# The experiences of non-Europeans in Australia before 1900

In the centuries after British settlement, Australia has attracted people from around the globe. Some came in search of riches and new opportunities; others were looking for a place to start a new life. Among them were Afghans from the Middle East, South Sea Islanders from across the western Pacific region and the Japanese. By far the largest group of non-Europeans to journey to Australia over this period of time were the Chinese.

## The Chinese

For most Chinese, the main motivation for making the long journey to Australia was the search for gold. During the 1850s Australia was known to the Chinese as *Xin Jin Shan* ('New Mountain of Gold'). Many Chinese immigrants were also political refugees who left China following a bloody civil war that raged across China between 1850 and 1864.

By the late 1850s, there were around 40 000 Chinese immigrants in Victoria. They represented 25 per cent of the miners in the state at this time. In New South Wales, gold mining communities were not as large as they were in Victoria. Here, around 60 per cent of all miners were Chinese immigrants. Their language, culture, religion, appearance and clothing, meant that the Chinese were often viewed with suspicion by Europeans. They were also accused of introducing exotic diseases and drugs (such as opium) onto the goldfields (see Source 7.32). As a result, they were regularly the victims of prejudice and racial abuse.

The main reasons for anti-Chinese feeling among Europeans included:

• *racism* – it was assumed that the culture and religion of white, European peoples was naturally superior. The other purely racist notion was that non-whites would contaminate the pure white race of British Australians. These views were widely expressed in parliament, popular literature and cartoons (see Sources 7.32 and 7.52). An argument often used by European settlers in the lead up to Federation in 1901 was that a united nation would be better able to make laws to restrict further 'unwanted' immigration.

• *fear of being overrun* – there was also a fear that the arrival of the Chinese in increasing numbers might result in Europeans being overtaken as the largest ethnic group. The Europeans feared they would be dispossessed of their land by the Chinese, just as they had dispossessed the Indigenous Australians.

• *suspicion of an unfamiliar culture* – the Chinese stood out as a cultural group. Their language, religion and appearance meant they were often viewed with suspicion by Europeans. Because almost all Chinese immigrants on the goldfields were male, they were also seen as competition for the relatively small number of women there.

• *jealousy* – having been denied access to the best mining areas near water, the Chinese often reworked claims (pieces of land) that European miners had abandoned. They worked hard to go over the tailings (the clay and soil that had already been worked by previous miners) and were often successful in finding quantities of gold that had been left behind, causing anger and resentment among the European diggers. The practice of sending gold home to their families was also viewed as taking wealth away from Australians. This was despite the fact that many European miners sent gold home to their families in Europe as well.



**Source 7.30** A Chinese miner on the goldfields carrying a cradle and other mining tools

Resentment and anger towards the Chinese community flared into violence on a number of occasions. From 1855 onwards, colonial governments in Victoria and South Australia started passing anti-Chinese legislation. Two of the worst incidents occurred shortly after this time. One at Buckland River in Victoria in 1857, and another at Lambing Flat in New South Wales in 1861. 'The Lambing Flat riots' as they became known were a series of riots and attacks against Chinese miners that took place over a period of about 10 months. Mobs of several thousand miners attacked Chinese miners working the goldfields in a number of locations. Over this time, about half of the Chinese miners living there were brutally beaten or injured in the attacks. Only one of the attackers, William Squires, was convicted and sentenced in relation to the attacks.

