the twentieth century. Ahmed suggests that fear "works to align bodily and social space: it works to enable some bodies to inhabit and move in public space through restricting the mobility of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed or contained."¹³ I contend that fear about the future health of the Australian nation compelled officials to record the handprints of its Chinese residents, including very young children.

By introducing emotion as an analytical framework through which to explore the taking of handprints, this article connects the emotive discussions that characterized introduction of the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act* and the requisite dictation test with the messy and inconsistent administration of exclusionary regulations in practice. The fragile nature of the exemption system and the anxiety with which it was administered are revealed not only in debates in the House of Representatives, but crucially—in terms of the sources that shape the writing of migration history—in the diversity of the surviving records, which demonstrate the far reaches of a regulatory system that subjected Chinese residents—young and old—to the state's inquiring gaze.

The 1901 Immigration Act

In 1901, Australia became a federation. One of the first acts passed by the new Commonwealth government was the *Immigration Restriction Act*, which established the foundations for the White Australia Policy and defined admission policies to the country until the 1970s. Fear about the impact of continued Chinese migration to Australia prompted introduction of the bill and its most exclusionary elements. This fear took many forms: fear about the domestic labour market, fear about miscegenation, and fear about the future of the nation as a white settler society if migration from Asia was not curtailed.

The fear that underpinned the introduction of exclusionary legislation is evident from the debates that accompanied the bill's passage in the House of Representatives. In discussions of the bill, Representative Samuel Mauger (Melbourne Ports), once president of the YMCA and an active social reformer, referred to the "alarming fact that there are something like 100,000 Chinese, Japanese, and other alien races in Australia." He recounted how, upon a recent visit to the "northern part of Queensland," he had been "alarmed not only at the great number of aliens who are making inroads in all trades, but who are intermingling

¹² See Shurlee Swain, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Ellen Boucher, *Empire's Children: Child Emigration, Welfare, and the Decline of the British World, 1869-1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 70.

with the European races there. One has only to visit the public schools to see that the very contamination and deterioration [referred to in the debate] are taking place in Queensland to an alarming extent.”¹⁴ He insisted that the issue was not only one of “colour” but of “alienship”: “We have something like 800,000,000 Chinese and Japanese, within easy distance of Australia, from whom we have to fear contamination.” Even positive characteristics attributed to Chinese labourers became a mark against their admission because of the fear triggered by their very presence. Representative V. L. Solomon suggested that it was “not so much the vices or the uncleanness [*sic*] of the Japanese, Chinese, and Malays that we have to fear, but rather their virtues, if I may put it so, their industry, their indomitable perseverance, their frugality, and their ability to compete against European labour.”¹⁵ Mr. William Knox, the representative from Kooyong, referred to Japanese and Chinese migration as a danger “which is insidiously growing into the life” of the country.¹⁶ The language used to describe the potential impact of migration from China and other parts of Asia, that of a “danger” or “threat” of an “insidious” nature, reveals the profound anxiety that surrounded introduction of the *Immigration Restriction Act*.

Some members deliberately played on societal fears to advance their cause. George Reid, who would become the fourth prime minister of Australia in 1904, suggested, “[T]hose who in Australia seem able to view this matter with much calm indifference would, I think, if the matter were brought closer home—if they were living near some Chinese den, and their children were exposed to any sort of contact with the persons to whom I refer—find that all their stoicism would give [*sic*] way.” Reid was referring specifically to the Chinese, whom he called a “most uneducated and vicious people.” Reid reflected the sentiment of many in the room when he declared firmly,

[W]e have fully made up our minds that the current of Australian blood shall not assume the darker hues. This is not a matter on which there is any room for discussion. That has been the feeling of the people right through, and no man can misunderstand it. There is not a single man who can sit in this House and say that he is a representative of the people of Australia while he does not share these sentiments.¹⁷

Central to the exclusion of Chinese migrants, and a cornerstone of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, was the requirement that non-European migrants pass a dictation test. If migrants were unable to correctly reproduce a short passage, they were refused entry. The idea of the test was hotly debated, as many representatives feared that it was insufficient to the task of limiting the numbers of migrants to Australia. Representative Watson worried about the fact that educated migrants from Asia would still be able to arrive. He argued, “[W]ith the Oriental, as a rule,

¹⁴ Australian House of Representatives, *Hansard*, Second Reading of the Immigration Restriction Bill, September 6, 1901, <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au> (accessed July 1, 2014).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, September 26, 1901.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, September 6, 1901.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 25, 1901.

the more he is educated the worse man he is likely to be from our point of view. The more educated, the more cunning he becomes, and the more able, with his peculiar ideas of social and business morality, to cope with the people here.”¹⁸ This sentiment was echoed by Representative King O’Malley, who declared the “educated Chinaman” to be “the very worst we can have in the community.”¹⁹ Moreover, Representative Alexander Paterson argued that the bill simply provided “an incentive to Chinese and Japanese to learn the English language in order to gain access to Australia.”²⁰

