THE ERRATIC COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AUSTRALIA AND CHINA
   By Eric Rolls
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INTRODUCTION

This lecture was delivered by Eric Rolls at the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory in November 1986, as one of a series of 'lunchtime entertainments'.

Eric Rolls is the distinguished author of a number of books, notably, *A million wild acres* and *They all ran wild*. He is currently carrying out research for a book dealing with the Chinese in Australia.

This lecture encapsulates, as far as is possible within the space of an hour, the results of his research, and presents a fascinating picture of a side of Australian society seldom seen by the average Australian.
THE ERRATIC COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AUSTRALIA AND CHINA

Australia and China, so geologists believe, lay side by side for three hundred million years. They drifted apart for millions more and now they are moving back towards one another at the rate of a few centimetres a year. Within imaginable time, anthropologists believe that the slight thin-boned Peking man sailed down to Australia in well-built rafts, mixed with a sturdy Indonesian people that were already here and engendered the Australian Aborigine.

So the earliest Chinese were an adventurous people. There is a strange concept that the Chinese were a race who stayed closely at home until stories of gold in California and Australia brought them out of isolation. The Silk Road, a trade route, opened into Europe through northern China two thousand years ago and Ch'ang-an, on the site of the modern city of Xian, became one of the world's greatest cities, busy with two million people of many nations, a centre for art as well as trade.

By the 7th century AD Chinese colonisers from the poorer parts of Fukien Province, always on the edge of famine, upset by rebellion and village squabbling, sailed eastward and settled Taiwan and other islands near it. Hakka boatmen began a regular two-way trade with them.

By the middle of the 13th century southern China was producing sugar, iron and silk far in excess of its own needs and of the foreign shipping that came to Guangzhou. Even the exquisite porcelain, the finest ever made, from the kilns at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province lost value as more and more kilns were built. So Guangdong and Fukien merchants ordered big ocean-going junks from the shipyards that had been turning out river craft and coastal craft for centuries and sailed the South and East China Seas in search of markets. Some of them sent out a hundred junks and became fabulously wealthy.

Thousands of sailors came back with thousands of stories of rich lands overseas and Chinese emigrated to them by the thousand. They were peaceful emigrants. They had the numbers and the resources to seize many of the countries they settled in, but they never attempted it. They wanted commerce, not conquest.

Three quarters of the way through the 13th century the Mongols invaded northern China. Successive rulers forbade emigration from China, forbade foreign trade. The southern Chinese felt distant enough from authority to do much as they pleased, a policy they still follow successfully. Emigration increased; trading voyages increased.

But it was with the new dynasty, the Ming, in the early 1400s that China became extraordinarily adventurous. The great eunuch, Zheng He, who carried his dried organs in a little porcelain jar tied to his waist so that he would not go into the next world incomplete, made seven marvellous voyages with more than sixty ships manned by about thirty thousand men, including a detachment of cavalry who took their
horses aboard. Known affectionately as San Bao, Three Jewels, he planned the voyages meticulously. He carried enough seeds on board and earthenware jars to grow them in, to keep up a supply of fresh vegetables to his vast crew for a two-year voyage. He sailed as far as East Africa and brought back plants, rare timbers, pepper (then as valuable as ginseng), a king or two who needed chastising, ostriches, zebras, antelopes, and a giraffe that was paraded to astonished crowds through the streets of Nanking, then the capital, to the palace.

There are unproven, unprovable, but not irrational suggestions, that Zheng He travelled to Australia. It is more than likely that Chinese vessels did have early contact with northern Australia, either by design or by accident. The Chinese traded with Timor from early times and it is only 650 kilometres from Darwin. They traded with West New Guinea and that is even closer. Perhaps they made early trips to Australia for beche-de-mer (trepang). Carbon dating of sites where the trepang was cooked gave readings of 1200 and 1400 AD among the expected dates of two hundred years ago. Aborigines tell stories of people with golden skins who once came each year to fish for trepang. The definite trade in trepang began after the middle of the 17th century. Macassan prahus came down each year on the wet monsoon and sailed back on the change to the dry. Some of their ships were owned by Chinese businessmen. The whole catch was sold to the Chinese junks that met the prahus on their return. Trepang was the first article of trade between Australia and China.

