

Merchant miner mandarin: the life and remarkable times of Choie Sew Hoy.

Jenny Sew Hoy Agnew and Trevor Agnew

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Recent years have seen the publication – with the active support of the Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Trust – of many fine works dealing with the settlement of Chinese in New Zealand and the contribution they have made to New Zealand economy, society and identity. On the other hand, and the appearance of several excellent studies and collections of essays notwithstanding, the history of the post-rush gold mining industry in Otago, especially alluvial and quartz mining, remains a largely unexplored field. In this finely crafted work by Jenny Sew Hoy Agnew and Trevor Agnew, the authors – also supported by the Trust – both augment our understanding and appreciation of the contribution made by immigrants from China and their descendants, and enlarge our understanding of the fortunes of Otago’s gold mining once the rushes had subsided. Most importantly, it offers a careful assessment of the life of a man whose enterprise, business skills, and connections did much to sustain commerce and industry in southern New Zealand.

The book contains five parts. Part 1 summarises the political turbulence and economic hardships that the people of Canton endured during the nineteenth century, thus setting the context in which the Choie clan decided that some of its young men should seek their fortunes overseas. It describes the major movement of Cantonese miners into Victoria between 1853 and 1855, records the invitation, inspired by the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce, to Chinese miners to mine in Otago, and offers some valuable insights into the role played by Melbourne merchants, among them, Ho A Mei and Lowe Kong Meng, in organising, financing, and supporting the movement of Chinese miners across the Tasman. Further, their involvement points to some interesting contrasts with the movement of Victoria’s European miners on to Otago’s gold fields.

Part 2 details Choie Sew Hoy's arrival in Dunedin in 1869 and his early business activities, including his connection with Chew Chong, the pioneer of Taranaki's wood-ear fungus export trade.

Part 3 examines his expanding engagement as owner, investor, and financier in the gold mining industry, in the quartz mines of Macetown (notably the Tipperary, Maryborough, and Premier mines) and Skippers, in alluvial sluicing claims (notably in the Nokomai Valley) in which he employed the latest technologies, and, most notably, in gold dredging. The original Sew Hoy dredge with its revolving bucket and ladder system, was set to work on the Shotover River's Big Beach in 1889 and where Sew Hoy had financed some of the Chinese mining parties that had attempted to work that ground. It was on the Shotover that some of the earliest experiments in dredging had taken place, several spoon dredges working the bed of the river from about 1870. It was also Sew Hoy's success that prompted the 'Wakatip' dredging boom of 1889-1890 and led on to the even greater dredging boom a decade later. This carefully reconstructed account offers valuable insights into the breadth of Sew Hoy's mining interests, his support for gold prospecting expeditions, his plans for the diversion of the Shotover River to realise the miners' dream of laying bare its bed, his adoption and extensive use of new mining technologies, including hydraulic elevating, and the changes in the organisation and financing of an industry that had once been the preserve of small, miner-controlled and financed associative enterprises. His failures are also recorded, along with the controversy that surrounded the formation in 1889 of the Sew Hoy Big Beach Gold Mining Company.

Part 4 traverses now familiar ground, namely, the general and local government-sponsored discrimination that New Zealand's Chinese settlers endured throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. The generally cordial welcome accorded Otago's first and relatively small number of Chinese miners (the Nevis Valley incident of 1866 and a series of incidents on the Mount Ida field excepted) was displaced by growing hostility as the number of men arriving directly from China swelled after 1870. It is perhaps ironic that the growing hostility was marked by the 1871 conviction and imprisonment (and, under public pressure, premature release) of Otago's other mining magnate, John

Ewing, for wounding Ah Cheow on suspicion of the latter having robbed one of his tail races, a charge frequently levelled at Chinese miners but seldom proved. The authors offer a useful account of Sew Hoy's efforts to counter the growing flow of racist sentiment that led to the prolonged efforts to restrict the inflow of Chinese settlers, to their exclusion for many years from State-funded social welfare programmes, and to the denial of access to naturalisation between 1908 and 1952.

In Part 5, the authors discuss - so far as the record allows - Choie Sew Hoy's family life, his community involvement and commitments, his extensive connections with Dunedin's business and professional communities. They reveal his love of horse-racing and his very considerable success achieved through betting on every horse in every race. They recount, too, his efforts to facilitate and support the disinterment of remains and their return to China in fulfilment of custom and wish. Choie Sew Hoy died in 1901, his remains being among those lost when the *SS Ventnor* sank off Hokianga Heads in 1902. The authors offer a fitting acknowledgement of the part that Te Rarawa plays in caring for those remains found from time to time on the western shores of Te Tai Tokerau.

Merchant miner mandarin is a well-researched, lucidly written, copiously illustrated, and attractively presented account of the contribution and times of one of Otago's foremost citizens. By exploring the life of Choie Sew Hoy, the authors explore the gradual admixing rather than merging of cultures and the development of a new sense of national identity. It is especially a fine addition to the burgeoning literature dealing with the contribution of the Chinese to the settlement and development of New Zealand.

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