Despite widespread anti-Chinese feeling, there were some Europeans who showed sympathy and even admiration for the Chinese. Antoine Fauchery, a French miner, described the Chinese as 'strong, industrious and patient'. By the 1870s, the focus of goldmining had moved to Queensland. The decline in alluvial goldmining saw many Chinese people return home, though a small community remained. Some moved on and set up new businesses such as restaurants, trading companies and shops, while others became market gardeners.
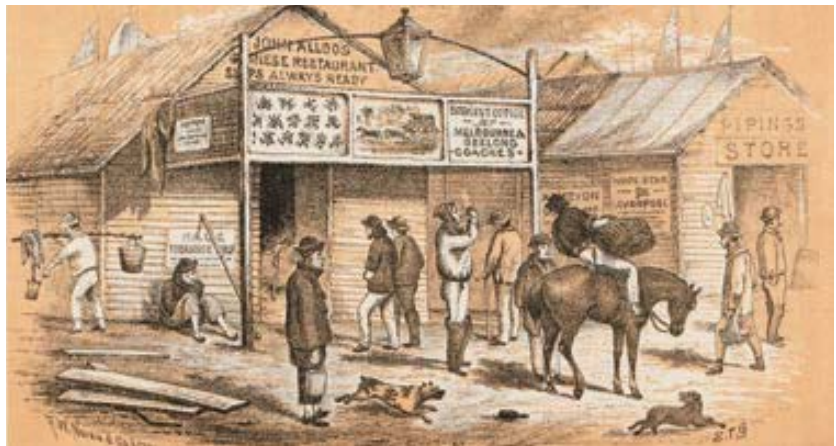


**Source 7.31**   *John Alloo's Chinese restaurant, main road, Ballarat,* 1855 by ST Gill; lithograph, National Gallery of Australia
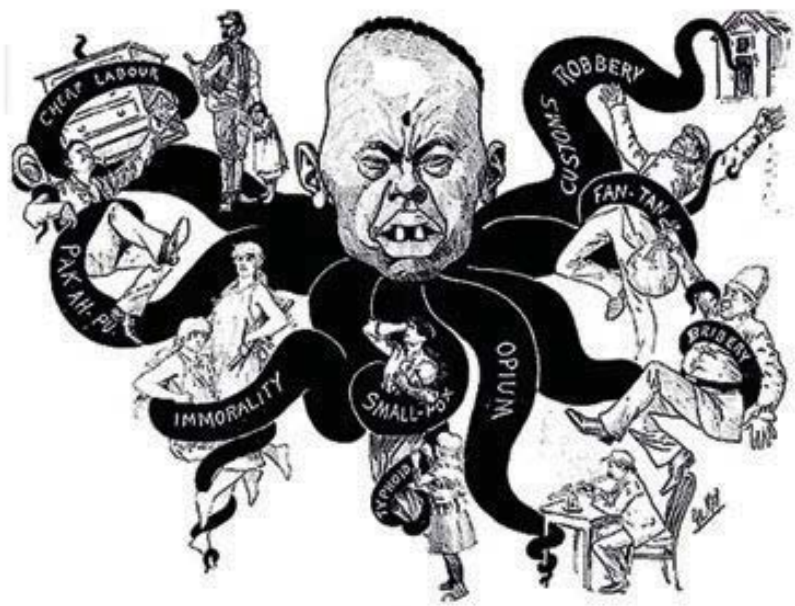


**Source 7.32**   'The Mongolian Octopus – his grip on Australia', a cartoon that appeared in *The Bulletin* in 1886

## **Check** your learning 7.9

### Remember and understand

1   List the main groups of non-European migrants to Australia in the period before 1900. Explain why these groups came to Australia.
2   What did the Chinese call Australia in the 1850s?
3   Why was this a major **pull factor** for Chinese immigration to Australia? What was a major **push factor**?

### Apply and analyse

4   Look carefully at Source 7.32. What evidence does this cartoon provide about the way in which Chinese migrants were regarded by many Australians in the 19th century?

### Evaluate and create

5   In pairs or small groups, research one of the violent outbreaks against the Chinese on the goldfields during the late 1800s.
   a   Your research should cover the following inquiry questions:
      •   when and where the riot/outbreak was
      •   what happened and why
      •   what sources are available
      •   whether the riot brought about any changes.
   b   Prepare a short written report of around 450 words or create an audiovisual presentation to present your findings to the class.