



## A new perspective on Australia and China

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BOOK REVIEW



## A new perspective on Australia and China

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***Australians in Shanghai: Race, Rights and Nation in Treaty Port China***, by Sophie Loy-Wilson, London, Routledge, 2017, 142 pp., £110, ISBN 9781138797628 (hardback), Publisher's website: <https://www.routledge.com>

Sophie Loy-Wilson begins her history of *Australians in Shanghai* with a story from her own teenage years in Beijing in the late 1990s. Loy-Wilson was a diplomat's child who lived in the grounds of the Australian Embassy, not far from the American Embassy. One day, she recalls, she found herself in the midst of an anti-American demonstration, a situation in which she felt the need to assert her identity as Australian, not American. The response from one student protestor was telling – to him, 'America and Australia were really one and the same' (1). In struggling to explain her distinct national identity to those around her in Beijing – that 'being Australian was not the same as being British or American' (9) – the seeds of the book at hand were planted. Loy-Wilson's time in China set in place her historical curiosity about Chinese perceptions of Australia and about earlier generations of Australians who had made China their home.

Loy-Wilson sets out her study of Australians in Shanghai in three parts. The first two chapters consider the Cantonese Australians who 'returned' to Shanghai from the 1910s, in particular the extended Kwok family from Sydney and their Wing On business empire. Here we meet a well-to-do and socially mobile group of Australians who leveraged their wealth and cross-cultural knowledge, along with native place and kinship ties, to become part of the modern Chinese elite. Loy-Wilson pays particular attention to Daisy Kwok (1909–1998), following her life from Sydney schoolgirl in the 1910s, to Shanghai socialite in the 1920s and 1930s, to disgraced capitalist in the 1950s and 1960s, to friend of the newly reopened Australian consulate in the 1980s. The second chapter, which focuses on Daisy's life after 1949, is interesting but sits at odds with the temporal focus of the book as a whole, distracting a little from the rich picture of life in interwar, treaty port Shanghai painted elsewhere.

The middle two chapters of *Australians in Shanghai* trace the experiences of a very different group of Australians – white Australian economic migrants who travelled to Shanghai in the Depression years of the late 1920s and 1930s, seeking work and opportunity. Relying largely on the archives of the Shanghai Municipal Police, Loy-Wilson skilfully uncovers the imperial tensions unleashed by the illicit activities of individual working-class Australians as they struggled to get by – including manufacturing narcotics, prostitution, fraud, illicit gambling and drunkenness. They may have been British by nationality, but (white) Australians became seen as a problem by the British in the International Settlement; a ban on Australians entering Shanghai was even mooted in the 1930s.

Within this context, Chapter 4 includes a brief but enlightening discussion on how Australia and Australians were represented in the Chinese press in the 1920s and 1930s, and how Chinese in Shanghai responded to the White Australia Policy and white Australians' domestic anti-Chinese sentiments.

Loy-Wilson's concluding two chapters, somewhat shorter than the others, move on to examine the activities of Australians within trade union, labour and Christian organisations in 1930s Shanghai, such as the International Labour Organisation and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Here the lives of individual Australians in Shanghai are subsumed by discussions of larger political events and issues concerning labour rights and industrial conflict, such as efforts to reform labour conditions in both British- and Chinese-owned factories in the Zhabei district of Shanghai. With her stated focus on the life trajectories of Australians in Shanghai, I might have welcomed a closer focus on the individual lives of intriguing figures like 'welfare officer and factory inspector' Eleanor Hinder from Sydney, who worked for the YWCA in Shanghai in the early 1920s.

In Loy-Wilson's words, *Australians in Shanghai* 'rethink[s] Australian history in a Chinese context' (6). Educated in China and Australia, fluent in Mandarin and English, and with personal and intellectual understanding of both contemporary and historical China, Loy-Wilson is ideally placed to tackle such a task. To do so, she draws on a range of sources produced in Shanghai and Australia as the basis for her study. As well as the Shanghai Municipal Police archives mentioned earlier, Loy-Wilson makes use of the English-language *North China Herald*, Chinese-language periodicals and other materials held in the Shanghai Municipal Archives, External Affairs and Foreign Affairs records held in the National Archives of Australia, and personal papers relating to Daisy Kwok and the wider Kwok family. As an Australian historian turned towards China and Chinese sources, Loy-Wilson builds on the work of historians such as John Fitzgerald (*Big White Lie*, 2007) and Mei-fen Kuo (*Making Chinese Australia*, 2013). And, like Fitzgerald and Kuo, Loy-Wilson has produced a transnational Australian history of the best kind.

A century after young Daisy Kwok and her family moved from Sydney to Shanghai – and 20 years after a teenage Sophie Loy-Wilson roamed Beijing by bicycle – Australians, be they politicians or bureaucrats or even historians, continue to be surprised by the long, complex and diverse histories that bind Australia and China. As Loy-Wilson notes in her conclusion, it is usually two key moments that are remembered – the colonial gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s, and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic in 1972. Two groups of men – Chinese goldminers and white 'post-Cold War warriors' – are remembered along with them. Yet in between, and before and after, Australians have engaged with China in many different ways and for many different reasons; Australians who were women as well as men, Chinese as well as white. Loy-Wilson's work makes an important contribution to broadening our understandings of these diverse histories, not least by simply including *Chinese* Australians among her Australians in Shanghai.