Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 12 (61) No. 2 – 2019
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2019.61.12.21

Laughing at or laughing with? – Ted Dyson's humorous treatment of Australian Goldfields Chinese

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Humour directed at immigrants can be ambiguous in intention and tends to reduce tension and suspicion rather than to inflame racism. Joking and humour directed at foreigners has been widely collected and studied. As Christie Davies has argued, nationalism or bigotry are not the ruling characteristics; rather, the temper of the humour largely depends on context and delivery and cannot be gauged simply from the written text. "Sketches of life on the Australian goldfields" by Ted Dyson (1865-1931) include humorous stories about Chinese diggers that contrast with other writers' anti-Chinese racist postings in the Australian periodical, 'The Bulletin'. The well-referenced survey by Ouyang Yu of the treatment of Chinese in Australian literature focussed on ethnocentrism and anti-Chinese sentiment, but Dyson's stories do not belong in this category of works. Dyson aimed to ameliorate antipathy and to arouse empathy with 'the other'. His humorous descriptions of Chinese worked to establish some respect and kindred feeling with Chinese people and their culture, forming a kind of middle ground in race relations.

Key-words: *humour, Chinese, Australian, racist*

1. Introduction

Edward (Ted) Dyson was born in Ballarat in 1865 to a father who was a mining engineer on several Victorian goldfields. He became a freelance journalist and writer and came to prominence with the publication of his short story *A Golden Shanty* in the 1889 Christmas anthology of the well-known Sydney-based periodical, *The Bulletin*. Over a long, productive working life – he died in 1931 – he published both poems and novels, but is best remembered for his short stories, collected in several anthologies, the first in *A Golden Shanty: Australian Stories and Sketches: Prose and Verses by Bulletin Writers* (1890). His stories concern the lives of miners, agricultural labourers and townsfolk and are

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presumably based on his own experience. They afford insights into the tribulations and preoccupations of ordinary folk in Victoria and New South Wales during the later stages of the gold rush years, the early years of Federation, and the First World War. They mainly concern "colonials" (i.e. those born in Australia) and new arrivals from Europe, Britain, Ireland and America. Aborigines are hardly ever mentioned, and Chinese very rarely.

The 1890s has been described as a watershed period in Australian literature. It was dominated by the Bulletin School of bush literature when that Sydney-based journal was under the editorship of J.F. Archibald. It has been much discussed by scholars and opinions of the literary merit of its writers have varied over time. The 1890s was a decade of rising nationalist sentiment that unfortunately often led to jingoistic racism, so that after Archibald's departure the masthead became openly racist: "Australia for the White Man". The highly-regarded Australian authors Henry Lawson, Banjo Patterson, Miles Franklin and Joseph Furphy all wrote for *The Bulletin* (Nesbitt 1971, 3-17).

Ouyang Yu has argued that the nationalism of these and other writers resulted in the "othering" of Chinese in Australian literature. He has singled out Dyson's work as epitomising anti-Chinese sentiment. While acknowledging that Dyson was regarded as a humourist, Ouyang finds that his humour, if it existed, was offensively racist.[2] In this paper I examine Ouyang's claim and demonstrate that a deeper understanding of humour and a more detailed examination of the texts lead to other ways of assessing Dyson's work. I look in particular at the treatment of Chinese characters in Dyson's two short stories, *A Golden Shanty* (1887) and *Mr and Mrs Sin Fat* (1890). I argue that these stories are concerned with all kinds of underdogs, with unsophisticated, rural pioneers, with the new urban middle class, and with consequent emerging social problems, with the purpose of criticising internal contradictions and absurdities in these groups rather than attacking a particular class or religious or ethnic sector.

A decade or so earlier, Charles Dickens had shone a light on the problems of rapid social transformation in England following the Industrial Revolution. James Kincaid states that in Dickens' work "fun was very serious and his seriousness often funny, with laughter being used 'to cement our involvement in the novel's themes and concerns'" (Kincaid 1971, introduction). While in no way claiming that Dyson's literary merits can be compared with Dickens', he obviously modelled much of his work on that great figure of the Victorian era and consciously adopted Dickens' humour techniques in his stories. Nineteenth century Australia was greatly

[2] In this paper I refer to Ouyang by this family name. Yu is his personal name. Most citations and library holdings list his work under Yu.

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influenced by British literary culture. Dickens' work circulated internationally in the English-speaking world and was widely read. In the style made popular by Charles Dickens, Dyson used phonetic rendition of dialect, mispronunciations and malapropisms, unexpected twists of the plot and "worm's eye view" of socially inappropriate behaviour to arouse sympathy for the characters in his stories. His descriptions of Chinese people create a middle ground between them and the dominant European society from which they were excluded. Dyson's humour treatment of Chinese people demonstrates a particular type of cross-cultural humour. This paper is a small study of this by one particular author, grounded in the particular historical circumstances of the time. The topic deserves a much wider study in other contexts.