Despite fears that the dictation test would be ineffective in preventing arrivals from China and other parts of Asia, it was ultimately included in the final version of the *Immigration Restriction Act*. Upon their arrival in Australia, migrants were required to take the dictation test. In 1905, the Act was amended so that the test could be administered in any language. It did not have to be in English, though it often was. The following are two sample passages of the dictation test administered under the terms of the *Immigration Restriction Act*:

The tiger is sleeker, and so lithe and graceful that he does not show to the same appalling advantage of his cousin, the lion with the roar that shakes the earth. Both are cats, cousins of our amiable purring friend of the hearthrug, but the tiger is the king of the family.

Ice and snow cover the Poles, which are not father from the sun than we are, but which the sun’s rays reach them slantwise, and are stopped by such a thickness of air that not enough of them reaches the surface of the earth at the Poles to keep them warm.²¹

If migrants failed the test, their entry was denied. This enabled Australian authorities to discourage certain classes and races of prospective migrants, including Chinese seeking to build on the fortunes of earlier generations of migrants from China who had sought wealth in the goldfields of the Victorian coast. According to official statistics, the test was administered 805 times in 1902 and 1903. Forty-six people passed and were permitted entry. It was administered 554 times over the next five years, and only six people were successful. There were no successful examinations after 1909.²²

The Chinese (and other non-Europeans) domiciled in Australia were exempt from the dictation test, which remained on the books until 1958. If they travelled abroad, they could obtain a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test (CEDT) upon their departure from Australia. This certificate protected them from having to undergo the dictation test upon their return, as long as they came back

18 *Ibid.*, September 6, 1901.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, September 26, 1901.

21 National Archives of Australia [hereafter NAA] (Canberra), A1, 1935/704, 45774, *Test passages. Immigration Act 1901-33*, File No.1. [Dictation test], “Test Passages, From 1st July to 31st December, 1941.”

22 New South Wales Migration Heritage Centre, <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/objectsthroughtime/immigration-restriction-act> (accessed July 3, 2014).

to Australia within three years. The exemption acknowledged the presence of a permanent Chinese populace in the country; however, authorities were determined to limit the size of this community.²³ The dictation test was key to efforts to curb new migration, and any loopholes were cause for anxiety. As a result, whenever Chinese residents travelled from Australia, officials worried about the integrity of the country's immigration program. Given the well-known trade in illegal documents, they feared the very real possibility that the person who left Australia would not be the one who returned or that the departing resident would attempt to bring a spouse, child, or children upon his or her return.²⁴ As one historian observes, "[T]he paranoia of Customs officials about fraudulent entry was not entirely without reason. Some cases ... were plain attempts (sometimes successes) at deceit."²⁵

Applying for the CEDT required the provision of personal, biographical information such as name, address, and age. Officials added descriptions about the physical traits of the applicant, such as hair and complexion colour, in addition to any distinguishing marks. The certificates also listed the dates of issue and departure, ports of embarkation, destination, ship, date of return, as well as the arriving ship and port. Applicants were required to submit two photographs (full frontal and side profile) and a print of their left hand. They also had to pay a fee of 1£ and submit two character references in support of their application. Although there is no description of a handprint requirement in the 1902 regulations, it appears as part of the proposed 1906 regulations. The requirement for prints was certainly in place by 1910.²⁶ Reflecting an intensification of the bureaucratic scrutiny of migrants in the early twentieth century, the requirements for a CEDT became more stringent as the years progressed. Initially, certificates were issued to all residents who left Australia temporarily, permitting them to return within a certain time period. Clause 3n of the 1901 Act allowed anyone previously domiciled in the Commonwealth to return. According to Julie Stacker and Peri Stewart, "[T]his clause was repealed in December 1905 and replaced by section 4B, which allowed the issue of a CEDT to people of good character who had resided in Australia for five years."²⁷ By 1917, residents also had to submit four photographs, double the original requirement.

The Customs Department created two copies of each certificate. The first one was given to the individual travelling from Australia and was to be presented upon

23 Those who were not "domiciles" or residents were issued a Certificate of Exemption. These certificates did not require photographs, and the category of exemption and the period of validity were simply written in. Upon the expiry of these certificates, the travelling migrant could apply to have another one issued.

24 There was an active industry in China and Hong Kong dedicated to the provision of false identity documents to enable migrants to gain entry to Gold Mountain countries that would otherwise be closed to them. See Elizabeth Sinn, *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration and the Making of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012). On the New Zealand context specifically, see Sean Brawley, "No 'White Policy' in New Zealand: Fact and Fiction in New Zealand's Immigration Record, 1946-1978," *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 27, no.1 (1993), pp. 16-36.

