

**'Chinese Labour and Capital in Western Australia, 1847-1947.'**

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of  
Murdoch University. 1991.

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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## Abstract

Prior to the 1970s historical writing on Chinese immigration and settlement in Australia presented Chinese as passive participants in a white economy. Since the 1970s, writers have changed this perspective and seen Chinese as active participants in the Australian economy. They have achieved this by exploring the economic, social and political relationships of groups within Chinese communities. This thesis examines the establishment, survival and decline of Chinese labour and capital in Western Australia between 1847 and 1947, investigating the economic, social and political relationships of capital and labour both within the Chinese community and between Chinese and white society.

Chinese indentured labour was recruited to serve as a docile, cheap and plentiful labour force for the pastoral, agricultural and pearling industries in the second half of the nineteenth century. Chinese labourers and domestic servants were subjected to official and unofficial controls aimed at creating and preserving a cheap and submissive labour force. This thesis argues that, far from passively accepting this imposed status, Chinese negotiated their position, utilizing strategies ranging from overt resistance to acceptance.

While controls over Chinese indentured labour were designed to maximise productivity, those introduced to govern 'free' Chinese immigrants were aimed at limiting productivity. Between 1886 and 1920, legislated restrictions limited the participation of 'free' Chinese in the Western Australian economy and confined Chinese business to specific industries which posed the least threat to white labour and capital: market gardening, furniture manufacturing, retail and wholesale trading and laundrywork. Chinese firms were small and labour intensive, and used low level technology. They were generally managed by owner/operators and were characterised by personalised labour relations and minimal division of labour.

Chinese firms were able to survive because they dominated their particular industry or specialist areas within it. They achieved this through adapting traditional skills to suit local conditions. The organisation of labour and personalised managerial practices helped firms retain staff, minimise costs and maximise productivity.

Chinese were active in their responses to controls and restrictions and met with some success, especially with State legislation. However, like Chinese in other States, they were unable to exert any influence over the Commonwealth government's Immigration Restriction Act, 1901. This Act resulted in severe labour shortages in Chinese-owned businesses which made it very difficult for them to continue operating. Without fresh supplies of labour to maintain production in labour intensive industries, it was inevitable that Chinese enterprise would lose its effectiveness in the sectors it was once dominant.

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## **Abbreviations.**

AA.            Australian Archives.



- SA. State Archives of Western Australia. currency of Singapore in the nineteenth century.
- \$HK. HongKong dollar.
- £, s, d. Sterling currency of Western Australia.
- CEDT. Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test.

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Map of Western Australia showing places of Chinese settlement