After the last voyage of Zheng He in 1431 China did make an attempt to seal herself off from the rest of the world. The voyages had been inordinately expensive and money was needed to guard the north against more Mongolian threats. So the fifth Ming emperor, Xuan De, forbade the building of ships bigger than coastal traders, he forbade emigration, which continued, he forbade private foreign trade and the southern merchants ignored him. Chinese trade became all important in world trade. Chinese merchants of the 16th century could make or break any foreign merchant.

The leaders in trade with China kept on changing. After the Arabians, the Portuguese, and the Dutch, the English began to exert their power. In 1636 the Courteen Association, built around the court of the improvident Charles I, the king who was later beheaded, sent Captain Weddell with a flotilla of ships to Canton (now called Guangzhou) to open direct trade with China. Weddell’s extraordinary behaviour probably had much to do with the later difficulties of trade. After running the gauntlet of Portuguese and Dutch ships that tried to sink him he arrived in the Pearl River estuary in a bad temper. Instead of waiting for a pilot and clearance, he sailed straight up through the Tiger Passage into the Pearl River. An on-shore battery opened fire. Weddell blasted it out of existence, then went ashore and burnt the neighbouring town. After that he announced that he had come to trade. The astonished Viceroy of Canton arranged a cargo of sugar, spice, porcelain and silk on condition that he never returned.

Over fifty years later, in 1689, the expanding English East India Company had calmed the Chinese enough to begin direct import of tea,
a commodity fast becoming known and wanted throughout the world. It was by no means a free trade. For an enormous rent, the Chinese allowed the company to build a factory on the waterfront near Canton. They could remain there for the six busy months of favourable trade winds, then they had to retire to Macau, the Portuguese settlement. All trade had to be conducted through special Chinese traders, the merchants of the Hang. These men were regarded as being so contaminated by their association with foreigners that they could never sit down during their discussions with Mandarins. The Viceroy, whenever he was displeased with any action by the foreigners, called the Hang merchants before him and kept them standing for hours before he even deigned to see them, then he would threaten them with the disgrace of the wooden collar, the cangue. He kept one for each merchant on display in a corner of the meeting room.

Each year, at the start of business, the Chinese pasted up a poster on the outer wall of the factory. Unfortunately, no posters, no translations, are extant. From scarce descriptions the poster reviled the English for the colour of their skins, their hairy bodies, their language, their food, their sexual practices. The Chinese laughingly picked on the English expression, 'I say', and nicknamed them, 'I say', but they used the remarkable opportunity the language gives for punning and pronounced it, 'Ai Sui', which means 'Love Piss'.

The increasing direct trade with China meant increasing movement of Chinese sailors. In those days captains regarded sailors as the scum of the earth and expendable. The death rate from dysentery, scurvy and malaria was appalling, up to 70 per cent of the crews. It became common practice for captains from several countries to replace the dead with Chinese sailors for the run home. They prepared their own meals aboard. They knew more about diet and they lived.

When Australia suffered British settlement in 1788, the tea trade, controlled absolutely by the East India Company, had grown enormously. Three of the ships in the First Fleet were on charter to load tea in Canton after they had unloaded their convicts. When the new settlement, short of competent farmers, grew hungry after two years of no contact with Britain, Phillip considered sending for supplies to China and ordered the little Sirius to be got ready for the trip. China had become the symbol of good things.

Good things take paying for. Britain grew short of the silver the Chinese Government demanded as payment so the British Government sent Lord Macartney to find out Chinese needs. The Emperor, Qian Long, was amused at the idea of China needing anything from the western world. He explained in a letter to George III that trade was permitted, 'so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence'. Lord Macartney returned home with no orders whatever.

But the East India Company had a product it thought it could promote. For years it had been quietly selling about two hundred cases of opium a year to China. It began to market opium ruthlessly, building up to 4000 cases by 1796, to 26 000 a few years later. Opium added extraordinary
tensions to ordinary trade. It still colours our relations with China. They do not take our humanity for granted.