25 Bagnall, "Paper Trails," p. 11.

26 NAA, <http://www.naa.gov.au> (accessed June 20, 2013).

27 Julie Stacker and Peri Stewart, *Chinese Immigrants and Chinese-Australians in New South Wales* (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 2004), p. 39.

re-entry. The second was retained at the port of departure for comparison with the certificate presented upon the resident's return. A third version was maintained in a book of certificates, which listed details about the document issued but did not contain photographs, handprints, or any other documentation. When residents returned, officials would compare the certificate each carried with the one retained at the port of entry. In doing so, officials were literally reading the bodies of the people in motion to ensure the authenticity of those who presented themselves for readmission.

Reading the Sources

The National Archives of Australia holds a large collection of Certificates of Exemption from the Dictation Test, of which more than 16,000 have been digitized and are available to the public online. This article is based on a small, representative sample selected on the basis of age, gender, and geographic origin of the applicant. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the records as a whole, and the selection in particular, is that, despite the uniformity and standardization implied by the terms of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, they are very diverse. There is wide variation in terms of the individual biographies and travel itineraries captured in the documents. There are also many inconsistencies and discrepancies in how officials recorded residents' prints and their movements. The selected examples hint at the diversity evidenced in the larger collection of digitized certificates. This diversity is central to understanding the fragile nature of the regulatory system and the anxiety that shaped its operation in practice.

On March 28, 1907, Gue Lun and her son Edward, both listed on the Certificate of Exemption from Dictation Test as Chinese nationals, departed Cairns on the *Taiyuan*, returning on the *Changsa* two and a half years later. Identified as the wife of Sam Sing, Gue Lun was 33 years old at the time she left Australia and was described as having an "ordinary" build. The certificate (Figure 2) carried two portrait images of Gue Lun, as required by the regulations, one in side profile, the other a full frontal. Gue Lun is almost smiling for the camera. Her hair is fashionably styled, and she wears accessories in her updo as well as a string of pearls and decorative ribbon around her neck. The back of the certificate indicated that she would be "accompanied by her son Edward, born at Cairns, 6th March 1904." Although the certificate indicates that the requisite 1£ fee was paid, there are no prints on the certificate. On this occasion, Customs officials deemed that neither Gue Lun nor her son Edward were required to provide prints.

By contrast, Ah Lie and her infant child Robert James were documented to a much greater extent when they left Australia for China in the same year. Ah Lie was 33 years old when she departed Cairns and, like many other Chinese residents, was identified as having black hair, brown eyes, and a "sallow" complexion. The photographs affixed to her certificate (Figure 3) show a handsome woman, pearl earrings clipped to her ears and the collar of a ruffled blouse just visible above the photograph's edge. Scrawled in red, across what was once a pristine certificate, is handwriting that indicates that the certificate was later extended for three years beyond the initial expected date of return. The intense, if somewhat incoherent,

Not paid at Cairns 2/10/07 #800/

For No. 21. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA. No. 07/43.
 DUPLICATE Immigration Restriction Acts 1901-1905 and Regulations.

CERTIFICATE EXEMPTING FROM DICTATION TEST.

I, William Howe Irving the Collector of Customs for the State of Queensland in the said Commonwealth, hereby certify that Gue Lun wife of See Chin hereinafter described, who is leaving the Commonwealth temporarily, will be excepted from the provisions of paragraph (a) of Section 3 of the Act if he returns to the Commonwealth within a period of three months from this date.

See other side of this certificate.

Date of departure 28th March 1907 Destination China

W. H. Irving
 Collector of Customs

DESCRIPTION

Nationality Chinese Birthplace Canton
 Age 33 years Complexion Dark
 Height 5' 6" Hair Black
 Build Slender Eyes Brown

Particular marks: All

(For impression of hand see back of this document.)

PHOTOGRAPHS

Full Face —  Profile — 

Date of departure 28th March 1907 Destination China
 Ship Taiyuan
 Date of return 2 July 1909 Ship Changsha
 Port Cairns

Customs Officer

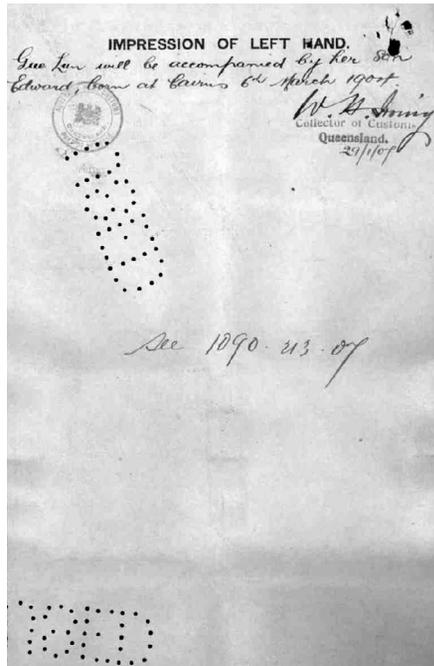


Figure 2: Name: Gue Lun and child Edward – Nationality: Chinese – Birthplace: Canton – departed for China per TAIYUAN on 28 March 1907, returned to Cairns per CHANGSHA on 2 July 1909, J3136, 1907/43, 9089879. Source: NAA (Brisbane), Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (CEDT).