2. A Golden Shanty

The main character of Dyson's short story *A Golden Shanty* (Dyson 1890) is Michael (Mickey) Doyle, the owner of the "Shamrock", a run-down pub on an abandoned gold mine site outside Ballarat, a centre of the early Gold Rush period, and we follow Mickey's fortunes until in an unexpected twist at the end of the story he narrowly avoids being outsmarted by local Chinese miners. Mickey is a stupid Irish publican (see comments below about contemporary discrimination against the Irish and against Catholics). Dyson describes him in some detail – "Landlord Doyle was of Irish extraction; his stock was so old that everybody had forgotten where and when it originated, but Mickey was not proud — he assumed no unnecessary style, and his personal appearance would not have led you to infer that there had been a king in his family, and that his paternal progenitor had killed a landlord 'wanst'." By contrast, the Chinese are not dignified by personal names. Only one is named – Hi Yup, and the rest are called "John" (short for John Chinaman), "Oriental," "Celestial," "Chow," "Mongolian," "Children of the Sun," or "Yellow Agony".

Mickey is having difficulty running his business since gold ran out in the Yellow Creek valley and the miners moved on to new fields. The Chinese arrive after others depart and set up camp on the abandoned site – "squalid, gibbering Chinese fossickers, who herded together like hogs in a crowded pen, as if they had been restricted to that spot on pain of death or its equivalent, a washing." They do not drink in the bar (drunkenness is not regarded as a Chinese characteristic). From time to time they steal Mickey's pigs and chickens and he has to fight to get his livestock back. Then they start to befriend the Doyle family, offering preserved ginger to Mrs Doyle and even patronising the pub. Mickey notices that each time

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they visit they steal a brick from his yard. When they start taking bricks out of the walls of the building, he confronts them.

> 'Why do ye be shtealing me house?' fiercely queried Mr. Doyle of a submissive Chow, whom he had taken in the act of ambling off with a brick in either hand one night.
> 'Me no steal 'em, no feah — odder fellah, him steal 'em,' replied the quaking pagan.

Then one day they send a delegation to see Mickey and make an offer to buy the hotel outright.

> 'We buy 'em you hotel: what for you sell 'em — eh?'
> 'Fwhat! Yez buy me hotel? D'ye mane it? Puchis th' primises, and yez can shtale ivery brick at yer laysure. But ye're joakin'. Whoop! Look ye here. I'll have th' lot av yez aten up in two minits if yez play yer Choinase thricks on Michael Doyle.'

He bargains with them and thinks he is very smart to settle on a purchase price of fifty pounds – actually less than they were prepared to offer. Mickey celebrates the agreement by killing a pig for dinner, a rare treat in his household. The carving knife is blunt from long disuse and he has to sharpen it. This he does using one of the remaining house bricks as a whetstone. Being old and worn down, the knife breaks and so does the brick, and in the dust of the shattered brick he sees specks of gold. Then he realises that at the time when the pub was built there had been plenty of gold in the creek bed so that some had been incorporated into the mud bricks. The smart Chinese have figured this out and that was why they have been stealing the bricks. That is also why they wish to buy the whole building.

At this point Mickey cancels the sale and sets his dog on the Chinese miners. They return to their camp "broken and disconsolate," and Mickey lets his imagination soar, envisaging immense profit from washing the gold out of the bricks. He sees himself in the future: "Michael Doyle, licensed victualler, … a millionaire and a J.P.".[3]

[3] The collection *A Golden Shanty* brought together three smaller collections, *Below and On Top*, *Fact'ry 'Ands*, and *Benno and Some of the Push*. In the preface to *Below and On Top,* Dyson acknowledges that many of the stories were originally published in *The Bulletin*, or in the Melbourne *Argus, Punch*, *The Antipodean* and *Cosmos*.

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3. Mr and Mrs Sin Fat

The short story *Mr and Mrs Sin Fat* also appeared in the 1890 collection of work by *Bulletin* writers titled *A Golden Shanty*. Its tone is quite different from *A Golden Shanty*, from which the collection is named. It tackles topics that were currently sensitive such as opium addiction and prostitution, as well as "miscegenation," although these are not the main focus of the story. To balance these serious concerns, the text contains comic passages and humorous passages in the Dickensian style and, again, concludes with a surprising twist of events.

The central character of the story, Mr Sin, is a Chinese man who arrives in Melbourne in 1870 "possessed only of a blue dungaree suit… ninepence in coppers, and as much of his fatherland spread over his surface and deposited in the cracks and crannies of his gaunt person as he could conveniently carry." Dyson says that his unprepossessing appearance is the origin of the expression "as ugly as Sin." The family name is clearly intended to arouse a mirthful reaction from the reader, but it could even be a transcription of a proper Cantonese name, and Dyson apparently understands that the Chinese surname precedes the personal name, which indicates some basic appreciation of Chinese custom.[4]

From Melbourne, Sin travels to Ballarat where he becomes a rag-and-bone man or "Rag John." His "bijou villa" is "built in his spare time from plans and specifications of his own making, and composed of old palings gleaned from neighbouring fences on moonless nights, and multitudinous other scraps and patches which were within the reach of a poor Chinee." There follow some comic interludes in the story describing Sin's activities in Ballarat, collecting rubbish and stealing a goose that he attempts to sell back to its owner.