The quality of the opium was not all it ought to have been either. The British Board of Trade wrote to the directors of the East India Company saying, 'the adulterated state of the drug has attracted attention and caused the system to be questioned'. The directors were outraged. They replied, 'The indifferent quality of the drug is immaterial to the Company. We draw a large annual revenue from the monopoly... Though the commodity is sophisticated and something else passed off upon them as opium under the name of opium, there is not any harm done to them'.

The Board of Trade responded primly, 'We bring the case to our own feelings by observing that if a wine merchant were to mix elder juice or other trash...with Port or Bordeaux wine and to pass off the composition as wine we should on detection reprobate the fraud and not admit his attempting to justify his conduct by saying there was not any harm done to the consumers'.

So the unwilling company instructed its agents, 'Never upon any account whatever to mix oil, cowdung, grass, sand, or any other extraneous substance with the drug after it comes into their hands'.

The Emperor, Qian Long, issued an edict prohibiting the use of opium. It is 'a subject of deep regret' he wrote, 'that the vile diet of foreign countries should be received in exchange for the commodities and money of the Empire.' Sales increased. One mandarin brought opium smokers before him and slit their lips so they could not draw on their pipes.

Sales increased to about 40 000 cases a year. Then, on 12 December 1838, dramatically, insulting and officially, with a retinue big enough to attract maximum attention, the Chinese vented their frustration on a native opium dealer. They strangled him in front of the British trading house. A new Viceroy, Lin, followed up by demanding that the British hand over all the opium in port, over 20 000 cases. He made obeisances and offerings to the Goddess of the Southern Sea, asked her to move all her creatures out of the water he was about to foul, then he employed hundreds of workmen to break up the balls of opium in a mixture of lime, salt and water, and trample them into a slurry that he washed into the sea.

The British Government was unjustifiably outraged. For two years British ships patrolled China's coastline, blockading, looting, raping, destroying. They attacked Shanghai, occupied it, then moved up the Yangtze Kiang to the beautiful and ancient city of Nanjing. The Chinese Government capitulated. The Emperor's agent signed the Treaty of Nanking on 29 August 1842. China agreed to open the ports of Guanzhou, Fujhou, Xiamen, Ningbo and Shanghai to unrestricted trade, to cede the island of Hong Kong, and to pay twenty-one million dollars in reparation for loss of trade and destruction of opium. It amounted to armed robbery. In the British House of Commons William Gladstone
declared, 'A war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated to
cover this country with permanent disgrace. I do not know'.

Among the special collections at the University of Hong Kong, I found a
startling notice in Dixon's *Hong Kong Recorder* of 19 July 1858. The
previous owner of Hong Kong advertised at great length that neither
the Chinese nor the British Governments had consulted him when his
land was handed over. Tung Wing Fook Tong, of Sunon district, was
formerly sole proprietor of the island of Hong Kong and of the hills and
coast on the north side of the harbour under the general name of Tsim
Shar-Choy'. He had trouble not only with governments, but with
rascally Chinese who had seized his mainland holding as well as with
his wife who was acting as though she had been the owner. He
concluded, 'Tung Wing Fook Tong hopes that the Foreigners will not
take a biased view of this matter'.

Australia, too, found commodities that interested the Chinese and for
which there was a respectable market. Apart from trepang, hundreds
of thousands of seal skins found ready sale, then, after the fur seal had
been taken almost out of existence, sandalwood from northern Australia
and Western Australia supplied another eager market. Australia's first
Chinese probably came out as sailors on these trading ships.

In 1821 three Chinese, a servant, carpenter and a cook, worked for the
Macarthur family on Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta. In 1827 two unnamed
carpenters had their own business in Sydney. Another carpenter set up
in Adelaide in the 1830s. By the mid 1840s Chinese were a common
sight in the streets of Sydney, along with Malays, French, Americans,
Germans, Scots, Irish, English, New Zealand Maoris, ex-convict
Negroes. Sydney was as cosmopolitan in the 1840s as it is now.