For No. 21. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA. No. 07/436
 DUPLICATE Immigration Restriction Acts 1901-1905 and Regulations.

CERTIFICATE EXEMPTING FROM DICTATION TEST.

I, William Howe Irving the Collector of Customs for the State of Queensland in the said Commonwealth, hereby certify that Ah Lie wife of See Chin hereinafter described, who is leaving the Commonwealth temporarily, will be excepted from the provisions of paragraph (a) of Section 3 of the Act if he returns to the Commonwealth within a period of three months from this date.

See other side of this certificate.

Date of departure 11th Dec 1907 Destination China

W. H. Irving
 Collector of Customs

DESCRIPTION

Nationality Chinese Birthplace Canton
 Age 33 years Complexion Dark
 Height 5' 6" Hair Black
 Build Slender Eyes Brown

Particular marks: All

(For impression of hand see back of this document.)

PHOTOGRAPHS

Full Face —  Profile — 

Date of departure 11th Dec 1907 Destination China
 Ship Taiyuan
 Date of return 31st Dec 1907 Ship Taiyuan
 Port Cairns

Customs Officer

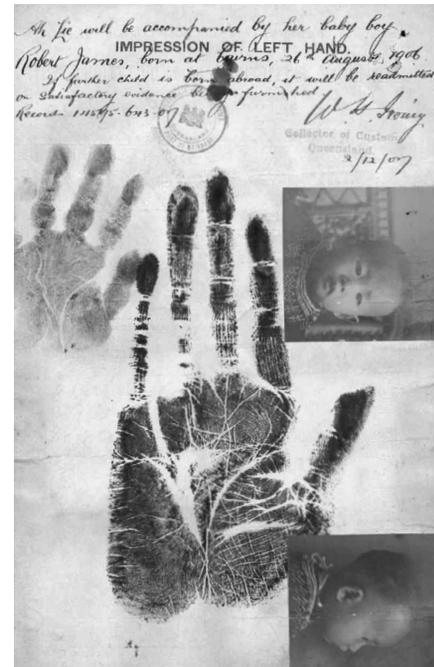


Figure 3: Name: Ah Lie (wife of See Chin) and child Robert James born at Cairns Nationality: Chinese – Birthplace: Canton – departed for China per SS TAIYUAN on 11 December 1907, 1907/426, J3136. Source: NAA, Brisbane, Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (CEDT).

documentation implied by the handwriting is affirmed in subsequent pages of the file. On the second page, for instance, two photographs of the infant Robert James are affixed to the certificate. In addition to the images, customs officials noted in the margins, “Ah Lie will be accompanied by her baby boy Robert James, born at Cairns, 26th August 1906.” The responsible official, W. H. Irving, further noted, “If further child is born abroad, it will be readmitted on satisfactory evidence being furnished.” Like his mother, infant Robert is photographed in profile and full frontal. His handprint and that of his mother are affixed on the same page. The last item in the file is the full frontal portrait of Robert James. On the back of the photograph, one Lee Chin affirmed, “I certify that this is the photo of Robert James. 23 October 1909.” The photograph, along with the handwriting, offers a reminder of the inconsistency with which officials administered the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*. If the surviving records are any indication, Ah Lie and Robert James were the subject of much more invasive scrutiny than Gue Lun and her son Edward.

The same kind of scrutiny attended Maud See Chin and her infant daughter Irene Lee Chin (Figure 4). Maud was identified as Australian born, a native of Townsville. She was 30 years old when she applied to depart Australia for China in 1915. Officials listed her nationality as “Chinese Half Caste” and recorded her height at 5 feet, 2 inches, with a “slight” build, providing the rote description of “sallow complexion.” Unlike other photographs in the series, Maud See Chin’s images, both the full face and profile, have her name handwritten along the lower



Figure 4: Name: Maud See & child Irene See Chin – Nationality: Chinese – Birthplace: Canton – departed for China per EMPIRE on 13 March 1915, returned to Townsville per NIKKO MARU on 1 August 1917, J2483, 174/30, 9110238. Source: NAA, Brisbane, Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (CEDT).

edge. Likewise, her daughter's photographs have her name, Irene Lee Chin, handwritten over the lower edge. In the profile image, Maud's hands are seen holding her 13-month-old infant-child upright. Irene's handprint appears alongside the image, but her mother's is nowhere on the certificate. Instead, the official, A. Booker, indicated, "HAND PRINT OF MAUD SEE CHIN—dispensed with." Despite the requirement to submit a print of the left hand, officials clearly made exceptions.

