



AUSTRALIA'S BANKRUPT CHINESE FURNITURE MANUFACTURERS, 1880–1930

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The proprietors of almost 100 Chinese furniture factories in Australia went bankrupt during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With a substantial stake in furniture production for decades following the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s, Chinese furniture factory operators were vilified and legislated against in a push for ‘White-Australian’ industrial advancement. Historians have consistently concentrated on such campaigns when explaining Chinese-Australian business failures of this period. Yet informed principally by their bankruptcy court testimony, this paper contends that Chinese furniture manufacturers went bankrupt largely because of economic difficulties and, thus, failures are not sufficiently explained by ‘White Australia’.

JEL categories: N4, N6, N8

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese manufacturers had a major stake in furniture production in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australia. Migrants from the Pearl River Delta area of Guangdong and their Australia-born descendants established furniture factories in metropolitan centres as part of a widespread economic diversification after the gold rushes. Taking advantage of population and housing booms and the related demand for home furnishings, Chinese factories specialised the manufacturing of European-style furniture for large department stores, such as Marcus Clark and Co. in

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Sydney.¹ They did business on a scale not seen in other Pacific Rim destinations for Chinese migrants, including the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Central and South America and, for a period of time, outnumbered their ‘European’ – or ‘white’ – counterparts.² In 1912, at their recorded numerical peak, there were approximately 200 Chinese furniture factories within Australia – employing around 2,000 Chinese workers – with most distributed evenly between Sydney and Melbourne. (Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1911; Yarwood, 1964). Next to market gardening, in which some 7,000 Chinese gardeners were engaged in 1911, the production of furniture was the largest post-gold rush Chinese economic activity and the only manufacturing activity in Australia involving a sizeable number of Chinese people.³

Over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the proprietors of close to 100 Chinese furniture factories went bankrupt.⁴ Indeed, there were more bankrupt Chinese furniture manufacturers than any other class of Chinese businessperson in Australia. Moreover, by the 1930s, nearly all Australia’s Chinese furniture factories had closed down (New South Wales, 1932; Victoria, 1933). The end of Chinese furniture manufacturing coincided with an end to Chinese involvement in most spheres of Australian economic life.

Chinese furniture factories were focal points for discrimination due to a drive for ‘White-Australian’ industrial progress.⁵ Industrialisation in Australia, as Hutchinson (2015) has noted, had tremendous symbolic value: it was often regarded as a remedy for Australia’s geographic isolation from Britain on the edge of Asia. Chinese factories, with their central role in furniture production, were widely considered an affront to the vision for an Anglo-Australian industrial economy. Chinese factory

- 1 On the population and housing boom, see Ville, 2015. Regarding sales to Marcus Clark and Co., see, for instance, Harry Kow’s Testimony, 18 February 1908, New South Wales State Records (NSWSR) 13655-10/23541-17604, 46. A ‘factory’ in industrial law was any place where four or more ‘persons’, or one or more ‘Chinese’, were engaged ‘working at any handicraft’ (*Factories and Shops Act* 1896 [NSW] and *Factories and Shops Act* 1927 [VIC]). I define a ‘furniture factory’ as any place where someone made furniture on their own account.
- 2 European workers in Sydney’s furniture industry first outnumbered Chinese workers in 1908 (New South Wales, 1908). Chinese operators did not dominate in Melbourne (Victoria, 1897). The Chinese-Australian furniture industry was comparable in size to the Chinese-American garment industry in San Francisco, the largest Chinese manufacturing industry in the United States (Chen, 2000; Lai, 2008). Shen (2012) notes the existence of furniture manufacturing in Singapore by a group of Sanjiangren migrants, from Wenzhou and Ningbo, in the first half of the twentieth century.
- 3 See, for instance, Williams (1999). A detailed early account of Chinese economic activity in Australia during the late nineteenth century is Coghlan (1918). Furniture factories were also significant to Chinese-Australian identity. A furniture factory manager is a key character in the first Chinese-Australian novel, ‘The Poison of Polygamy’, published in Melbourne’s *Chinese Times* in 1909 and 1910 and brought to light by Huang and Ommundsen (2016). This factory fails because of the manager’s opium addiction.
- 4 Insolvency and Bankruptcy Files, NSWSR 13654-5, 1873-1928; Insolvency Registers, Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV) 757, 8750, 1871-1928. I use the term ‘bankruptcy’ consistently, even though it was ‘insolvency’ before 1888 in NSW, and in Victoria until 1928. A smaller number of Chinese operators, such as George Shue in Queensland, also operated and went bankrupt in other Australian colonies and states (Australian Star, 1888).
- 5 While ‘White Australia’ is normally taken to have begun with the start of the Commonwealth ‘White Australia’ policy in 1901, the concept can be traced back several decades earlier.

employees were also regularly seen as a threat to the European industrial working classes. As Markus (1974) has pointed out, it was supposed that Chinese workers worked for longer hours and less pay than European workers, undermining their fight for better working conditions. Chinese manufacturers were thus targets of campaigns by business organisations and trade unions. Anti-Chinese Leagues, comprised predominantly of members of these groups, were formed against them from the 1870s (Yong, 1977; Leckey, 2003). Such agitation led to outbreaks of violence, including the vandalism of Ah Toy's factory in Sydney by a 2,000-strong mob in 1878 (Fitzgerald, 2008). Chinese operators also faced restrictions on Chinese migration to the Australian colonies in 1881 and 1888, and the *Immigration Restriction Act* with Federation in 1901 (Markus, 1979; Markus, 2004). From the 1880s onwards, Chinese furniture factories were subject to race-based clauses in industrial law as well, particularly the 1896 *Factories and Shops Acts* in New South Wales and Victoria, despite vigorous public opposition from Chinese community leaders like Sydney factory boss John Hoe (洗俊豪).⁶ Confronting reminders of this legislation are the 'Chinese Labour' and 'European Labour Only' stamps on antique furniture (Maushart, 2016).

Historians have usually focussed on anti-Chinese discrimination when explaining the failures of Chinese businesses in Australia. A causal connection between measures intended to realise European racial hegemony on the Australian continent and the collapse of many Chinese commercial ventures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been stressed in a number of historical studies. Scholars have argued that race-based immigration legislation in particular, referred to by Price (1974) as the 'Great White Walls', decimated Chinese economic activity (Markus, 1979; Cronin, 1982; Reeves, 1903; Coghlan, 1918; Willard, 1923).

