

CHINESE INVOLVEMENT IN TE AROHA AND ITS MINING

Philip Hart

Te Aroha Mining District Working Papers

No. 132

Revised 16th August, 2026

Historical Research Unit
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand

ISSN: 2463-6266

© 2016 Philip Hart

Contact: prhart1940@gmail.com



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

CHINESE INVOLVEMENT IN TE AROHA AND ITS MINING

Abstract: *No Chinese mined in the Te Aroha district, but a few lived there, working quietly as market gardeners and owners of laundries. A few Chinese children attended the local school, provoking a controversy about their allegedly uncleanness that saw the complainant defeated by public and press opinion. Only two Chinese invested in local mining; the career of one of these, Ah Chee, is summarized.*

Perhaps because so few Chinese lived in the district, they were not seen as a problem by anyone apart from rival businessmen and businesswomen.

OCCUPATIONS OF CHINESE RESIDENTS

The first Chinese man to settle in Te Aroha was Ah Ying, or, alternatively, Ah Yang, who arrived in 1882¹, an event unnoticed by any newspapers. The first mention in the press of any Chinese living there was in February 1885, when it was reported in passing that the railway line from Hamilton would terminate ‘near the Chinaman’s garden’.² In the following year, the ‘Chinaman’s garden’ was described as being alongside the land acquired for the railway station.³ This market garden was on four acres of George Lipsey’s land,⁴ upon which Ah Ying erected a two-roomed house.⁵ The *Thames Advertiser* wrote, in 1886, that ‘a couple of Chinamen have a garden in a very high state of cultivation, and from which they supply the township with vegetables of every description’;⁶ the other man’s name was not recorded. In November 1889, Ah Yang was still living at the ‘Chinaman’s garden’,⁷ but four years later an Auckland journalist reported that ‘they have managed to starve out John Chinaman as a vegetable grower’ at Te Aroha, ‘so the inhabitants must be an industrious lot’.⁸ The departure of the Chinese market gardeners was, this report suggested, because of the hard work of the local residents not because of a boycott. In 1886 and 1891, these two gardeners were the only Chinese living in the Piako County, but no Chinese were resident in Te

¹ *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

² *Te Aroha News*, 14 February 1885, p. 7.

³ *Te Aroha News*, 19 June 1886, p. 2.

⁴ See paper on his life.

⁵ Te Aroha Borough Council, Rate Book for 1888 [no pagination], Matamata-Piako District Council Archives, Te Aroha.

⁶ *Thames Advertiser*, 11 October 1886, p. 2.

⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 20 November 1889, p. 2.

⁸ ‘Obadiah’, ‘Shares and Mining’, *Observer*, 2 September 1893, p. 7.

Aroha in 1896 or 1901; by 1914, if not earlier, there were Chinese market gardeners in the district.⁹

In the early twentieth century, several Chinese owned laundries. In 1911 it was announced that 'J. Joe, a Chinaman', had established one.¹⁰ In response, Mrs C.B. Smith advertised that she was the proprietor of the 'European Laundry',¹¹ a heavy hint to support her not a foreigner. In 1912, laundryman Oor Hing Lee moved to Morrinsville, and two years later it was reported that 'the Te Aroha Laundry will be worked by Wa On'.¹² This news prompted its rival to announce that 'The Te Aroha (European) Laundry is still carried on by Mrs Geiseler'.¹³ In October 1917, the *Te Aroha News* carried an advertisement for 'Tim Lee's Laundry, Whitaker-street, opposite Bank of New Zealand'.¹⁴ He had previously operated laundries in Nelson, describing himself as a 'laundry expert'.¹⁵

The last reference noted to a Chinese man working in this trade was the death of a baby in 1922, the child of Fong Sue Len, 'Laundry Proprietor'.¹⁶ In the previous year, Fong Len had provided a small prize for the best boy's pony in the annual Thames Valley annual show.¹⁷ He later moved to work as a market gardener in East Tamaki, Auckland.¹⁸

