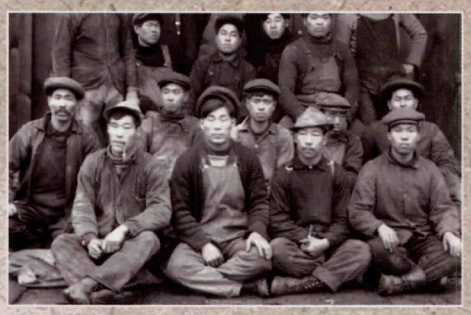





Boundless Plains to Share

Lost Years and the Chinese Diaspora

What is it like being a person of Chinese descent in the West? This is what Kenda Gee seeks to answer in *Lost Years*. But while the documentary offers an engaging chronicle of the diaspora from the mid 1850s to now, **Juliana Qian** – herself a Chinese-Australian – feels that it misses an opportunity to investigate the racism that persists today.

Lost Years (2011) is a feature-length documentary examining 150 years of Chinese diaspora across Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. It has been relatively successful, receiving nominations at the AMPIA Awards, the Gemini Awards and the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival in Canada, and winning Best Feature Documentary at the Rhode Island International Film Festival. I attended the Australian premiere, presented by Colourfest, in September 2013. Focusing on the genealogical journey of Kenda Gee, a fourth-generation Chinese-Canadian, the documentary was a perfect fit with the ethos of Colourfest as a film festival that focuses exclusively on diasporic and culturally diverse stories and supports a politics of self-representation.

The screening was prefaced with speeches that located the film more firmly in its Australian historical context. Hong Lim MP, state member for Clayton, spoke about the poll tax cited in the film and the successful lobbying by Chinese communities in Canada, the US and New Zealand for government apologies on this racially discriminatory tax. He mentioned that, during the gold-rush era, boats carrying Chinese passengers would land at Robe in South Australia to avoid the £10-per-person poll tax that was introduced in Victoria in 1855, and then the Chinese prospectors would walk 250 miles overland to the Victorian goldfields in Ballarat

and Bendigo. Sophie Couchman, curator at the Chinese Museum, began by acknowledging the role of Chinese migrants in settler-colonialism and the displacement of Australia's Indigenous peoples. She then gave a brief survey of the history of Chinese migration and Australian immigration laws from the mid 1850s to the early 1900s, when the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* was the first major piece of legislation enacted after Federation. Afterwards, Chris Lee, a family historian, spoke about the challenges and rewards of researching the life of her great-grandfather, who had arrived in Australia in 1856.

By the time the lights went down, my mind was already flicking through memories of other stories, photos, films and museums, and twinkling with thoughts of my own family, sprawled over three continents, stretched like dough handled by a noodle-maker – one long line twisting, looping, tossing, pulling.

Lost Years is a documentary with many threads. It looks at the experiences of early Chinese migrants in a system of racial oppression, the efforts of their descendants to uncover and honour their history, and the contemporary political struggle for acknowledgement and reparations, particularly in relation to the anti-Chinese poll tax. The documentary uses a variety of media – interviews; historical footage, photographs, newspapers and other artefacts; tours of notable sites; voiceovers; and several brief re-enactments – to build up sensory depth to the histories it presents. Yet while the film presents a compelling glimpse into the lives of early Chinese migrants and their enduring legacy, I was left wanting more extensive analyses of the intersections between racism, diaspora and settler-colonialism in the four countries, and more insight into how nineteenth-century policies resonate in contemporary politics and culture.

PREVIOUS PAGE, SECOND ROW, MIDDLE: DIRECTOR KENDA GEE WITH HIS FATHER **THIS PAGE, SECOND ROW, L–R:** *CHOP SUEY*; AZIE DUNGEY IN *ASK A SLAVE* **ALL OTHER IMAGES:** SCENES FROM *LOST YEARS*