In the past two decades, however, an increasingly nuanced historical discussion on Chinese enterprise in Australia has taken place as well, with cultural and economic history perspectives complementing the more usual political and social explanations for its demise. A key contribution to this discussion has been Chou's (1995) account of the crucial role of 'cultural baggage' in the gradual disappearance of most Chinese businesses from Victoria. According to Chou, the Chinese 'sojourning attitude' was at least as important as discrimination in precipitating this disappearance. Frost (2002), on a similar note, has attributed the collapse of Chinese farming operations in Australia to a combination of anti-Chinese discrimination and large-scale organisational change in Australian agriculture. Reeves (2010) and McGowan (2005) have likewise placed strong emphases on the 'broader historical sweep' of the gold rushes and the growth of the Australian economy in explaining the short-term nature of many Chinese commercial operations.

6 Hoe wrote several letters to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1908 voicing his opposition to this legislation (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1908a; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1908b; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1908c; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1908d). A number of European activists also opposed this anti-Chinese discrimination; see Clarke (1907). I use period Chinese characters and *Hanyu Pinyin* where period transliterations are unavailable.

In this paper, I look closely at Australia's bankrupt Chinese furniture manufacturers. Drawing chiefly on bankruptcy court testimony given by the operators of 45 Sydney and 29 Melbourne Chinese factories, I explore the three most common explanations that they gave for the collapse of their own ventures: market downturns, limited capital, and high wages.⁷ I show that these difficulties, which European factory proprietors often bemoaned as well, were due only in part to race-based discrimination. I contend that the failures of these Chinese manufacturers, then, are not sufficiently explained by 'White Australia'. In doing so, I aim to build on the research of other historians by helping to account for the collapse of some significant Chinese businesses. I also seek to add to research on the economics of Chinese overseas history more broadly, particularly in relation to the organisation of firms and the ability of governments to regulate them (Cochran, 2009; Yen, 2013; Susanto & Susanto, 2013). I concentrate on the statements made by Chinese manufacturers themselves. While the majority of these statements were made in potentially intimidating courtroom settings, often through interpreters, and must, therefore, be treated with caution, they still permit unique insights into manufacturers' operations (Rhook, 2015; Finnane, 2015). As Loy-Wilson (2014) has pointed out, Chinese entrepreneurs reflecting on their own activities tended to 'focus on the practicality' of everyday business, rather than 'the exotic' and 'whimsical detail' that was typical with non-Chinese reflections on Chinese enterprise.⁸ As well as bankruptcy court testimony, I draw on other evidence used in bankruptcy cases, namely, financial ledgers, lists of assets and liabilities and claims by creditors, who normally initiated bankruptcy proceedings.⁹ I also use testimony provided in other legal proceedings, along with the entire collection of bankruptcy records for European furniture factory proprietors (54 in Sydney and 46 in Melbourne), Chinese- and English-language newspaper articles, and annual reports on the working of the *Factories and Shops Acts* in New South Wales and Victoria.

MARKET DOWNTURNS

In 1892, Wong King Gee, a furniture manufacturer on Harris Street in the inner-city Sydney suburb of Ultimo, lamented at his bankruptcy hearing: 'my bankruptcy

7 This is the entire collection of Sydney and Melbourne bankruptcy files for Chinese furniture manufacturers. The differences in bankruptcy rates, which were consistently much lower across all industries in Victoria than in New South Wales, for both Chinese and non-Chinese entrepreneurs, were due to a greater tendency for Victorian insolvent estates to go into administration without court involvement (*The Age*, 1898; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1887). Only a small fraction of failed furniture manufacturers went before the courts (Victoria, 1891).

8 Reveley (2010) has noted in relation to autobiographies, however, that entrepreneurs' own reflections should hardly be treated as a 'repository of truth'.

9 On the procedures associated with insolvency and bankruptcy, refer principally to *Insolvency Acts 1841–74* (NSW), *Insolvency Statute 1871* (VIC), *Bankruptcy Act 1887* (NSW), *Insolvency Act 1890* (VIC), and *Insolvency Rules 1890* (VIC). Bankruptcy courts were taken over by the Commonwealth in 1928 (*Bankruptcy Act 1928* [AUS]).

Table 1. Main reasons offered by Chinese furniture manufacturers for bankruptcy

	Market downturns	Limited capital	High wages	Other	Unspecified/ uncertain	Bankruptcies total
Sydney	6	16	4	5	14	45
Melbourne	5	10	2	4	8	29

Notes: 'Other' includes fire, theft, sickness and legal action outside of bankruptcy court. No Chinese manufacturers cited anti-Chinese agitation or legislation as reasons for their bankruptcy. Some of them cited multiple reasons. In these instances, I have recorded the reason that they seem to have given precedence over the other ones. Limited capital and high wages became more serious issues over time, as will be discussed.

was caused by the great depression in my trade'.¹⁰ You Kee Young, the proprietor of a furniture factory on Little Lonsdale Street in Melbourne, made a similar statement in bankruptcy court in 1894. He nominated a 'falling off of business' as the most important reason for his failure.¹¹ Complaints such as this regarding downturns in the market for furniture were not unusual among bankrupt Chinese factory operators, as Table 1 illustrates. European manufacturers also made similar claims on a regular basis. John Penman, for instance, who ran a factory on Melbourne's Wright's Lane in the 1880s and 1890s blamed an apparent 'dullness of trade' for his failure in 1896.¹²

Australian-wide economic tumult during the early 1890s was the primary source of complaint for many bankrupt Chinese furniture manufacturers. Both Wong King Gee and You Kee Young were most likely referring to the recession of this period which followed unprecedented economic growth in the wake of the gold rushes and, according to Maddock (2015), caused a dramatic drop in consumer purchasing power.¹³ In Sydney, nine Chinese operators went bankrupt in the early 1890s and two went bankrupt in Melbourne.¹⁴ By contrast, only three European furniture manufacturers in Sydney and one in Melbourne went bankrupt, although thousands of other non-Chinese businesspeople around Australia failed over this period.¹⁵ There was an upsurge in racist agitation against Chinese factories in Sydney and Melbourne during the late 1880s and early 1890s, which led to restrictions on Chinese migration in 1888 and the *Factories and Shops Acts* in New South Wales and Victoria in 1896 (Yong, 1977). This probably made the already dire economic

10 Wong King Gee's Testimony, 23 February 1892, NSWSR 13655-10/22605-1778, 12.

11 You Kee Young's Affidavit, 10 December 1894, PROV 765-187, 5.

12 John Penman's Affidavit, 4 January 1896, PROV 765-221, 4.

13 It is quite likely that protracted droughts which spanned the 1880s and 1890s also had a significant impact because several Chinese operators reported having sold furniture in rural farming communities. See Charles Lum's Accounts, NSWSR 13655-10/23741-20077, 4. On the drought itself, see Ville (2000).