In 1929, a letter from 'Visitor' noted that residents frequented a fruit shop owned by Chinese and asked

why so many of your town and country people patronise the fruiterers, considering prices are the same in each shop, when it should be our duty to remember that the profits that Chinamen make are all taken out of the

⁹ *Result of a Census of the Colony of New Zealand, taken for the night of the 28th March, 1886* (Wellington, 1887), p. 135; *Result of a Census of the Colony of New Zealand, taken for the night of the 5th April, 1891* (Wellington, 1892), p. 86; *Result of a Census of the Colony of New Zealand, taken for the night of the 12th April, 1896* (Wellington, 1897), p. 9; *Result of a Census of the Colony of New Zealand, taken for the night of the 31st March, 1901* (Wellington, 1902), pp. 11, 22; *Te Aroha News*, 27 April 1914, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Te Aroha News*, 10 August 1911, p.2.

¹¹ Advertisement, *Te Aroha News*, 2 May 1912, p. 3.

¹² *Te Aroha News*, 13 August 1912, p. 3, 1 April 1914, p. 3.

¹³ *Te Aroha News*, 4 May 1914, p. 3.

¹⁴ Advertisement, *Te Aroha News*, 15 October 1917, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Thames Star*, 22 May 1905, p. 2; *Colonist*, 18 May 1915, p. 6.

¹⁶ Death Certificate of Toy Yuan Len, 6 August 1922, 1922/5739, BDM.

¹⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 17 October 1921, p. 1.

¹⁸ Photographs in Immigration Restriction Act 1908 and Poll Tax Registrations, 5575, 33/1915, box 13e, R14850372 [online]; Auckland Bankruptcy Files, 5628, box 102, R27542370, ANZ-A.

country, making our little New Zealand so much the poorer. Surely this behoves us to be loyal to and support our own people.¹⁹

SCHOOLING

Some Chinese attended the Te Aroha school, although full details are unavailable because of the loss of the first admissions register. The first to be admitted was Charlie Ying, in 1888, when aged ten.²⁰ George Ying, admitted on 17 May 1890, aged almost six, was the son of J., a gardener; he left for Auckland in December 1892.²¹ Five months after George was enrolled, Charles Ying, also recorded as being the son of J., was re-admitted, leaving in July the following year to be a gardener. Within a month, when he was re-admitted, Ah Ying was registered as the parent or guardian; he left for the last time in June 1892 to be a gardener.²² He was in fact the son of Ah Loh, a goldminer, and the nephew of Ah Ying, who had adopted him when Ah Loh brought Charles to Te Aroha from Canton in 1888.²³ Although aged 12 in 1890, because of his lack of English he was enrolled in the Primer 1 class; to assist him to learn English, his adoptive father paid for private tuition.²⁴ Eight months after leaving school for the last time, he was accidentally drowned when swimming in the river with a Pakeha friend.²⁵ In reporting his death, the *Thames Advertiser* referred to him as ‘a prominent young celestial’ without giving any reasons for his prominence.²⁶

RESIDENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE CHINESE

Charles Ying’s first enrolment in the school in mid-1888 created an immediate controversy because John Philip Vause, the New Zealand-born postmaster at Te Aroha

¹⁹ Letter from ‘Visitor’, *Te Aroha News*, 5 June 1929, p. 4.

²⁰ Te Aroha School, Attendance Roll 1888, p. 363, YCAF 4135/24a, ANZ-A.

²¹ Te Aroha School, Admissions Register No. 2 (1889-1897), no. 652, Primary School, Te Aroha; Te Aroha School, Attendance Roll 1890, YCAF 4135/27a, ANZ-A.

²² Te Aroha School, Admissions Register No. 2 (1889-1897), nos. 678, 723, Primary School, Te Aroha.

²³ Death Certificate of Charles Ying, 21 February 1893, 1893/353, BDM; *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

²⁴ Te Aroha School, Examinations held in November 1890, YCAF 4135/27a, ANZ-A; *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

²⁵ Death Certificate of Charles Ying, 21 February 1893, 1893/353, BDM; *Auckland Star*, 23 January 1893, p. 1.