Older children received their own CEDTs. On June 27, 1906, a CEDT was issued to Willie Chen Chow (Figure 5). He was "about four years" old at the time, having been born on August 23, 1902. The usual two photographs were affixed to the application form. In recording his physical traits, the responsible officer listed his build as "very small" and his complexion as "brown." A "small flat scar on left cheek" was noted as a distinguishing characteristic. On the flipside, Chow's handprint was imprinted for future examination by officials. Of particular note, on the bottom of the form, handwritten notes indicated that his certificate was extended three different times. Chow did not return to Australia until 1917. The processing of Chow's application appears consistent with that of adult males departing from Australia. No exception was made for his young age.

In fact, the manner in which Chow's application was processed was almost identical to that of Yee War (Figure 6), who left Sydney on October 27, 1917. Born in Canton in 1869, Mar was 48 years old at the time of his departure, and customs officials described him as being of "medium" build with no distinguishing physical

Book No. 401
COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA No. 4134
Migration Restriction Acts 1902-1905 and Regulations.

CERTIFICATE EXEMPTING FROM DICTATION TEST.

I, William Howe Young the Collector of Customs for the State of Queensland in the said Commonwealth, hereby certify that Willie Chen Chow hereinafter described, who is leaving the Commonwealth temporarily, will be exempted from the provisions of paragraph 10 of Section 3 of the Act if he returns to the Commonwealth within a period of Three (3) Years from this date.

Date 27th June 1906 W. H. Young
Collector of Customs

DESCRIPTION.

Nationality Chinese Birthplace Brisbane
Age About 4 (Born 23/8/02) Complexion Brown
Height Very small Hair Black
Build Very small Eyes Dark Brown
Particular marks Small flat scar on left cheek
(For impression of stamp on back of this document)

PHOTOGRAPHER.

Date of departure 13th July 06 Destination China
Ship Eastern
Date of return 3 June 1917 for 3 years from 28/7/09
by Authority
Date of return 19/11/12 for 3 years from 27/6/12 by Authority
& Authority
Date of return 12/6/17 for 3 years from 28/7/12 by Authority
& Authority

Figure 5: Name: Willie Chen Chow – Nationality: Chinese – Birthplace: Brisbane – departed for China per EASTERN on 13 July 1906, returned to Brisbane per AKI MARU on 3 June 1917, J3136, 1906/139, 9089660. Source: NAA, Brisbane, Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (CEDT).

characteristics. He worked as a gardener in Sydney and had made one previous trip to China in 1911-1912. As the application forms were standardized, the only discernable difference between Chow's file and Mar's is that the former's is five pages in length, while War's runs to 29 pages. Unlike many of the surviving files at the NAA, War's file contains detailed character references. T. Arnold wrote, "I have pleasure in stating that I have always found Yee War honest and diligent during the five years I have had dealings with him and have no hesitation in recommending him." The mayor of Nyngan T. Linles concurred, declaring, "This is to certify that I have known Yee War for about 14 years and have found him a very honourable steady and good man in every way a desirable subject." A. M. Herrick added, "This is to certify that I have known the bearer Yee War fourteen years and have found him a very desirable subject he is strictly steady & honest & a good man in every way." War's file contains additional character references, no doubt due to his failure to provide a police report in the first instance. According to the correspondence in the file, this omission appears to have sparked concerns about War's character.

Of note is that War's file begins with his application to bring his wife and child to Australia in 1919, an application that was refused. His later undertaking "not to bring with me or to introduce into the Commonwealth of my return to the Commonwealth any relative who is not possessed of an unexpired or unrevoked certificate" therefore takes on additional significance, as do the numerous character references and validations of his portrait photographs. War also provided two sets of two images (a regulatory requirement by 1917); both featured a full frontal and a profile. In both he is wearing a shirt and coat, the length of a pocket watch visible in one. One set of images is closer than the other, somehow giving the impression of a difference in age. War looks much younger the further back he is

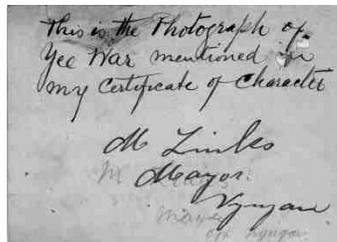
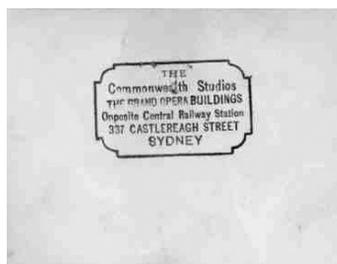


Figure 6: Certificate Exempting From Dictation Test and 2 left hand prints [box 109], SP42/1, C1919/4223, 1631035. Source: NAA, Sydney, Yee War [includes 6 photographs showing front and side views.

from the camera. To assuage concerns about the subject of the photographs, War had them certified by the mayor of Nyngan, who wrote on the back, “This is the photograph of Yee War mentioned in my certificate of character.” The application also featured a print of his left hand, as well as his thumb.