14 Melbourne factory inspectors also noted 'the depression has been acutely felt by Chinese furniture makers' because 'they only make the cheap classes of furniture' for the 'working classes' (Victoria, 1893).

15 Records on the total number of factories operating during the early 1890s are lacking, so bankruptcy rates cannot be calculated for this period.

circumstances of the early 1890s recession worse for the Chinese manufacturers, although no bankrupts said so in court. This period also saw the beginning of a gradual decline in Australia's Chinese population and the loss of many buyers of Chinese furniture due to restrictions on Chinese migration, but no bankrupts talked about this either.¹⁶ In addition to a possible reluctance to criticise discriminatory legislation in bankruptcy court, this may have been because hearings were concerned with narrow, individual- and firm-level causes of failure, not broad trends.

Several Chinese furniture manufacturers also discussed a market downturn linked to World War One in bankruptcy court. Joe Sing, who operated a 15-worker establishment on Sydney's Liverpool Street between 1912 and 1914, attributed his situation to, as he put it, 'being unable to dispose of my stock owing to the war'.¹⁷ Yuen Gar (蔡元加), another Sydney operator, also described difficulty in World War One. 'I could not sell my furniture', he stated in court in late 1914, 'business became very bad'.¹⁸ According to Wilson (2015), the war also reduced the purchasing power of consumers and was felt particularly strongly in those industries not associated with the war effort, including furniture. Eight Sydney and five Melbourne Chinese furniture manufacturers went bankrupt between 1914 and 1918, compared to six Sydney and 11 Melbourne European factory operators. Figures 1 and 2 show spikes in bankruptcy rates for Chinese manufacturers in both cities during World War One.¹⁹ These figures also show that the rates of Chinese bankruptcy were higher than European rates in Sydney and about the same in Melbourne. Campaigns to buy 'Australian' goods, driven by – and driving – wartime nationalist fervour, as discussed by Crawford (2005), could have had a role in the Chinese bankruptcies. It is more likely, however, that less capital investment and steeper wage increases in the Chinese factories than in their European equivalents – to be discussed in the next sections – were the crucial factors in making this downturn worse for Chinese manufacturers.

There were few Chinese furniture factories left by the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s, so this was rarely cited in bankruptcy court; yet this appears to have been the final straw for Australia's Chinese furniture industry. Ah Gan, who operated on Melbourne's La Trobe Street, faced bankruptcy court in 1929, and he suggested that the Great Depression was a factor in his failure.²⁰ Indeed, it seems to

16 On the population decline, which was almost near-total by the 1930s, refer to Choi (1975) and Markus (2004). Chinese manufacturers certainly marketed to Chinese customers, suggesting that they were a significant source of business (*Tung Wah Times*, 1919).

17 Joe Sing's Testimony, 17 November 1914, NSWSR 13655-10/23741-20068, 59-60.

18 Yuen Gar's Testimony, 18 November 1914, NSWSR 13655-10/23743-20093, 40.

19 No data were collected on factories in Sydney prior to 1897. Melbourne data do exist for this period but is patchier than that collected from 1897 onwards. Thus, I have only calculated bankruptcy rates between 1897 and 1928. In both Sydney and Melbourne, the reported bankruptcy rates for European factories were probably lower than the Chinese rates in part due to differences in the definition of a 'factory', as a place where 'four or more Europeans' or 'one Chinese' were engaged 'working at any handicraft'. Smaller manufacturers were more likely to fail, and thus, the inclusion of very small Chinese firms is likely to increase the measured failure rate.

20 National Archives of Australia (NAA) Melbourne B741-V/7678.

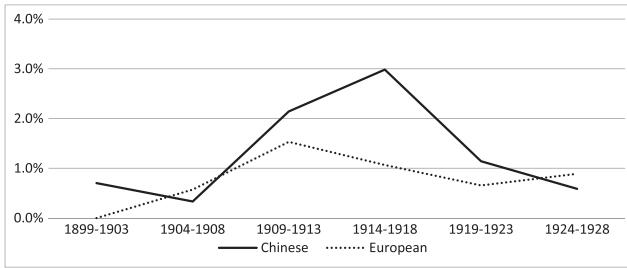


Figure 1. Sydney furniture manufacturer bankruptcy rates. Bankruptcy Files, 1897–1928; New South Wales, 1897–1928.

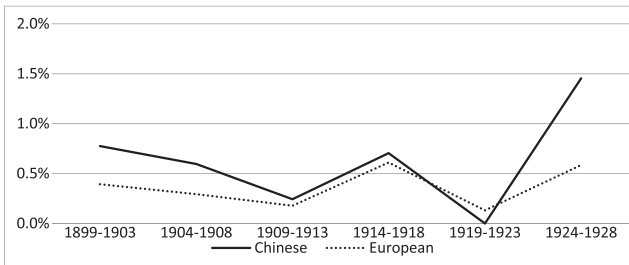


Figure 2. Melbourne furniture manufacturer bankruptcy rates. Insolvency Registers, 1897–1928; Victoria, 1897–1928.

have had a disastrous effect on the industry. Sixty-seven Chinese factories were recorded in Melbourne in 1927, yet only 20 in 1933 (Victoria, 1927 and 1933). In Sydney, 15 Chinese factories were registered in 1927, but all apart from two had closed by 1932 (New South Wales, 1927 and 1932). The implementation of arguably the harshest anti-Chinese industrial legislation in Australia took place in New South Wales in 1927, so this probably worked in combination with the Great Depression to effectively end Sydney's Chinese furniture industry (*Factories and Shops Act 1927*). Few European furniture factories closed during the Depression, although over 2,000 factory employees – half the workforce – were laid off (New South Wales, 1927 and 1932; Victoria, 1927 and 1933). An apparent late 1920s spike in bankruptcy rates for Melbourne Chinese operators, shown in Figure 2, may in part reflect economic uncertainty in the lead-up to the Great Depression, to which they would have been more exposed than European factory proprietors owing to the aforementioned issues with capital and wages. A comparable spike, however, was not seen in Sydney, as Figure 1 illustrates, which seems unusual considering the same economic uncertainty there in this period and the additional anti-Chinese industrial legislation of 1927.