But it was not until the late 1840s that any number of Chinese began
coming to Australia. Between 1849 and 1852 more than two thousand
coolies, most of them from Fukien Province, were brought in as farm
labourers and shepherds. It was not a happy experience for either the
Chinese or their masters. Those sent out as shepherds had perhaps
seen a dozen or so fat-tailed sheep feeding along village roads in the
care of a child. In Australia they were given mobs of five hundred to a
thousand to feed out over hundreds of hectares of empty bush. They
lost the sheep, they lost themselves. They were underpaid and soon
realised it. Some masters were bad and treated them with alarming
cruelty. One Chinese bound with others for the Riverina six hundred
kilometres from Sydney burnt his foot so badly he said he could not
walk. The driver of the dray that carried their gear tied a rope round
his waist, hitched it on to the back of the dray and dragged him. If they
ran away they were hunted down with stockwhips like runaway cattle.
When rice became scarce and dear they were issued wheat and maize
instead. It was unaccustomed and unliked food and against their
contracts.

Some of the Chinese were bad men, pirates and descendants of pirates.
One landowner on the Darling Downs was murdered. On several
stations stockmen were threatened by angry Chinese jabbing at them
with broken sheep shear blades strapped to sticks. Their anger seldom
lasted long. Even after such violent demonstrations they usually went back to work, though sometimes it was for a different master. Under the Masters and Servants Act their contracts could be sold.

The finds of gold in New South Wales and soon after in Victoria and Queensland ended those contracts. Along with thousands of German, Irish and English workers the Chinese rushed to the goldfields. There were not police enough to find them nor courts enough to charge them. Police and magistrates had joined the rush.

The gold discoveries in Australia coincided with a tea shortage in China. Captains who had sailed from Melbourne and Sydney to pick up a cargo of tea found they had a wait of several months. So they refitted their ships, glued up posters announcing Australia as the new Gold Mountain (California was the old Gold Mountain) and brought back hundreds of Chinese gold diggers. All the first ship-loads came in as free men. They were mostly poor peasants, so they had borrowed the money to come out from family, from friends, from village clans. The interest rates were high, up to 100 per cent a year, their very family might have been mortgaged, but they were free men able to make their own decisions. Very soon there were thousands working the Victorian fields.

Their organisation was extraordinary. One can only marvel at how they coped. Perhaps one in a hundred knew enough English to ask directions. They were accustomed to closely-settled farms and frequent villages, to big rivers and plenty of water, yet they found their way hundreds of kilometres inland through dry Australia, and carried loads of up to 100 kilograms on shoulder poles. They brought rice, dried fish, dried vegetables, sauces to stock their own shops. They brought gardeners and a supply of vegetable seeds, they brought their own doctors and medical supplies, they brought opium and opium smoking equipment, they brought gambling games, everything needed to set up Chinese villages in Australia. They crowded together in small rooms built side by side along narrow alleys. They had not come to settle. Their aim was one hundred pounds sterling\(^1\), a sum that would then buy land enough in China for a family to live comfortably, and they were prepared to live very hard in Australia until they earned it.

Few of them had any mining experience. At first they did no prospecting for new claims. They reworked the mullock heaps of the rather careless European miners. Village groups worked together. That gave them an advantage over European miners working singly or in groups of two or three. If one party of Chinese found nothing in a couple of weeks of washing dirt they would be supported by the finds of other parties.

People of many nations came to Australia but the Chinese were the biggest single group. Because they kept to themselves, because their language was so different, their appearance, their religion, they were regarded with suspicion. When by 1855 numbers in Victoria reached

\(^1\) $200
17 000 they were regarded with genuine fear. It seemed the whole of China was coming to take over Australia. The Victorian Government restricted the numbers each ship could carry to one Chinese passenger for every ten tons registered, and imposed a poll tax of ten pounds sterling\(^2\) a head. The Chinese, again displaying their extraordinary organisation and their communication system, as well as their ability to dodge inconvenient laws, booked passage for Adelaide and Robe in South Australia where there was no poll tax. When the first party landed in Adelaide, stray cats and dogs disappeared into woks overnight.

Robe, so much nearer the goldfields, became the favourite port. Fifteen thousand Chinese passed through it in 1856. They recognised one of the seaweeds in Guichen Bay as edible and harvested many tons of it to dry on racks built along the beach. Rich in Vitamin C, it was a valuable food after the long voyage.