²⁶ *Thames Advertiser*, 22 February 1893, p. 3.

since September 1883,²⁷ complained to the Auckland Board of Education. Vause, the secretary of the temperance Band of Hope, was a prominent member of the community,²⁸ but his letter undermined his status:

I respectfully beg to ask whether Chinese children are admitted into our public schools; and, if not, whether you are aware that a Chinese boy is now attending Te Aroha Public School (apparently with the sanction of the school committee, as no notice has been taken by them of the matter), having commenced to attend on Monday last? I make this enquiry on behalf of myself and other parents of children attending this school, who strongly protest against being compelled to having their children associate with such loathsome and objectionable characters as the Chinese, more especially as in the case of the boy I refer it, he is the adopted *protege* of a Chinese gardener, who lives in squalid filth in a small shanty about 5 feet square, known to be a den of opium-smoking and other vices, and to come within a few yards of either him or the boy is absolutely unpleasant. I am not aware whether your board has the power to prohibit Chinese children from attending the school. If it has, I earnestly trust that in this case that power may be at once exercised, both for the sake of the prosperity of the school and for the welfare of those European children attending it.

His letter was referred to the local school committee, which had the power to forbid the attendance of unclean children or those with contagious diseases.²⁹ In the issue of the *New Zealand Herald* that published his letter, an editorial reproved Vause for writing a letter that

exhibits a taint of snobbery that is singularly uncolonial. The embellishments of the boy's being filthy, ill-smelling, and residing in a small shanty full of opium smoke, are of course the unbridled statements of an ill-tempered man, who in this respect exhibits dispositions which certainly do not elevate him above the character of Chinamen, or of any other so-called "inferior race." This is supposed to be a democratic country, but your ignorant and uncultivated Democrat is a tyrant of the worst kind, and when the opportunity offers not infrequently evinces the characteristics of a vulgar snob. We venture to believe that this little Chinese boy is as neat and cleanly as any lad at the school; and if he has not been sufficiently long in contact with European civilization to have become familiar with all its requirements, there is not the least doubt that a kindly hint from the teacher

²⁷ 'Addresses Presented to Sir George Grey on his 74th Birthday, 14 April 1886, by European and Maori Residents of Auckland Province', p. 191, Grey New Zealand MS 275, Auckland Public Library; *Observer*, 24 June 1882, p. 230; *New Zealand Gazette*, 10 January 1884, p. 47.

²⁸ See *Te Aroha News*, 27 June 1885, p. 7, 5 September 1888, p. 7; Te Aroha Correspondent, *Waikato Times*, 9 December 1886, p. 3.

²⁹ Board of Education, *New Zealand Herald*, 7 July 1888, p. 5; reprinted in *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

will be cheerfully and speedily responded to by the little fellow and his relatives; for the Chinese nature as we know it, is singularly docile, polite, and obliging, and exhibits nothing whatever of that obstinate sullenness which would persist in continuing in cleanliness.

It cited the example of a Chinese boy in another town who was ‘the lion of the school, respected and liked by all’, thus revealing his schoolmates to be ‘real Democrats and genuine colonials; for true Democracy claims and gives level rights for all’. As for Vause, the ‘viciousness of his own narrow prejudices’ revealed him to be ‘not worthy of breathing the pure free air of colonial life. He seems to have a foreign name, and we hope it will be found that he is not an Englishman, but some mongrel creature that enjoys our British liberty without knowing what it means’.³⁰ Thus was a racial slur used to rebuff a racial slur! In its initial summary, with quotations, from Vause’s letter, the *Te Aroha News* added its own emphases and one ‘(!)’ when reporting that Vause protested

against *his* children being associated with “such *loathsome* and *objectionable characters* as the Chinese,” more especially as the lad lived in squalid filth in a shanty a few feet square, *known as a den of opium smoking and other vices (!) and it was very unpleasant to come within several yards of him.*