LIMITED CAPITAL

In 1910, Henry Louey, the operator of a furniture factory in the Sydney suburb of Surry Hills and employer of 14 men, said in bankruptcy court that he went out of business because his ‘capital was not sufficient’.²¹ In 1917, Ernest Quong stated similar regarding his factory on Elizabeth Street in Sydney, which he ran for three years and where he engaged two workers. ‘Want of capital’, as he put it, was responsible for his bankruptcy.²² Indeed, this reason was the most common one offered by bankrupt Chinese factory operators for their failure, also illustrated in Table 1. This explanation for bankruptcy was common among European furniture factory proprietors as well, including partners Henry Ricketts and George Irvine, the operators of a 13-worker establishment in the Sydney suburb of Chippendale between 1909 and 1912.²³

The majority of bankrupt Chinese manufacturers pointed out that their own capital was modest, usually less than a few hundred pounds. Yee Wye, who traded on Market Lane in Melbourne during the 1880s, said that he had ‘a little money ... a few pounds’ of his cash invested in his factory.²⁴ Henry Louey testified that he had £175.²⁵ The nine partners in the 30-employee Sun Kwong Loong and Co. furniture factory at Surry Hills in Sydney, which was in operation between 1912 and 1915, had more cash overall. Yew Gwong (耀光), Jan Way (威象), Waig Young, Lee Chun, Gen Bong, George Foy, Lew Di, Jip Tin (洽典), and Jan Chick (贊澈) – several of whom came from Heungshan in the Pearl River Delta – stated that they had put £500 of their money altogether into their operation.²⁶ Only a few Chinese manufacturers reported having had more than this sum. Chow Kum (周錦), who ran one of the largest Chinese factories in Australia, on Sydney’s Elizabeth Street with 34 workers, said to an 1891 Royal Commission in Sydney that he and his two partners – migrants and relatives from the See Yip region – had just over £1,000 of their own capital (New South Wales, 1891–2). Similarly modest investments were common in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century furniture manufacturing more generally. English manufacturer Lazarus Blatt, to take one example, testified in 1885 that he had invested £30 in his factory on Exhibition Street in Melbourne.²⁷ On the whole, however, the European sector of the furniture industry involved larger capital investments. Merrett (2015) has argued that this period could be categorised as the beginning of ‘big business’ in Australia, whereby manufacturing, including furniture production, was increasingly dominated by firms with extensive financial resources. Sydney ‘universal provider’ Anthony Hordern and Sons, the clearest case of big business in the furniture industry, built a

21 Henry Louey’s Testimony, 98.

22 Ernest Quong’s Testimony, 17.

23 Henry Ricketts’ Testimony, 19.

24 Yee Wye’s Testimony, 10.

25 Henry Louey’s Testimony, 97.

26 Partners’ Testimony, 98–180.

27 Lazarus Blatt’s Testimony, 7 May 1885, PROV 762-235, 4.

factory in the southern Sydney suburb of Redfern with £15,600 in 1901 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1903). This investment was used to make furniture for its own retail outlets, and the firm benefited from backward vertical integration and the production of key lines on a large scale. Prior to 1901, Anthony Hordern and Sons had sourced much of its furniture from Chinese manufacturers (New South Wales, 1891–2).

Chinese factory operators' own capital was limited because it was often just saved wages from having worked in furniture factories themselves. Yee Wye explained in 1889: 'I worked ... made a little money and then started for myself'.²⁸ Henry Louey also said that he had earned most his £175 by working in Chinese factories in Sydney and Melbourne during the early twentieth century.²⁹ The Sun Kwong Loong and Co. partners testified much the same about their contribution to the partnership's £500 capital. 'I saved it up [£54 for his own share] from my wages when I was working', explained Lew Di, one of these partners, in bankruptcy court in 1915.³⁰ This was also quite common in the furniture industry more generally. According to Fahy et al. (1985), numerous furniture manufacturers started in the industry as ordinary factory workers. This was characteristic of *all* early industrial manufacturing in Melbourne, although this changed dramatically over time, according to Fahey and Sammartino (2013). These historians have noted that 'the archetypal Melbourne manufacturing pioneer emerge[d] from the workshop floor as a skilled tradesman', yet soon found it hard to compete with the 'new men of capital' who followed them into manufacturing.

Limited personal capital frequently caused the Chinese furniture factory proprietors to arrange loans from their friends and relatives, which they often spoke about in court; still, these loans were small. Man Sing, the proprietor of a 10-worker factory on Goulburn Street in Sydney between 1888 and 1890, stated that all the money that he had put into this operation was borrowed: 'I had no money of my own ... when I went into business I borrowed money [£50] from my friends ... Ah Ying lent me the money, and Man Yik Tong'.³¹ Henry Louey testified similar in 1910: that in addition to his £175, he had borrowed £150 from his cousin George Louey (雷永洪) in Melbourne and another £95 from two friends, Wong and Leong.³² These groups of Chinese associates did not allow bankrupt Chinese furniture factory bosses access to substantial amounts of capital. Friends and relatives from whom they borrowed, often only factory workers as well, were normally minor actors in the globe-spanning financial networks controlled by Australia's Chinese merchant elite, used to raise capital for Shanghai's 'Four Great Companies': the Sincere, Wing On, Sun Sun, and The Sun Company department stores. Indeed, Fitzgerald (2007) has suggested that anti-Chinese agitation and legislation caused

28 Yee Wye's Testimony, 10.

29 Henry Louey's Testimony, 96–7.

30 Lew Di's Testimony, 27 July 1915, NSWSR 13655-10/23778-20439, 127.

31 Man Sing's Testimony, 23 March 1891, NSWSR 13655-10/22675-3020, 61, 66, 68.

32 Henry Louey's Testimony, 98–9. Ng (2015) has noted claims of hidden partners and shareholders fraudulently claiming to have made loans in order to get shares of bankrupts' estates in Hong Kong, but there was no suggestion of this in any of these Australian cases.