If they had money enough they hired a teamster to carry their gear and lead them across, many hired guides at exorbitant rates and walked. Some of the guides led the party for a couple of days then disappeared during the night, leaving the Chinese to find their own way around the lakes and swamps in the wettest winter ever known in south-east South Australia. They bought sheep from landowners along the way, killed them, scalded them and plucked the wool out. The ignorant heathens' laughed the graziers, ‘they don’t know how to skin a sheep’. The Chinese attitude was that no-one but a hairy barbarian would discard the skin, such a valuable part of the flesh.

Later Chinese often came out under different conditions. A storekeeper in Adelaide, others in Melbourne, Hobart and Sydney, had grown wealthy enough to bring out hundreds of coolies to mine for them while they worked off their passage money. They put experienced miners from China, California and Australia in charge of them. They kept control of them, not only through the innate honesty of the Chinese, but through secret societies that made sure they stayed honest. They developed some different and interesting methods of mining, especially the system of paddocking used in Tasmanian creeks and rivers. They built three-sided timber walls from the bank to midstream, plugged the gaps with grass and clay and bucketed out the water. Then they removed all the loose mud and gravel from the bed and washed it into the previous paddock. Sometimes crevices in the bedrock were lined with gold.

On every field where the Chinese worked there is still evidence of their ability to move water. They took levels with a rice bowl fitted in the middle of a 1.8 metre plank and filled with water to a marked line. They tipped the plank till the water reached the rim on the bottom side. With that seemingly crude instrument they ran water twenty kilometres round the sides of mountains. Stone pitched dams are still in place in the Palmer River area in North Queensland, aqueducts still collect water as they did in the 1870s when 17 000 Chinese mined

\(^2\) $20
there. At Tenterfield in northern New South Wales creeks still run through the new paths cut for them over a hundred years ago. In one place they diverted a creek through a channel cut across a bridge to a lower creek. For hundreds of metres they dug out a channel sixty centimetres wide and five to ten metres deep. One does not walk around that country at night.

There were several violent attempts to drive Chinese miners off the goldfields, especially on the Buckland River near Beechworth in Victoria and at Lambing Flat, now Young, in New South Wales. Savage European miners stole gold, burnt tents, smashed equipment, filled in shafts, then rounded the terrified Chinese up with stockwhips and drove them away. One burly Irish miner from Lambing Flat went back to the Victorian fields with seventeen pigtails hanging from his belt.

The Chinese extended their activities away from gold. They established thriving market gardens all over Australia and saved many European gold diggers from the disaster of scurvy and beriberi. The average Englishman thought he could work for months on salt beef, damper and black tea. For many years Chinese had control of the furniture trade. They established fisheries in all states and marketed fresh fish as well as drying and salting fish for export to China. Here in Darwin they used very fine nets to catch young prawns no more than a centimetre or so long which they packed in brine for export. They cut sandalwood, grew tobacco, sugar cane, rice, bananas, maize. They opened restaurants, laundries. They entered into every phase of Australian life.

The first Chinese who came to the Northern Territory were brought in from Singapore by Captain Bloomfield Douglas to work for European mining companies. He arrived in August 1874 with 186 coolies and 10 Filipinos from Manila. Dr Guy who inspected each man as he came aboard rejected 35 per cent for obvious syphilis but he could not recognise tertiary syphilis. Too many very sick men got past him. Then the broker who arranged the deal sent Triad members aboard late at night to switch sick men for the best of those on board. Dr Guy was not sure whether fifteen or fifty were substituted. He was too nervous of the ostentatious knives to count.

This introduction also was not a happy one. Some of the mining companies who had applied for labour were going broke before the men arrived. They were not given enough to eat - there was a popular concept that a Chinese could work on very little food. In some cases they worked for months then the companies closed down without paying them.

Once again gold saved them. Thousands of Chinese poured in to work on the fields at Pine Creek, the Margaret River, Yam Creek, the Shackle, Burrundie, so many places. They worked rich ground and poor ground successfully. For the first and only time in Australia they worked reefs and made a good profit from fields Europeans had given up as worthless. As the gold cut out they went into tin mining. Men such as Pin Que and Hang Gong became famous throughout the
Territory. They were very successful businessmen whose authority extended equally among Chinese and Europeans.