It considered his letter was

most unwarranted and deserving of strong censure. The Chinese are not desirable colonists and are addicted to very bad and objectionable vices as a nation, but we have never heard any complaint whatever made against Ah Yang, who has now been a resident at Te Aroha for six or seven years, and is a quiet inoffensive industrious man. He recently sent to China for this son, a lad of about fourteen [both the relationship and age were incorrect, as clarified in the subsequent issue],³¹ whose father no doubt considers, seeing he is a ratepayer and an elector [he was not on the electoral roll], that he has just as much right to avail of the state school as Mr J.P. Vause’s children have, if not more seeing the one is better able to procure private and select tuition for his children than the other. It is greatly to Ah Yang’s credit to show a desire that his boy should avail of any opportunities within his reach for improvement. We may state that since the receipt of the telegram we have interviewed the headmaster on the question, who states the boy is well conducted, clean in personal habits so far as he has had opportunity in observing, well dressed, and he has *never heard anyone* raise any objection to the boy before. Others we have spoken to have replied in the same strain.

³⁰ Editorial, *New Zealand Herald*, 7 July 1888, p. 4.

³¹ *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

The whole letter appears to have been a most unprovoked and unwarranted attack on Mr Ah Yang and his son.³²

‘Mr’ Ah Yang, it will be noted, which was the normal form of address in Te Aroha and Auckland newspapers when referring to Chinese men. It should also be noted that the only prosecution at Te Aroha for possessing opium was in 1914, when Chong Nee, alias Yee Wah, a 60-year-old gardener, was fined £2 for possessing one tin.³³

The subsequent issue of the *Te Aroha News* announced that Vause had ‘suddenly attained an enviable notoriety through his very remarkable letter to the Board of Education ... which is likely to make him well-known and much spoken of throughout the Colony’.³⁴ It published a letter from ‘True Briton’, who considered that Ah Yang had ‘been most scurrilously slandered, and believing he is not in a position to defend his character, as it is only right that he should do’, suggested that money be subscribed to bring a defamation case against Vause, ‘as the accusation made against Mr Ah Yang is calculated to do him a serious injury’.³⁵ Commenting on this suggestion, the newspaper considered that

Mr Vause has already been punished quite severely enough (unwarranted though his vicious attack upon an inoffensive man was), and that he has been taught a lesson he is not likely to soon forget; and that therefore it would not be right to go to such extreme measures as that suggested, although we doubt if Mr Vause would himself have had much mercy on Mr Ah Yang if he had written about him in the same style. Perhaps Mr Vause will see the wisdom and justice of writing an apology to Mr Ah Yang; by so doing he would undoubtedly show good sense and make such preparation as is within his power for the wrong he has perpetrated. For the information of our readers, we may state that as a matter-of-fact Mr Ah Yang’s house instead of being about 5ft by 5ft, is about 24ft by 8ft, with a 6ft skillion [lean-to shed]³⁶ in addition. The house is match-lined, comfortably furnished, clean, and tidy. Mr Ah Yang has been in the Colony about thirty years (having been twenty years on and off at Coromandel, four in Auckland, and six at Te Aroha). He is a man who pays his way and is generally respected.³⁷

³² *Te Aroha News*, 7 July 1888, p. 2.

³³ Te Aroha Police Station, Charges Taken at Te Aroha Lock-Up 1903-1917, folio 27, entry for 25 April 1914, BABD 11355/1a, ANZ-A; *Te Aroha News*, 27 April 1914, p. 2.

³⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

³⁵ Letter from ‘True Briton’, *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

³⁶ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. Lesley Brown, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1993), vol. 2, p. 2883.

³⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

‘Resident’ of Te Aroha applauded the ‘just censure’ of the newspapers:

Such a low contemptible effusion as the letter in question I have never read, and it clearly demonstrates what a narrow-minded person our local Postmaster is. I am sure, sir, that no true Englishman will agree with Mr Vause in his uncalled-for remarks, and it is my opinion Mr Ah Yang could recover damages in a court of law, as the letter is absolutely untrue in every particular. I am given to understand that Mr Ah Yang has two good sized rooms, which for one bachelorising are kept very clean; and no one will I think dispute the fact that the little fellow in question is well-dressed and clean in person. Again, sir, Mr Ah Yang being, I believe, a naturalised British subject [if so, he was not naturalized in New Zealand],³⁸ has full right to British protection and privileges, and I don’t think the committee of the Te Aroha Public School will do otherwise than treat Mr Vause and his letter, as both deserve, with the greatest contempt.³⁹

