

HISTORY



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The man who made his mark

Among many others, the Chinese Fortunes exhibition uncovers the fascinating story of a millionaire ahead of his time, Melbourne merchant Lowe Kong Meng.

If you visit the *Chinese Fortunes* exhibition at Ballarat's Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka, you will see a photograph of Lowe Kong Meng, one of Melbourne's most eminent merchants in the 1860s-70s.

Even with one elbow resting on a fiddly floral chair and one leg crossed over the other, this 32-year-old millionaire still manages to stand at ease with a delightfully louche and decidedly unhumble expression on his face. This is a rare feat, given that the picture was taken in 1863, an era when you were likely to find more relaxed poses in memento-mori pictures than in the stiff-living aristocracy of Melbourne.

Unlike his Sydney contemporary, the businessman Quong Tart, who was often photographed in striking three-piece suits, Kong Meng is wearing a comfortable silk tangzhuang. This suggests a man who couldn't give a flying fig about kowtowing to colonial expectations.

Our buildings are emblazoned with the names of famous colonialists, and yet I had lived my whole life in Melbourne without knowing about this legendary figure. The first Chinese face I saw in a school history textbook had no body attached. Instead, eight tentacles emanated from his chin, each clutching prohibited goods such as opium and white women, or carrying nefarious ills like "smallpox" and "customs robbery".

The Bulletin's 1886 "Mongolian Octopus"

cartoon taught me that the Chinese have always been perceived as a threat to Australia, and made me realise just how recently the White Australia set of policies had been dismantled. Even today, "good" Chinese are still depicted as hardworking, forever-grateful migrants while the "bad" Chinese are rich foreigners stealing our farming land and inner-city apartments, and siphoning baby milk off our shores.

This is why Kong Meng's story is so compelling: he was the latter kind of Chinese – he arrived here in 1853 wealthy and worldly instead of poor and desperate. Born in British Penang, and fluent in English, French, Malay and Cantonese, at the age of 23 he sailed to Victoria in one of his own ships.

A year later he had six ships sailing regularly between Australia, India and China trading in food, tea and opium (from China) and rice (from Calcutta). By the age of 28, he was importing shipments that would be worth almost \$10 million in today's money.

According to historian Paul Macgregor, Kong Meng's consignments of gold bullion to Asian ports rivalled the international financial exchange of the leading colonial banks, and by his early 30s his firm had branches in Melbourne, Mauritius, Hong Kong and London. This was not some hard-scrabble miner made rich by menial labour, but a man born into privilege and education. With his perfect English and his insistence on his

British citizenship, he moved in the highest political and business circles of Melbourne, and his colleagues included New York traders and members of the Shanghai American community.

When Kong Meng decided to marry, he didn't just marry anybody. He scored Mary Anne Prussia, a Tassie lass so resplendent that an official photograph taken of her at 24 at the Lord Mayor's fancy-dress ball seems to glow 150 years later. Dressed as "Night", with enormous shimmering moons and stars dangling from her six-layered floor-length gown, Annie looks every inch the sort of woman the "Mongolian Octopus" was prohibited from coming within a mile's radius of.

Kong Meng and Annie had 12 children, and photos depict their dapper little Eurasian sensations dressed like tiny lords and ladies. Unlike most Chinese, Kong Meng didn't live in the Chinatown district, but moved his family into grand homes in South Melbourne, East Melbourne and Malvern. When his daughter Agnes married, he gave her a mansion in Brighton as a wedding present.

He was prolifically active in the Chinese community: supervising clubs, settling disputes, helping men find work and urging them to respect British law. In 1859 he initiated

a petition against the £4 annual tax levied on every Chinese resident. In 1863, two foreign ambassadors representing the Emperor of China made him a Mandarin of the Blue Button for his efforts on behalf of Melbourne's Chinese community.

Kong Meng's political activism did not seem to put him out of favour with the Melbourne establishment. The *Australian News for Home Readers* published a long laudatory profile of him in 1866, noting his "liberality in contributing to various charitable institutions" and his "kind disposition and hospitality to strangers".

Despite his enormous wealth and success, his shoulder-rubbing with Melbourne's swankiest blue-bloods and his white wife, when racist sentiment soared, Kong Meng felt compelled to defend the Chinese. In 1879, in response to the Seamen's Strike against the employment of Chinese labour on ships, he and two other Chinese leaders penned a treatise appealing to "the reason ... the right feeling, and the calm good sense of the British population of Australia". At times, the treatise even resorts to seditious sycophancy:

"We felt sure that such an enlightened

people as the English, after having made war upon us for the purpose of opening China to Western enterprise, and of spreading European civilisation in eastern Asia, would eagerly welcome the arrival of some thousands of frugal, laborious, patient, docile, and persevering immigrants from the oldest empire in the world."

Perhaps Kong Meng felt he had more in common educationally and intellectually with the "enlightened English" rather than his "frugal" and "docile" brethren who were mostly poor farmers from southern China. But he wanted the British government to reciprocally apply the 1860 Peking Treaty to

(From left) Lowe Kong Meng is one of the intriguing characters featured in the *Chinese Fortunes* exhibition; Annie Kong Meng (nee Prussia) in 1863, aged 24.

allow Chinese migrants to enter British territories as it allowed the British to enter China. Of course, history shows that this did not happen.

Kong Meng grew increasingly troubled by the escalating anti-Chinese sentiment, but did not live long enough to see the passage of the laws that would herald the White Australia Policy. Even during his final year of life, he actively protested against anti-Chinese legislation during the 1888 anti-Chinese campaigns in Victoria and NSW. He died in his Malvern home, survived by Annie and his 12 children. An obituary in *The Argus* claimed that

"had he lived, it was contemplated to appoint him the Chinese consul-general for Australia, a position which as far as Melbourne is concerned, he had de jure long occupied".

In 1916, his son George tried to enlist in the army, but was rejected for not being "substantially of European origin". Replies from a sympathetic public flowed in to *The Argus*, beseeching the government to let him "serve with his fellow Australians at the front". They mention his brother, Sergeant Herbert Kong Meng, who was serving overseas, but above all they mention his father, "remembered by older residents as a gentleman of great public spirit, scrupulously honourable in all his dealings, and very highly esteemed by the citizens".

Lowe Kong Meng was buffered by his wealth and influence against the brunt of racism, but

after his death his children were not. Later photographs depict George and Herbert as soldiers for the Victorian Mounted Rifles, two handsome but solemn men sitting slightly apart from their group.

There is also a final photo of Herbert in gaunt old age, his face drooping and melancholic. He was discharged from World War I due to “senility”, which today would probably be recognised as post-traumatic stress. These men seem worlds apart from their earlier incarnations as the well-dressed little princes of a shipping magnate.

I look back again at the portrait of the proud man in traditional dress leaning against fussy colonial furniture and suddenly it seems that I am looking at a very recent photo. Lowe Kong Meng’s posture seems even a little modern-day ironic, his expression so self-assured that one can’t help admire his tenacity and vision.

Macgregor writes that Kong Meng’s “trading endeavours, his attempts to economically integrate Victoria with Asia, and his vision for Australian society are now becoming increasingly prescient”. Lowe Kong Meng was a global citizen before this kind of “identity” even existed in Australia.

Chinese Fortunes is at Ballarat’s Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka, January 28-June 25. made.org

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