the Chinese merchant elite to invest offshore, which may explain their absence from Australian furniture production. Sydney and Melbourne Chinese manufacturers occasionally also borrowed modest sums from their European associates.³³ They frequently maintained accounts in city banks, too, but few ever took out bank loans, unlike a number of both their smaller- and larger-scale European counterparts, even though mobilising capital via networks of friends and relatives was also seen among European factory operators.³⁴ Chinese proprietors did not float shares on the stock market, either, unlike several of the larger-scale European manufacturers. Furniture specialists E. J. Forbes and Son, to take one example, registered their factory on George Street in Sydney with £20,000 share capital in 1911 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1911). It is entirely possible that Chinese manufacturers were denied access to such finance because of racial discrimination, although none spoke about this on record. It must be recognised, however, that bank loans and shares were uncommon methods of raising finance in the towns and villages around the Pearl River Delta, as Faure (2009) has noted, so many Chinese furniture factory proprietors in Australia may have simply avoided them.

Trade credit, while it still did not allow access to sizeable sums, was the key means discussed by Chinese manufacturers for mobilising capital. Man Sing had credit accounts with five European timberyards, 10 European dealers of other production materials, and two Chinese grocers (for live-in Chinese workers' food) when he went bankrupt in 1890.³⁵ His debts were over £300, much more than his £50 loan capital.³⁶ Sun Kwong Loong and Co. had also amassed a debt of nearly £1,700 with Chinese and European suppliers – more than three times the partnership's own £500 capital – when they went out of business in 1915.³⁷ Robert Yon and Ernest Blanchfield, who ran the joint Chinese-European Yon Brothers and Co. factory on Little Lonsdale Street in 1920s Melbourne, were likewise reliant on trade credit. Yon testified in 1925, 'I put no cash into the business, neither did Blanchfield'.³⁸ Nonetheless, they had debts of close to £4,000 when they went bankrupt that year, accumulated mainly through credit accounts with suppliers of production materials in Melbourne.³⁹ Non-Chinese furniture manufacturers, too, often relied on trade credit. Alfred Jarvis and William Cheney, for instance, proprietors of a factory on Sydney's Pitt Street in the 1910s, said that they had £50 loan capital invested in their factory yet had debts of close to £400 with their suppliers when they were declared bankrupt in 1920.⁴⁰ Ville (2015) has noted that trade credit was one way that firms cooperated with each other in efforts to manage

33 See, for instance, Testimony, 4 June 1883, NSW SR 13654-2/9993-17928, 175.

34 Soo Gangtong, a furniture dealer, had a bank loan in Sydney, but he was one of a few exceptions; see Soo Gangtong's Statement of Affairs, 7 April 1923, NSW SR 13655-10/24030-23307, 309-20.

35 Man Sing's Accounts, Jan 27 1890–31 October 1890, NSW SR 13655-10/22675-3020, 5-30.

36 Man Sing's Statement of Affairs, 8 November 1890, NSW SR 13655-10/22675-3020, 78-80.

37 Jan Way's Statement of Affairs, 12 August 1915, NSW SR 13655-10/23778-20439, 230.

38 Robert Yon's Testimony, 10 June 1925, PROV 766-186, 15.

39 Certified List of Proofs Filed, 7 May 1925, PROV 766-186, 223.

40 Alfred Jarvis' Testimony, 14 December 1920, and Alfred Jarvis' Statement of Affairs, 15 November 1920, NSW SR 13633-10/24002-22211, 4, 12.

economic uncertainty in Australia, especially after the 1890s recession, which suggests that it flowed quite freely.⁴¹ Even so, overall reliance on trade credit among Chinese operators was probably greater than it was among their European rivals, given the relative lack of bank loans and share capital in the Chinese furniture sector. Faure (2009) has suggested that a dependence on trade credit was characteristic of Chinese enterprises both within China itself and throughout the world, although Ng (2015) has recently argued that overly lenient British bankruptcy legislation in Hong Kong encouraged many Chinese businesspeople there to make use of trade credit more than they would have ordinarily, which may have also been the case in Australia.

Limited personal capital and reliance on trade credit led to considerable instability in Chinese operations stemming from constant pressure to pay creditors. 'I am pressed by numerous creditors', stated Low Wing, employer of three workers on Pitt Street in Sydney, when his business collapsed in 1887.⁴² Bong Shue, a factory proprietor on Melbourne's Little Lonsdale Street, similarly lamented 'pressure of creditors' when his business failed in 1907.⁴³ Under pressure to pay creditors, as several Chinese operators stated, they were forced to sell their furniture too cheaply, regularly had goods confiscated, and were ultimately subject to litigation, all of which were detrimental to their businesses.⁴⁴ Instability associated with a dependence on trade credit was discussed by European factory bosses as well, in both Sydney and Melbourne.⁴⁵ Kent (1994) has detailed how such dependence was linked to instability in nineteenth-century British manufacturing, and indeed the same seems to have been common in Australia. Gambling when pressured by creditors was also discussed remarkably often by bankrupt Chinese operators in Sydney. As New South Wales Registrar in Bankruptcy M. F. Salisbury criticised in 1921, New South Wales bankruptcy law did not deal harshly enough with gambling by insolvents, thus encouraging the practice among Chinese and non-Chinese businesspeople alike (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1921). Gambling was never discussed in court by Melbourne's bankrupt Chinese factory bosses, perhaps because of its stricter treatment – a year's imprisonment – in Victorian legislation (*Insolvency Act 1890*).

'Insufficient capital', to paraphrase the factory proprietor Henry Louey, was also felt in relation to mechanisation, as a number of the failed Chinese manufacturers suggested. Lay Jong (鹿童), who ran a 30-worker factory on Sydney's Elizabeth

40 Alfred Jarvis' Testimony, 14 December 1920, and Alfred Jarvis' Statement of Affairs, 15 November 1920, NSWSR 13633-10/24002-22211, 4, 12.

41 Merrett (2015) has also noted that this kind of cooperation between firms in Australia continued into the early twentieth century.

42 Low Wing's Testimony, 31 May 1887, NSWSR 13654-2/10351-22105, 3.

43 Bong Shue's Affidavit, 18 October 1907, PROV 765-402, 6.

44 Yee Lee, for example, complained about being forced to 'make up extra cheap furniture for auction sale' when pressed by creditors; see Yee Lee's Testimony, 15 August 1893, NSWSR 13655-10/22771-4833, 5.