Nobody wrote to support Vause, and although there was no record of his apologizing to Ah Yang, within a week of this publicity he wrote to the board of asking to withdraw his letter. ‘I regret that I was so misled and ill-advised as to make the statements contained therein, which I now find are not borne out by facts’.⁴⁰ It may have been true, as implied in this letter, that another resident had prompted his initial one. One-and-a-half months later, the *Te Aroha News* announced that Vause was to swap positions with the Te Awamutu postmaster,⁴¹ a move made, it must be assumed, at his own request. As the official notification was not gazetted until a month later and published another 11 days after that,⁴² it must also be assumed that Vause had informed it of his pending move to avert continued controversy. The *Te Aroha News* made no comment on his departure but did print a letter from ‘Fair Play’ informing its readers that, before he left, Vause ‘sold as many as he could of the fruit trees, etc, dug up the remainder, and turned in his cow to complete the work of devastation’ in the garden of the postmaster’s house. ‘His action in so doing needs no comment and speaks volumes with respect to the general character of the man’.⁴³ Vause continued to work for the

³⁸ See *Names etc of Alien Friends who have been Naturalised in New Zealand* (Wellington, 1918), REPRO 1647, ANZ-W.

³⁹ Letter from ‘Resident’, *Te Aroha News*, 11 July 1888, p. 2.

⁴⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 14 July 1888, Supplement, p. 1; summary printed in *Te Aroha News*, 14 July 1888, p. 2.

⁴¹ *Te Aroha News*, 1 September 1888, p. 2.

⁴² *New Zealand Gazette*, 11 October 1888, p. 1087.

⁴³ Letter from ‘Fair Play’, *Te Aroha News*, 29 September 1888, p. 2.

postal department until his retirement in 1915;⁴⁴ and he never published his opinions on Chinese people again.

A considerable degree of sympathy for the Chinese continued. A *Te Aroha News* editorial of 1895, commenting on the formation of an Anti-Chinese League in Christchurch, noted that 'John' had

conformed to our laws and customs, and by his frugality and industry has been able to successfully compete in any industry upon which he has ventured.... No one will deny their industry, that they are a sober and law-abiding people is evident. There are good qualities in any race, much more so in the Heathen Chinese. If they have succeeded, amongst strangers and in [a] strange land all honour to them. Let us copy their good points ... and not for shame's sake acknowledge ourselves outwitted by the almond eyed celestial. In the name of British fair play, let us live and let live.

New Zealanders surely could compete with them, 'if we only apply ourselves'.⁴⁵ Fifteen years later, the secretary of the New Zealand Anti-Asiatic League attracted a crowd of from three to four hundred to the corner of Whitaker and Kenrick Streets on a Saturday evening. The speaker 'spoke for over an hour and received a patient hearing throughout'; he urged the boycott of all Chinese merchants.⁴⁶ As previously noted, many residents ignored this advice and continued to frequent Chinese laundries and fruiterers. Twenty years later, when 22-year-old Jimmie Gow, a former Te Aroha schoolboy, was killed, he received a kindly obituary describing him as 'well known in Te Aroha a few years ago', with 'a bright disposition' and 'a remarkably ready wit. It was said that it was impossible to "put it over" Jimmie, he always had a reply ready'. Another of his virtues was his active involvement in the Salvation Army.⁴⁷ That he had participated in the social life of the district was illustrated by his participate in a children's fancy dress ball held at nearby Mangaiti in 1922, when he dressed as 'a summer tourist "off the yacht!"'⁴⁸

TWO INVESTORS

The most popular Chinese man at Te Aroha in the late 1880s was not a miner, for there were no Chinese miners on this hard rock goldfield, nor a local resident, but an Auckland restaurant owner who invested in it: Thomas Quoi, whose involvement is

⁴⁴ See *Auckland Star*, 15 July 1940, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 27 April 1895, p. 2.