Ching Wah Foo was another resident who was subject to scrutiny similar to that experienced by Yee War. Like War’s file, Ching Wah Foo’s file is rather extensive and includes a number of character statements as well as the photographs and prints affixed to the CEDT (Figure 7). In November 1921, Ching Wah Foo told the Collector of Customs in Darwin that he wanted to return to China for three years. Ching was born in Canton in 1866 and had arrived in Australia in 1883. During his time in Australia, he worked as a gardener, waiter, and storekeeper. At the time of his application, Ching had lived in Darwin for eleven years, having returned to China twice in the interim (1891-1892 and 1896-1897). As part of his preparation to depart, he dutifully submitted two photographs of himself and signed the CEDT, as Yee War did, stating that he did not intend to bring any relatives with him upon his return. This statement is of note, because included along with Foo’s application are two images of a young boy named Chin Hong Foo. On the back of the images, photographer Chin Loong Trang certified the child’s identity with a written statement. Unlike the other cases discussed here, in which the child in transit was clearly related to the adult woman also departing Australia and in which the child’s handprints appear, it is unclear what relation Chin Hong Foo had to Ching Wah Foo.

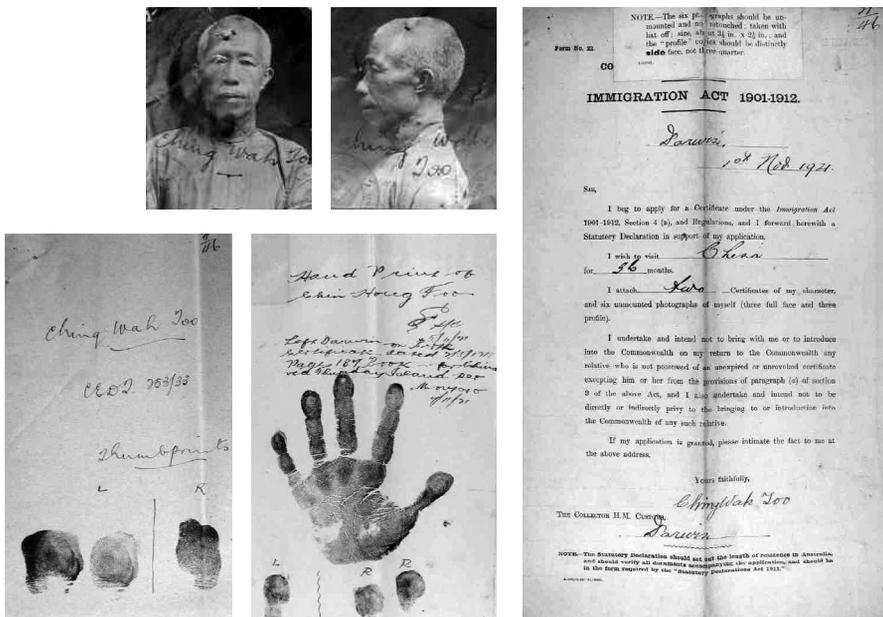


Figure 7: Certificate of Exemption from Dictation Test – Ching Wah Too, includes child Chin Hong Foo, E752, 1921/46, 1594922. Source: NAA, Darwin.

The mysterious documentation pertaining to Chin Hong Foo may explain, in part, why Foo's file is so extensive. For instance, the file includes a "Report by Police or Customs Officer on within Application." This requirement was standard, but few statements were retained in the surviving records. S. Hood, MC, made a full statement, declaring: "I certify that the within named Ching Wah Foo is a person of good character to the best of my belief. I know the persons whose signatures appear on the certificates of character. The photos attached and initialed by me are those of the application. 2 November 1921."

The certificate contains the requisite photographs (certified in the same manner as those of Ching Hong Foo) as well as copies of Foo's handprint, an imprint of his left thumb, and two copies of his right thumb. The accompanying forms indicate that he was born in Canton and was 55 years old, 5 feet, 2 ½ inches tall. He was described as "slight" of build, with a "sallow" complexion, grey hair, and brown eyes. The examining officer found no "particular marks." Foo departed for China on the ship *Victoria* on December 16, 1921. He returned August 11, 1922 on the *Eastern*, arriving at Thursday Island. When Foo returned, he provided his left and right thumbprints, which were recorded in the file. The Customs officer noted that the prints were "compared with Form 32 and found to agree." Upon his return, he also brought with him the photographs he had submitted in his initial application. A year in transit, however, had severely damaged the photographs. The inscription on the back (shown in Figure 7), confirming Foo's identity, was almost entirely erased. The eroded handwriting is a reminder of how fragile the system of regulating movement through the production of documents, photographs, and prints was in practice. Despite all of the government's efforts, the very documents authorities relied upon to protect the integrity of the immigration program were subject to wear, tear, and deterioration over time. The requirement for handprints and, in particular, the treatment of children under the *Immigration Restriction Act* provide not only evidence of the fragility of the exemption system, and provide further proof of the government's anxieties about successfully regulating the movement of Chinese people to and from Australia.