The most effective of the film's re-enactments is part of a 'living history' tourist attraction. The filmmaker and his father visit the site of a laundry that employed Chinese labourers, where a historical interpreter in the role of a white manageress shows them the work and living quarters. As I watched her bark orders at the labourers and tell them they're filthy, I was compelled to reconsider the value of immersive historical education that re-creates traumatic and oppressive experiences. For instance, the comedy web series *Ask a Slave*, created by and starring Azie Dungey, reflects on the actress's experiences working as a first-person historical interpreter at George Washington's Mount Vernon plantation. The first episode draws from real questions that the actress was asked while portraying a slave character, such as 'How did you get to be the house maid for such a distinguished Founding Father?'[1] Living history exhibitions sit in an uncomfortable space between memorial and theme park, and while it's important to remember the past, I don't know that we're required to relive it, even within a controlled simulation. However, the laundry scene is much more powerful than the sepia-toned, soft-focus re-enactments staged elsewhere in *Lost Years*, which seem contrived and sentimental.

Following the site tour is an examination of anti-Chinese imagery, with a montage of newspaper comics and other historical material. The film shows a cartoon depicting a Chinese laundry staffed with slanty-eyed cats donning *queues* (the long single plait that was a common hairstyle for Chinese men in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). The screening elicited gasps from the audience, flabbergasted by the pointed visual caricature as well as the storyline that depicts the Chinese workers as sinister, opium-smoking kidnappers of women. I later researched the cartoon online. Called *Chop Suey*, it was made by Paul Terry and Frank Moser for Terrytoons studios in 1930. Re-watching the unabridged cartoon, I found myself genuinely charmed by the slapstick animation. I was intrigued that the Chinese characters included mice, cats, an elephant and a rhinoceros, while the non-Chinese characters were also mice – was this a subtle acknowledgement of diversity and a common humanity? Then a slanty-eyed cow

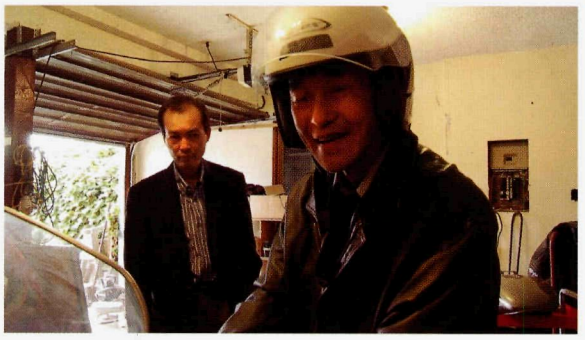
While the film presents a compelling glimpse into the lives of early Chinese migrants and their enduring legacy, I was left wanting more extensive analyses of the intersections between racism, diaspora and settler-colonialism in the four countries.

irons over a slanty-eyed mouse, flattening it into a dachshund; I laughed. Though it is presented within the documentary as evidence of a staggeringly racist past, I realised that the cartoon was intended as entertainment, not anti-Chinese propaganda. The racism that seems so overt now must have been commonplace in the media of the time, as I hope the racism that is normalised in today's media will become shocking to later generations.

If the film is a little too narrow in its politics, it is also perhaps too heavy in cinematic devices. At times, *Lost Years* feels a little weighed down with its myriad devices, as though desperate to authenticate the narrative from every direction. The film sparkles in the scenes in which enigmatic Chinese elders are given space to speak for themselves. One memorable interviewee, an ex-serviceman motorcyclist, proudly puts on his uniform and remains active in the poll-tax apology movement. Eccentric, bombastic and utterly charming, he epitomises a particular face of America in such a way that questions of assimilation or acceptance seem ludicrous.

Interwoven through the film is the director's own journey, retracing his great-grandfather's steps exactly a century earlier. Accompanied by his ageing father, Gee visits his family's ancestral village in Taishan, a coastal county-level city in southern China that has a population of only about one million today, but from which a large portion of the Chinese diaspora originated. Until the 1980s, Taishanese was the dominant language in US Chinatowns.[2] The Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo shows that the majority of gold rush–era Chinese arrivals to Victoria were also from the region around Taishan, and there's even a Toi Shan Restaurant in Bendigo that's been going since 1948, though it's changed location and owner.[3] I appreciated seeing Taishan on screen. It's a place that I've never been to, but it looms large in my imagination – after all, my own great-grandfather made the journey from Taishan to North America at roughly the same time as Gee's.