⁴⁶ *Te Aroha News*, 12 April 1910, p. 3.

⁴⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 14 May 1930, p. 6.

⁴⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 31 October 1922, p. 2.

described in the paper on his life. The only other Chinese associated with local mining was Ah Chee, a friend of Quoi,⁴⁹ who purchased six of the 50 shares in the Montezuma from the latter in 1889.⁵⁰ Like Quoi, he was naturalized in 1882, when aged 31,⁵¹ and in the 1880s and 1890s owned a restaurant and boarding house in Auckland.⁵² In 1887 he was in trouble with the law for selling Chinese spirits without a license, but when he was accused (and acquitted) of receiving stolen goods five years later several of Auckland's leading merchants testified to his honesty and integrity, and his fluency in English was also mentioned.⁵³ He became a prominent market gardener, an exporter of dried fungus, a leading figure on both the racecourse and the stock exchange, and, with his descendants, who inherited his business, a founder of prominent companies.⁵⁴ He and his wife became prominent Presbyterians.⁵⁵ Unlike Quoi, he invested in many other mining companies throughout the Hauraki Peninsula, mostly during the boom of the 1890s.⁵⁶ Upon his death in 1931 he left an estate in New Zealand of only £392 12s 10d;⁵⁷ presumably, having retired to Canton, he had repatriated much of his personal wealth to his homeland.

⁴⁹ See *Observer*, 9 February 1901, p. 7, 18 June 1931, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Certified Instruments 1889, no. 15343, BBAV 11581/10a, ANZ-A.

⁵¹ Naturalization of Ah Chee, Internal Affairs, IA 1, 1900/2606, ANZ-W; *New Zealand Gazette*, 7 September 1882, p. 1228.

⁵² Supreme Court, Judge's Notebooks, Conolly J, Criminal Notebook 1890-1891, pp. 15-19, 145, BBAE A304/120, ANZ-A; Supreme Court, *Auckland Weekly News*, 15 December 1888, p. 20; Police Court, *New Zealand Herald*, 2 February 1891, p. 3.

⁵³ *New Zealand Herald*, 30 June 1887, p. 4, 11 July 1887, p. 3, 28 September 1892, p. 3, 29 September 1892, p. 3, 3 December 1892, p. 3, 5 December 1892, p. 3, letter from Ah Chee, 6 December 1892, p. 3.

⁵⁴ National Bank, Inspector's Reports on Auckland Branch, 17 November 1890: Advances, 31 August 1896: Advances, 13 December 1897, National Bank Archives, Wellington; *Waikato Times*, 6 December 1894, p. 4; Hesketh and Richmond Papers, box 6, MS 440, Auckland Public Library; *New Zealand Graphic*, 21 September 1895, p. 350; *New Zealand Herald*, advertisement, 22 June 1920, p. 2, 17 December 1920, p. 9, 15 December 1921, p. 10, 17 January 1929, p. 12, 16 March 1931, p. 12; *Observer*, 18 June 1931, p. 5; James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past*, (Dunedin, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 260-261, 290, note 118, vol. 3, p. 269; Wikipedia.

⁵⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 16 March 1931, p. 12, 17 July 1931, p. 14.

⁵⁶ Company Files, BADZ 5181, box 209 no. 1249, ANZ-A; *New Zealand Gazette*, 10 October 1895, p. 1602, 14 November 1895, p. 1804, 28 November 1895, p. 1853, 5 December 1895, p. 1883, 25 June 1896, p. 1017, 13 August 1896, p. 1302, 20 August 1896, p. 1342, 27 August 1896, p. 1381, 17 September 1896, p. 1575, 24 September 1896, pp. 1622, 1623, 21 January 1897, p. 185.

⁵⁷ Probate, BBAE 1570, 160/1932, ANZ-A.

CONCLUSION

Chinese miners concentrated their efforts on the alluvial fields of the South Island, and the only involvement in mining in the Te Aroha district was a small amount of investment, for which residents were duly grateful. Had Te Aroha been settled by rather more than a few 'inoffensive' market gardeners and laundrymen, perhaps attitudes would have been different.