The insistence on fingerprinting non-European residents temporarily departing from Australia was the result of official insecurities about the capacity of immigration and law enforcement authorities to distinguish individuals from the masses in motion. These anxieties manifested themselves across the geographic spread of white settler societies. Concern about identification was especially pronounced in cases involving Chinese migrants. In 1883, a California detective by the name of Harry Morse suggested that Chinese migrants be thumb-printed in order to facilitate criminal investigations and curb admissions. This idea was supported by the local press, which later declared, "The thumb marks of Mon Shing, a Chinese laundryman, are more recognizable than his face."²⁸ Supporters approved of fingerprint identification in the belief that Asian faces were too similar

28 "Thumbs Down! The Latest Plan for Outwitting the Chinese," *San Francisco Daily Report*, September 19, 1885, p. 8, cited in Simon A. Cole, *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) p. 126.

for officials to distinguish.²⁹ A similar process took place after 1901 in Australia, where the amount of documentation required to obtain a CEDT, including handprints and fingerprints, began to increase incrementally. Handprinting, even as a fraught science, was central to the capacity of officials to render the bodies of migrants legible; which individuals were subject to fingerprinting reveals a great deal about whom authorities needed help reading.

The use of handprints and fingerprints to identify residents exempt from the dictation test emerged from a historic transformation in the culture and science around printing the body, specifically fingerprinting. In ancient times, fingerprinting was used as a kind of signature. “Modern fingerprinting,” which Chandak Sengoopta defines as a form of personal identification, originated with the British experience in nineteenth-century colonial India.³⁰ Informed by a widespread, embodied mistrust of Indians, William James Herschel, a British officer, demanded a handprint from Rajyadhar Konai on a contract he was negotiating. Herschel described the process as follows: “I dabbed his palm and fingers over with the home-made oil used for my official seal, and pressed the whole hand on the back of the contract, and we studied it together, with a good deal of chaff about palmistry comparing his palm to mine on another impression.”³¹

Significantly, Herschel pointed to an affective intent behind his request for the print. The procedure, he told Sir Francis Galton, was intended to “frighten the man” from backing out of his contract.³² Here, fear was used to intimidate the applicant. In Australia, fear was at the root of the very development of the hand and fingerprinting systems. Fingerprinting was seen as a way for officials to identify people in motion, but it also became a way to cast doubts about the Chinese character, which facilitated the pursuit of a White Australia from 1901 until the early 1970s. Even as the foundations of the White Australia policy began to crumble in the postwar period, the *Truth* newspaper in Melbourne called for the fingerprinting of the entire Chinese community in Australia. An editorial on April 4, 1954, read:

[F]or months, *Truth* has drawn attention to the shocking laxity in the Immigration Department’s supervision of the thousands of Chinese in Australia. There is an urgent need for the round-up of all Chinese in Australia. They should be fingerprinted, and have their credentials checked. Those who have no right here should be deported immediately. [Minister] Holt has said his Department does not have the power to fingerprint all the Chinese in this country. If the Minister were more aware of the menace of Chinese infiltration, he would make it his job to see Parliament gave him this very necessary power.³³

²⁹ Cole, p. 126.

³⁰ Chandak Sengoopta, *Imprint of the Raj: How Fingerprinting was Born in Colonial India* (London: Macmillan, 2003), p. 54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ NAA (Sydney), SP1122/1, N66/4906, 10921591, Box 219, Immigration File, Chinese migrant, “CHAN See Gou.”

As evidenced by this editorial, even as the White Australia Policy began to unravel, fingerprinting continued to be seen as a solution to the “problem” of the Chinese in Australia. The very call for universal printing suggested there was something amiss with the Chinese character. Even though universal printing was never introduced, the fear engendered by the prospect of large-scale migration meant that fingerprinting technologies were used far more liberally against the Chinese populace than against other migrants to Australia from the early twentieth century.³⁴

In fact, the government was so fearful of the potential impact of large-scale Chinese migration and potential fraud that, under the CEDT system, Chinese children were treated as adults, subject to the same regulatory and invasive processes as their more senior counterparts. This treatment exhibited a marked difference from how white children were treated in the same period. Childhood in Britain and among settler societies such as Australia, for instance, was considered by the middle and upper classes as a period “of innocence and dependence.”³⁵ This belief animated the work of child rescue societies and emigration organizations. Yet, as Shurlee Swain argues, “coloured children” were ignored by British child rescue societies because they did not share the same Anglo-Saxon heritage as their potential rescuers. She contends that, as “the size and spread of the child rescue enterprise grew, whiteness became a central organizing category with white children at risk in foreign territories enthusiastically ‘rescued’ while children of color resident in Britain were singled out as markers of disorder who had no clear future in the nation.”³⁶