45 Albert Attwells, a non-Chinese furniture manufacturer, also lamented having to sell furniture 'too cheaply' under these circumstances; see Albert Attwells' Testimony, 7 May 1919, NSWSR 13655-10/23911-21726, 4-5.

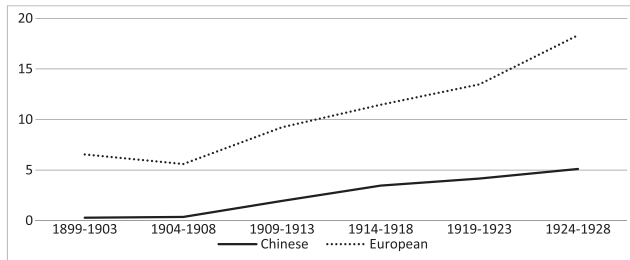


Figure 3. Average machine horsepower per Sydney furniture factory. New South Wales, 1897–1928.

Street with his brothers, said that he ‘did not use machines’, except two lathes, when he went bankrupt in 1893.⁴⁶ Most Chinese bankrupts reported the same in court.⁴⁷ Operating in this way could be viable in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was common in smaller-scale European factories. Still, technology was transforming the furniture industry, and indeed many industries, in this era, rendering traditional methods increasingly uncompetitive.⁴⁸ Hydraulic, steam-, gas- and oil-powered – and then direct- and alternating-current electric – lathes, circular saws, bandsaws, planers, mortisers, and tenoners, and a range of engines, were imported from Britain and the United States (Fountain, 2000). New machines allowed manufacturers to benefit from economies of scale, but these were capital-intensive and beyond the reach of many Chinese *and* European proprietors whose capital was modest. Yet on average, Chinese factories mechanised markedly less, as illustrated in relation to Sydney in Figure 3.⁴⁹ As Figure 3 also shows, the gulf between machine power in Chinese and European factories expanded over time, particularly following World War One, suggesting that limited capital became a more serious matter in Chinese factories over time. Data on machine power is not available for Melbourne, but by the 1920s, it had certainly become clear to Samuel Tye of the Quong Yick factory on Corr’s Lane that his workers’ hand tools could not match his European rivals’ ‘up-to-date and labour-saving machinery’, which his own limited capital precluded and which he held responsible for his bankruptcy in 1926.⁵⁰ It is possible that the overall small size of Chinese operations in Melbourne relative to those in Sydney, to be discussed in the following section, made the impact of mechanisation deeper there. Indeed, this could help explain the apparent late-1920s spike in bankruptcy rates for Melbourne’s Chinese operators. Still, the

46 Lay Jong’s Testimony, 27 July 1893, NSWSR 13655-10/22864-6597, 41.

47 Albert Attwells said in court that he had ‘no plant’; see Albert Attwells’ Testimony, 8.

48 Harris and Buzelli (2005) have shown that the building industry in Australia, by contrast, remained largely unaffected by industrial production of this nature.

49 The definition of a ‘factory’ has next to no effect on the calculations in Figure 3. Indeed, even if there were an additional 200 European furniture manufacturers in Sydney with three workers or less, and no machinery at all, the average horsepower of machinery per European factory would still have been much higher.

50 Samuel Tye’s Affidavit, 26 October 1926, PROV 10246-108, 20.

significance of machinery should not be overstated. Scott (2009) has pointed out that ever-changing furniture designs largely prevented ‘true mass production’ in Britain’s furniture industry, ensuring that there was always space for small-time, traditional furniture makers, which also seems to have been so in Australia.⁵¹ A suburban housing boom in Australia after World War One, noted by Frost (2015) would have also helped to ensure that the demand for furniture was high enough to sustain this class of operator, in spite of widespread mechanisation.

Bankrupt Chinese furniture manufacturers also indicated that their limited capital prevented the acquisition of real estate, another desirable capital asset. All the bankrupts said that they had leased, not purchased, the buildings in which they carried on business.⁵² There were legal impediments to non-naturalised Chinese migrants purchasing property, which could account for the leaseholds, but even naturalised and Australia-born operators, including Henry Louey and Robert Yon, did not purchase their factories, neither did their smaller-scale European counterparts.⁵³ Undoubtedly, this would have made their accessing bank loans and large-scale mechanisation (which often necessitated structural modification to existing buildings) considerably more difficult.

Some bankrupt Chinese operators revealed, though, that limited capital investment suited them because it facilitated their timely return to China. Lay Jong testified before the 1891 Royal Commission in Sydney that he and his four brothers were saving their money to return to China, rather than investing it in the factory. ‘About £300 or £400 would be enough’ for each of the four brothers, he explained, to return and lead a comfortable life (New South Wales, 1891–2). Bankruptcy soon followed for them, but a number of proprietors revealed that many others had successfully realised this ambition.⁵⁴ In fact, a number of partnerships were in constant flux and factories often changed hands entirely owing to such successes, for which sizeable capital investments in Australia were simply not necessary.⁵⁵ Williams (2002) has stressed that the intention of most Chinese migrants to go back to China ‘with wealth and glory’ determined their work in Australia and around the world. Chou (1995) has gone one step further, arguing that this was the principal reason why Chinese migrants in Melbourne came to be involved in furniture production in the first place, that is, because it allowed them to achieve this goal with only a ‘*small fixed capital outlay*’ [emphasis in original]. Even so, with the institution of permanent restrictions on Chinese migration to Australia in 1888, the flow of capital

51 On constantly changing furniture designs in Australia, refer to William Holman’s Testimony, 8 November 1904, *The United Furniture Trade Society of New South Wales v. Anthony Hordern and Sons*, NSW SR 2/5714-11/12-1904, 14-7.

52 Loon Moon had multiple sites; see Hock Shung’s Testimony, 11 December 1913, NSW SR 13655-10/23707-19673, 8.

53 Ah Garb, however, who did not go bankrupt, had his own factory worth £12,000 in 1920; see NAA Sydney, A1/1925/22539, 56. Other operators bypassed restrictions on property ownership by signing 99-year leases, thus making them effective owners, and they did not go bankrupt, either; see NAA Sydney, SP42/1-C/1917/208, 23.