The year 1888 was a savage year in Chinese-Australia relations. The Millar brothers brought in over 2000 coolies to work on the Darwin-Pine Creek Railway, and at the same time hundreds of Chinese, expecting the anti-Chinese movements to succeed, chartered ships for Melbourne and Sydney. Afraid for their jobs, afraid of the numbers - it seemed once again that China intended to settle Australia - Australians everywhere demanded that their colonial governments stop Chinese immigration. All sorts of legislation were used against them: declaration of Chinese ports as infected with smallpox, poll taxes, tonnage restrictions, different landing documents.

Passengers on The Afghan with legitimate landing permits, refused permission to disembark in Sydney, took the New South Wales Government to court and won their case. Still Sir Henry Parkes refused them entry. 'I throw your English laws to the winds' he declared in parliament, 'I obey the laws of the people'. Eventually, though, after delaying several days, he gave in and the passengers landed quietly late at night.

Chinese in Australia, even businessmen who owned land in several cities, who had lived with their families in Australia for years, were put to inordinate inconvenience. A group of Darwin storekeepers were stranded in Hong Kong for months. The South Australian Government did not even bother to answer their questions. No steamer would carry James Ah Catt from Launceston to Melbourne where he had another big store. Way Lee, very wealthy and a long-time resident of Adelaide, was refused permission to travel to his business in Sydney unless he paid one hundred pounds sterling3 in poll tax at the New South Wales border, a sum equal to about $40 000 today.

The governments were unconcerned that their laws were unjust. The sole aim was to make things so uncomfortable for the Chinese that those here would go home, and no more would come.

One of the main complaints against the Chinese all through the 19th century was that they did not come to settle. They left their wives and families at home. After Federation in 1900 it was made almost impossible for Chinese to bring their wives to Australia. One Sydney Chinese who had been naturalised for years did not make it easier for others. He went home to China, then applied for permission to bring back his wife and two daughters. He got permission to bring them in for six months. It was not until he applied for an extension that authorities discovered he had brought back three new wives.

From 1900 until the 1960s Australia was adamantly White Australia. Anybody seeking entry could be excluded by a dictation test deliberately chosen in a language he was not likely to know. Australians generally were of the opinion that white skins, white morals were superior. During the last war there was a brief reversion to the ideas of a hundred

3 $200
years before: Chinese make good labourers. Among the Australian Archives in Canberra I found a telegram marked TOP SECRET from General Macarthur to John Curtin our Prime Minister, saying he was short of carriers in the front line. Would Curtin send an agent to China to engage 5000 coolies? A man was actually sent. Both governments seemed to be unaware that the area the men were to be recruited from had already been overrun by the Japanese.

We came to our senses in the 1960s with the realisation that new people with new customs, new foods, new languages revitalise a country. We had grown as complacent as syrup. The newcomers changed Australia from one of the staidest countries on earth to one of the most exciting. Chinese are deeply involved in everything Australia is doing.

But over the last three or four years there has been another change. One hears anti-foreign, anti-Asia sentiments as vicious as those of a hundred years ago. I do not think they will prevail.

In 1983 with my late wife, Joan, and Sinan Leong, a Chinese girl, I had a marvellous trip to China as a guest of the government to see people working as they did last century. They gave us two interpreters for the three of us, cars and drivers, and showed us what we wanted. And over and over they told me 'The book you are writing should make the two people more understandable to one another'. Apart from telling a fascinating story, that is what I am doing.

Sometime in the 1880s - I've not got all my information with me to give exact dates or even names - a wealthy Chinese came to Darwin from Hong Kong. He inspected the Daly River, said he could grow rice enough along it to feed all Asia. He applied to buy 4000 hectares of land and asked for a grant of another 4000 hectares. He also applied to bring in 2000 farmers with their wives and families. He intended to build homes for them. The South Australian Government did not even bother to answer him.

I believe that if he had developed his project, the Northern Territory, instead of being an embarrassingly unfinancial territory, would now be a very wealthy state.