More research is required on whether societies such as the Child Emigration Society and Dr. Barnardo’s Homes were interested in the welfare of the few Chinese children who resided in Australia at the time of federation. For now, it is possible to observe that there are interesting connections between the practice of handprinting Chinese children in the same manner as adult Chinese residents and treatment of the children rescued by emigration societies. In both cases, the malleability of children was assumed. Child rescue workers, especially those involved with emigration societies, believed that children could be plucked from unsavoury living conditions and transformed into “imperial labourers.”³⁷ The path from childhood to adulthood was a short one. Likewise, Chinese children resident in Australia were assumed to be capable of being involved in the same kind of documentation fraud as their adult counterparts. In both instances, children were understood as critical to the future health of the nation.³⁸ Fears about the

34 Arguments about the practicality of a universal printing requirement and a parallel set of moral imperatives meant that the government of Australia never adopted universal printing. NAA (Sydney), SP244/2, N1950/2/15040, 7299100, Box 152, “Chinese crew members who signed off or deserted from MV CALIFORNIA, MV CHINA and MV BAHREIN.”

35 Swain, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire*, p. 202; Ellen Boucher, “The Limits of Potential: Race, Welfare, and the Interwar Extension of Child Emigration to Southern Rhodesia,” *The Journal of British Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2009), pp. 917, 923.

36 Swain, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire*, p. 205.

37 Boucher, *Empire’s Children*, p. 123.

38 For a discussion of how childhood animated discussions of exclusion in the Canadian case, see Kristine Alexander, “Childhood, Race and Twentieth-Century Canada” (forthcoming).

demographic impact of Chinese families in Australia and the implications of rampant procreation provided the foundations for exclusionary immigration legislation and invasive technologies, such as the handprinting and fingerprinting required on the CEDTs.³⁹ Children caught up in this regulatory regime offer perhaps the most poignant evidence of how fragile exclusionary regulations were in practice and how extensive the state's fears were about its capacity to regulate and limit the growth of the Chinese population in Australia.

Conclusions

The Australian state of the early twentieth century was fundamentally fearful of Chinese residents of all ages, *en masse*. The federal government feared the potential impact of uncontrolled migration on the prospects of a White Australia; it feared its hopes for a new nation would be undermined by the presence of a large, resident Chinese population. These fears persisted throughout the twentieth century, despite the government's successful efforts to curb the numbers of Chinese migrants arriving in Australia after 1901. As Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell famously declared in 1945, if the nation was to survive, it would need to be populated with the right people or "perish." Calwell believed that Australia needed to settle large numbers of white migrants or risk being overrun by migrants from Asia.

Fear was at the heart of the White Australia project for the seven decades it was formally in place. Even the youngest of Chinese Australians departing the country for a temporary visit to China were required to submit their handprints to the state. Officials knew that these prints would likely change in the three years the children were permitted to be away and yet insisted on the prints regardless. How can this be explained? There is little practical reason, but, if one considers how fearful or "paranoid" customs officials were about ensuring only legitimate entries to the country, then recording children's handprints starts to make a little more sense.⁴⁰

Thinking about the emotional life of the state requires a close reading of the archival record, heeding the instances in which fear, concern, or anxiety are mentioned. It also requires reading the archival record in a creative way. Instead of limiting the analysis of the handprints in the archives to questions of biopolitics or the possibilities of forensic history, one can read the messy residue generated by the requirement to leave handprints and fingerprints. Doing so reveals a process that was far more complicated and subject to discretionary decisions than the regulations that governed the admission of entries to Australia might otherwise suggest. To understand the emotional life of the state, one must attend to the cluttered trail left by regulatory processes, rather than seeing discrepancies and differences as evidence of rational technologies at work.

In the mess of the archives, one can see the determination of immigration officials to safeguard the immigration program from abuse and prevent the future nation from being overwhelmed by undesirable migrants. This evidence is

39 John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), p. 51.

40 Bagnall, "Paper Trails," p. 11.

particularly acute in the case of child migrants, who were treated as adults capable of fraud. One can also see how difficult it was to administer the immigration program, given the fallibilities of photographic and fingerprinting technologies; it is easy to imagine the kind of insecurities engendered by the fragile system of documentation and regulation. What is less apparent is the fear that animated the creation of the regulatory regime in the first place. Here, one must rely on hints from the public discussions that attended the initial introduction of the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*. By returning to the origins of the program and observing the increasingly invasive identification technologies, we can better explain the appearance of handprints in the archives. More than anything, the handprints are a reminder of the emotion that underlay the regulation of Chinese residents in Australia from the late nineteenth century.