54 NSW SR 13655-10/22864-6597.

55 See, for example, Yuen Gar’s Testimony (re his partner Lee Lit), 40.

investment from new Chinese migrants – limited though this may have been – to replace that taken away by those seeking to enjoy ‘wealth and glory’ in China all but stopped. This must have exacerbated capital constraints on new Chinese furniture factories, although none of the bankrupts discussed this in court, possibly because it was also a broad trend and beyond the scope of bankruptcy hearings.

HIGH WAGES

Hing Pound, who operated a factory in the Sydney suburb of Alexandria, complained at his bankruptcy hearing in 1909 that his business had collapsed because ‘wages are too high’.⁵⁶ Charles Lum, also an Alexandria furniture factory proprietor and employer of 15 workers, testified likewise in 1914: ‘I was paying too heavily for wages’.⁵⁷ This claim was not unusual among the bankrupt Chinese manufacturers of Sydney and Melbourne, as shown in Table 1. These complaints were made by Chinese manufacturers primarily from the 1910s, and earlier by certain European factory bosses. Frederick Povey in Richmond, Melbourne, to take one example, stated that ‘the wages of the employees of the firm [had] increased’, owing to the 1896 *Factories and Shops Act*, which precipitated his failure in 1898.⁵⁸

Chinese manufacturers stated that there were marked increases in workers’ pay over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1873, Sydney-based Woo Lung reported in court that he paid his 20 or so workers ‘between £1 and 25 shillings per week’.⁵⁹ Figure 4 – created using 214 Chinese workers’ claims for back pay in bankruptcy court – suggests that these rates were standard, in both Sydney and Melbourne, and were seldom exceeded during the late nineteenth century. Yet by the 1910s, Chinese factory bosses were describing how they had to pay many employees three times as much, and one boss, Sam War Lee in Sydney, said that ‘some of them [workers] earn £6 to £7 a week’ in 1914.⁶⁰ This is reflected in Figure 4 and is especially striking for Melbourne during the late 1920s, where average weekly wages appear to have risen to nearly £5.⁶¹ Increases of this

56 Hing Pound’s Testimony, 17 March 1909, NSWSR 13655-10/23578-18024, 47.

57 Charles Lum’s Testimony, 26 October 1914, NSWSR 13655-10/23741-20077, 4.

58 Frederick Povey’s Affidavit, 9 August 1899, PROV 765-274, 1-2.

59 Woo Lung’s Testimony, 2 May 1873, NSWSR 13654-2/9488-11460, 65.

60 Sam War Lee’s Testimony, 9 November 1914, NSWSR 13655-10/23744-20102, 23.

61 The data in Figure 4 are drawn from the bankruptcy hearings. An alternative source would be from the factory inspectors’ reports. However, these data are incomplete and probably not very reliable. Sydney factory inspectors collected data on Chinese earnings for only a limited period after 1896. Melbourne factory inspectors, on the other hand, collected these data over an extended period, starting in 1887. Yet the data are inconsistent before 1897, and factory inspectors themselves had no faith in it after 1897, frequently accusing Chinese factory bosses of fraudulently over-reporting workers’ pay in order to be seen to adhere to minimum wage determinations. The bankruptcy data are consistent with a 1908 special investigation conducted by inspectors into underpayment within Melbourne’s Chinese furniture sector which found that Chinese workers were paid ‘exactly about half the legal rate’ of £2/16/0 in 1908 (Rankin, 1916).

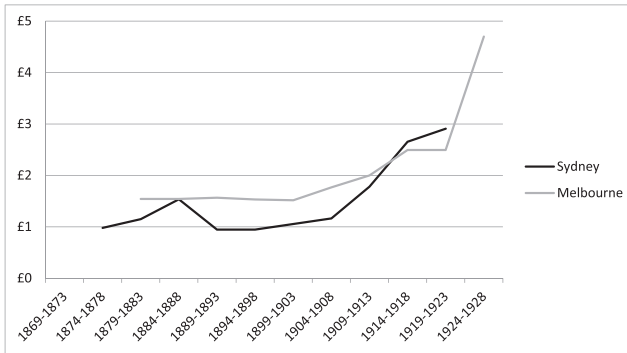


Figure 4. Average weekly wages paid by bankrupt Chinese manufacturers. Insolvency and Bankruptcy Files, 1873–1928.

magnitude were not witnessed in European factories over the same period. There were increases in European workers' earnings, but these were less dramatic as most were paid more – between £2 and £3 a week – in the 1870s and 1880s.⁶²

While no bankrupt Chinese factory proprietors mentioned it in court, race-based immigration legislation contributed to higher wages as it helped increase workers' bargaining power. Furniture trades union representative William Holman told the 1891 Royal Commission in Sydney that the 1888 New South Wales *Chinese Restriction Act* had effectively frozen the Chinese worker pool and had placed employees in a stronger position to bargain with their employers for better remuneration (New South Wales, 1891–2). Indeed, several of Sydney's Chinese manufacturers reported instances of industrial action over the 1890s, such as Yee Lee, who commented on what seems to have been a go-slow by workers at his factory on Castlereagh Street. 'They got lazy because I had not paid the wages. They did not make much furniture', he stated in court in 1893.⁶³ Moreover, by 1908, Chinese factory employees in Sydney were participating in a strike as part of the 300-member 'Sai-ga-Hong' (西家行), the Chinese furniture factory workers' union (Sydney Morning Herald, 1908e; Evening News, 1908a; Evening News, 1908b; *Tung Wah Times*, 1908). Similar action occurred in Melbourne in 1897 and 1903, which were probably facilitated by workers' stronger bargaining position after the 1888 Victorian *Chinese Immigration Restriction Act* (Markus, 1974; Yong, 1977). Over time, many Chinese workers returned to China, like their bosses. They were seldom replaced because of legislative restrictions and, thus, the value of remaining workers would have further increased. Even so, Chinese workers' own initiative was also a critical factor in their agitation for, and their achievement of, more pay. The first factory workers' strike recorded in Melbourne occurred in 1885, well before the

62 One example of this can be seen in the 1884; refer to NSWSR 13654-187/3. £2/10/- was the average rate of pay in Melbourne furniture factories in 1888 (Victoria, 1888).