But I felt that Gee could have either delved deeper into his own family's story, or left it as a brief introductory footnote. As it is, his journey to Taishan seems like a structuring device that



> There is a tendency among minoritised groups to look at their own community only in relation to the dominant group. This results in a narrow view of history, and serves to reinforce the centrality of the dominant group as yardstick and mediator.

doesn't add much substance to the documentary. His connection to the subject is already palpable in the way he speaks to his great-grandfather's other descendants, the access they allow him into their lives and his tender treatment of the material. I am ambivalent, too, about the increasingly popular trope of the diasporic descendant's return to his or her ancestral home. I understand it's a story we can feel compelled to share, and I can empathise with the curiosity, hope, anxiety and visceral sense of connection that the return may bring. But while I don't doubt the authenticity of emotion that it raises, sometimes the internal dimensions of the journey are neither apparent nor interesting viewing. Gee's Taishan trip comes across as an attempt to anchor migrant stories to an origin and homeland in China, but the film's strength lies in the elaborate and tangled roots it finds in diasporic Chinese communities around the world.

What struck me most in watching *Lost Years* was how the doctrines of colonialism and racism pervaded and perverted the life and laws of so many places – how the system bolstered and perfected and reproduced itself. Chinese migration in the nineteenth century was triggered in part by European invasions. After suffering several humiliating defeats, China was forced to accept treaties allowing European powers to rain down tariffs and pump the place full of opium. The southern coastal regions around Taishan were among the most affected by land scarcity and civil wars. And then the labour of the Chinese diaspora was in turn used in white settler-colonies to displace indigenous peoples in North America, Australia and Aotearoa. For the most part, Chinese migrants bought the myth of these colonies as a land of plenty and opportunity, as empty land, without acknowledging or engaging with the fact that these opportunities were made possible by colonial theft.

The transcontinental railroad in the US is a salient example. The film shows how the railroad companies paid Chinese workers less than white workers and put them to work on the most dangerous sections. Reportedly, four Chinese workers died for every mile of rail that was built. The country's anti-Chinese laws in the 1850s and 1860s were relaxed to provide the railroad companies with a steady stream of Chinese workers, who at one point constituted 90 per cent of Central Pacific Railroad Company's workforce.[4] The bulk of the railroad's construction was completed in 1869, and in 1882 the US Congress passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, barring further Chinese immigration and denying naturalisation to Chinese people already in the US. It wasn't until 1943 – more than sixty years later – that the act was repealed. Disappointingly, the film doesn't explore how Chinese migrants interacted with settler-colonialism, though the railroad increased the scale and speed of invasion and settlement across Native American lands tremendously. Nor does it investigate how the railroads became sites of conflict between racialised[5]

groups. An executive of one of the railroad construction companies, Mark Hopkins, even advocated using African-American slave labour to break a Chinese workers' strike: 'A Negro labor force would tend to keep the Chinese steady, as the Chinese have kept the Irishmen quiet.'[6] While I can't fault Gee for what he didn't include, there is a tendency among minoritised groups to look at their own community only in relation to the dominant group. This results in a narrow view of history, and serves to reinforce the centrality of the dominant group as yardstick and mediator.

Most prominently, *Lost Years* could do more to illuminate the experience of migrants today. A few moments in the film struck me as potential openings for discussions on the injustices faced by Chinese workers and other groups, and how these issues continue to resonate in contemporary politics. In one scene, Gee visits a historical quarantine site and we learn from the site guide that a Chinese woman was in quarantine for twenty-two months because, as a woman travelling alone, she was suspected of prostitution. These days, laws that purport to save women from trafficking still criminalise migrant sex workers who aren't trafficked, and also result in racist policing of migrant and non-white women who aren't sex workers.[7] The film shows that labour unions, morality councils and women's groups united to prevent Chinese men from hiring white women, mirroring contemporary racist scaremongering about violent men of colour disguised as feminist concern, such as during the Cronulla riots.[8] Similarly, at the film's mention of suicide attempts in quarantine, I was reminded of Australia's current system of immigration detention in which refugees can be held indefinitely in what Pat McGorry has called 'factories for producing mental illness'.[9]