63 Yee Lee's Testimony, 11 April 1892, NSWSR 13655-10/22771-4833, 308.

passage of the *Chinese Immigration Restriction Act* of 1888 (Markus, 1974). As noted by Lai and Jeung (2008), union activity was common in the Pearl River Delta region in this period, so this almost certainly influenced Chinese factory workers in their Australian struggles. Examples set by the labour movement more generally in Australia probably influenced Chinese workers' industrial action for improved wages as well. Sydney's *Chinese Australian Herald* suggested this in 1908; when workers went on strike that year, the newspaper condemned them for allegedly attempting to emulate Australia's 'lazy' European trade unionists (*Chinese Australian Herald*, 1908).⁶⁴

The *Factories and Shops Acts* also played a role in Chinese workers' increased pay, but this was not discussed in court by any of the bankrupt factory bosses, either. The *Acts* provided for the institution of minimum rates of remuneration within the furniture industry, which for adult males were set at £2/1/3 a week in Victoria in 1897 and £2/12/– in New South Wales in 1904, followed by a number of subsequent increases.⁶⁵ Anti-Chinese agitation by unions was central to the implementation of this legislation.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the direct enforcement of minimum rates of pay by factory inspectors does not appear to have been particularly meaningful in driving up Chinese workers' pay due to issues with the legislation itself and factory inspectors' staffing levels.⁶⁷ Joe Sing, the Sydney manufacturer who complained of 'being unable to dispose of my stock owing to the war' stated that 'there was no inspector who came along during the time I carried on'.⁶⁸ Melbourne factory inspectors had some success in enforcing minimum wage law within the furniture industry, as Seltzer and Borland (2016) have pointed out, and this is reflected in complaints made by European operators like Frederick Povey, noted earlier. A likely outcome of such success, however, at least according to Inspector Ellis in 1898, was the dismissal of old, slow, and sick Chinese workers. This may have forced these workers to start their own businesses and work for themselves at substantially reduced earnings, driving pay in the Chinese sector down lower than ever (Victoria, 1898). Rankin (1916) has also noted that minimum wages encouraged many manufacturers in Melbourne, Chinese and European alike, to keep firms small in order to avoid notice and keep pay low, which could explain the small size of Melbourne's Chinese factories relative to those in Sydney – shown in Figures 5 and 6 – where inspectors were not as concerned about enforcing

64 European trade unions members voted against Chinese unions in Sydney and Melbourne merging with their unions on racial grounds (Markus, 1974; *Evening News*, 1908a, b).

65 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1897; Victoria Papers of Special Boards (Furniture), PROV 5466; Judgement of Court, *The United Furniture Trade Society of New South Wales v. Anthony Hordern and Sons*, 9.

66 See, for instance, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1912. Additionally, plank 15 of the electoral platform of the NSW Labour Electoral League in 1891 was 'stamping of Chinese-made furniture' (*Australian Star*, 1891).

67 Inspector Hartley, for instance, complained about both in Sydney in 1910 (New South Wales, 1910).

68 Joe Sing's Testimony, 61. There were indeed few factory inspectors. In 1913, when Joe Sing was in business, seven inspectors needed to inspect 4,322 factories across all industries in Sydney, which included 69 Chinese furniture factories (New South Wales, 1913).

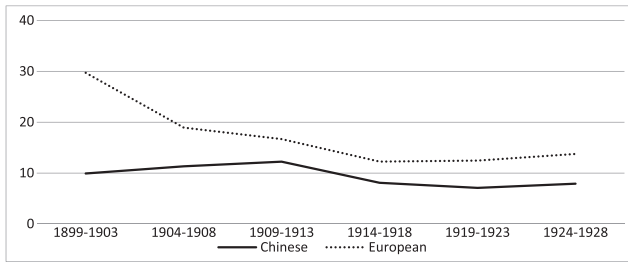


Figure 5. Average number of workers per Sydney furniture factory. New South Wales, 1897–1928.

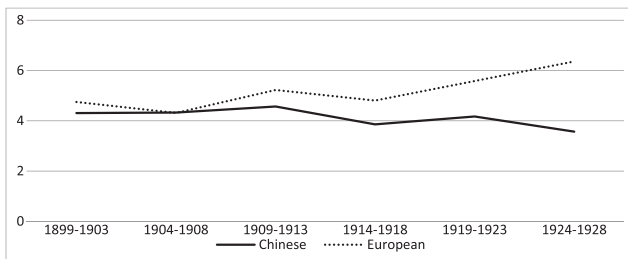


Figure 6. Average number of workers per Melbourne furniture factory. Victoria, 1897–1928.

minimum wages.⁶⁹ Direct enforcement of these rates, then, probably did little to improve Chinese workers' pay, but the minimums still seem to have served as benchmarks for workers to improve their earnings. Chinese factory workers were warned by Chinese industrialists and their supporters not to aspire to legally mandated minimum wages, which they believed were 'too high' (*Tung Wah Times*, 1913). This indicates that many workers were in fact being underpaid yet were still using the minimums as points of reference for negotiating with their bosses. This is consistent with the findings of historians such as Isaac (2008) and Hatton and Withers (2015) who have argued that minimum wage legislation in Australia had a mixed impact, but was often less significant than is normally supposed.

69 Sydney factory inspectors only made a brief effort to collect wages data after 1896, but Melbourne inspectors made a protracted one, which spanned most of the period under consideration. The definition of a 'factory' is more important in Figures 5 and 6 than for previous figures here. On average, Chinese and European firms were probably the same size when measured by their numbers of workers.

CONCLUSION

Australia's bankrupt Chinese furniture manufacturers failed in business for complex reasons, which they themselves reflected on at length. They testified in both Sydney and Melbourne bankruptcy courts about market downturns ruining their businesses. They described their limited capital and their dependence on trade credit for materials and supplies as well, which created much instability in their enterprises as they were under constant pressure to pay off creditors. According to a number of Chinese factory operators, this capital situation also left them without machines in a mechanising industry and helped ensure that they could not purchase factory space. High wages were blamed in court, too, for the collapse of Chinese manufacturing operations.

The statements made by the Chinese bankrupts compel us to explain their failures largely in terms of economic issues. As shown, their chief complaints in bankruptcy court – market downturns, limited capital, and high wages, which were frequently lamented by European furniture factory operators as well – can be attributed only in part to anti-Chinese discrimination associated with the drive for 'White-Australian' industrial progress. Indeed, that such discrimination contributed to the failures of the Chinese furniture manufacturers is supported by their reflections on their own activities, but that it can sufficiently explain their failures is not.

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