Instead, the film looks at the legacy of early Chinese migrants through the movement demanding apologies and reparations for the anti-Chinese poll tax – as Gee puts it, the film aspires to compel governments to 'own up to the past and make an effort to redress some of the injustices'.[10] Australia was the first country in the world to introduce anti-Chinese immigration legislation, beginning with the 1855 poll tax, and the only one of the four countries featured in the film that has not yet apologised. This is no surprise to me – racism has long been entrenched in Australian society and Commonwealth nations have traded policies of discrimination, exclusion and control throughout their histories, not only unapologetically but with great pride in their successes. What surprises me, however, is that I have no real wish for an apology. Not because what's past is buried, but because it's so far from over. Gee himself identifies this as one of his intentions for the film:

The first priority for us is that we hope viewers around the world get an appreciation of the past [...] the idea that we don't want to forget the past, because if we do, as Santayana once said, we're condemned to repeat it.[11]

But, for me, honouring my ancestors' legacy means keeping a keen eye for the injustices of the present. Immigration detention still punishes people of colour for daring to seek security. Political commentators still exacerbate fears of invasion and blame migrants for 'stealing our jobs', as though settler-colonial economies are not built on ongoing land theft. Mobilising around a tax levied upon nineteenth-century Chinese migrants seems like a distraction from challenging contemporary border violence and colonisation. So while the film documents a fascinating and underrepresented history, I can't agree with its assessment of our shared legacy and of where we should direct our calls for change. The poll tax is a primitive version of systemic racism that has since been redesigned into a sleeker and subtler machine. If the poll tax is a command-line interface, Australian racism in 2014 is iOS 7 – it's harder to see the workings, but it works very well.

http://www.lostyears.ca

Juliana Qian is a Shanghainese-Melburnian writer, performer and radio producer whose work has appeared on airwaves, stages and pages including Overland, Peril, *The Famous Spiegeltent, 3CR, Triple R and Joy FM.* **m**

Endnotes

1 *Ask a Slave*, web series, <http://www.askaslave.com/>, accessed 12 February 2014.

2 David Pierson, 'Taishan's US Well Runs Dry', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 May 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/may/21/world/fg-taishan21>, accessed 12 February 2014.

3 Barbara Nichol, 'Melbourne's Chinese Restaurants, Cafes and Cookshops (1830s–1950s)', Chinese-Australian Historical Images in Australia, Chinese Museum, 2005 (last modified 2009), <http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au/biogs/CH01148b.htm>, accessed 12 February 2014.

4 'Cultural Impact of Building the Transcontinental Railroad', The Transcontinental Railroad, <http://railroad.lindahall.org/essays/cultural-impacts.html>, accessed 12 February 2014.

5 I refer to *racialised* and *minoritised* groups rather than *racial* and *minority* groups to draw attention to how racialisation and minoritisation are active processes, not neutral descriptions of difference. These days, for example, people of Irish descent would usually be considered 'white', but historically have been considered racially distinct from white Anglo-Saxons. For further reading, see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, Routledge, London, 1995.

6 'The Chinese Workers' Strike', PBS website, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tcrr-strike/>, accessed 12 February 2014.

7 'Pub Cleared for Rejecting "Asian-looking" Women', *The Local*, 12 September 2013, <http://www.thelocal.se/20130912/50200>, accessed 12 February 2014.

8 For a further discussion of the gendered dynamics of the Cronulla riots, see Christina Ho, 'Muslim Women's New Defenders: Women's Rights, Nationalism and Islamophobia in Contemporary Australia', *Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 30, 2007.

9 Adam Cresswell, 'Call to Abandon "Factories for Mental Illness"', *The Australian*, 26 January 2010, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/call-to-abandon-factories-for-mental-illness/story-e6frg6nf-1225823428382>, accessed 12 February 2014.

10 Kenda Gee, quoted in Chad Soon, 'Talking about *Lost Years*', *The Morning Star*, 18 September 2011, <http://www.vernonmorningstar.com/entertainment/129993793.html>, accessed 12 February 2014.

11 Ibid.