Mrs Sin Fat enters the scene. She is the villainess of the story, a European woman that Sin has rescued from the streets where he found her drunk and lying in the gutter. Compared with the jocular description of Mr Sin, the language used to describe the woman is plain and direct. She is not accorded the dignity of a personal name. "About thirty-four years of age, tall, round, with the unnatural obesity of a heavy drinker, intensely hating all about her — aye, and hating herself worse than all

[4] Such understanding was rarely applied to the recording of Chinese immigrants' names. The first Chinese to settle in Australia was recorded as John Shying although his surname was in fact Mak 麥 and Shying was a version of his personal name Sai Ying 世英. There is a Cantonese surname Sin (Xian) 冼 and Fat may represent a character used in personal names such as 法 or 發. Indeed, Sin Fa (Xianfa) 憲法meaning "constitution" was a term very current in Chinese newspapers in the 1890s when this story was published as political reform in China was being hotly debated.

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as she wallowed in the very dregs and slime of the social system — such was Mrs. Sin Fat." The two "got married" (Dyson's use of quotation marks), although she frequently leaves him to go out drinking with other men. She is described as "his only weakness." From this it is clear that the author's sympathy is with Sin and not with his missus. There is grudging admiration of his typically Chinese craftiness. "Sin bore his cross patiently but it was not affection entirely that restrained him from dropping something unhealthy into her gin. … he had many plans, and this woman could dress well and ape the lady. He foresaw a time when she would be useful to him."

The Chinese settlement in Ballarat is built over old gold diggings. One night the ground collapses, burying the couple and their house in a deep chasm. This prompts Sin to leave Ballarat for Melbourne. He opens a business in Little Bourke Street in 1876, apparently a restaurant but in fact a gambling house, brothel and opium den. Melbourne is booming and he quickly becomes rich. Dyson's description of the newly affluent Sin drolly enlarges on his personal name Fat. It is worth quoting in full, and I note that the fact that Dyson correctly identifies one of the hallmarks of Chinese humour in this text proves that he had made some effort to appreciate the nuances of Chinese language and custom.

His stoutness was phenomenal; it would not have discredited the treatment of those wily men who prepare prize hogs for agricultural shows. Layers of blubber bulged about his eyes, leaving only two conical slits for him to peer through; his cheeks sagged below his great double chin, and his mighty neck rolled almost on to his shoulders, and vibrated like jelly with every movement. But his corporation was his greatest pride — it was the envy and admiration of all his friends; it jutted out, bold and precipitous, and seemed to defy the world. This Celestial phenomenon was dressed in the very latest Chinese style; gorgeous silks of many colours bedizened his capacious person; his feet were encased in the richest stub-toed, wooden shoes, his hat was a brilliant building direct from Flowery Land, and his proud tail swept the floor. A dandy dude was he — a heavy swell from home — oily and clean, looking as if he had been well scraped and polished with a greasy rag. He was jolly, his smiles went from his ears to his toes like ripples on a lake, and succeeded each other like winks — in fact, he was brimful of a wild sort of Chinese humour. We have read that the Chinese delight in punning; this man must have been the king of Mongolian punsters, judging from the merriment his every remark was wont to receive. He was brimming with irony, sarcasm, and sparkling repartee. A white man could never grasp his witticisms; after translation they sounded much like childish nonsense but anyone who listened to him would feel confident that he was a comical dog all the same.

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The police – with Irish names, Mahoney, Mulduckie (?) and O'Brien – are in on the "Chinese restaurant" racket, "These zealous guardians of public property and morality had mastered the art which was necessary to every 'mimber av the foorce' who would have his bank book and little terrace in the suburbs – the art of not seeing too much."

Mrs Sin Fat is the procuress for the brothel but as the business prospers her tasks are sometimes taken over by others. One day she sees a girl who has been lured into the shop and is being introduced by Sin to her first pipe of opium. With shock, she recognises her own daughter. She and Sin launch into a deadly fight about whether to keep the girl or let her leave. Dyson at this point leaves off all mockery and facetiousness and becomes deadly serious. "'That girl,' she said calmly; 'is she to go?' 'No, no! Go yourself.' These memorable words were the last ever spoken by the great, the prosperous Sin Fat." Mrs Sin draws a knife, kills Sin and drags her daughter away. Then she apparently commits suicide by drowning in the Yarra River.

Sin Fat was found, and duly inquested. A verdict of murder was returned, and a warrant issued for Mrs Sin Fat, but she was never caught. Only one man every set eyes on her again. A week after the murder a stoical old ferryman was working his lumbering craft across the river late one night, when something struck the prow, turned slowly round, and quietly drifted with the dark waters. It was a body. It turned over after the contact with the boat, and the man saw a white, bleached face in the moonlight, surrounded by a mass of black hair, which formed a sombre halo. The ferryman looked after it curiously for a time, then resumed his rowing, muttering, "Only a body! Well, I don't want t'be mixed up in no inkwests."

4. Chinese on the Goldfields

From the 1850s onwards, tens of thousands of Chinese entered Australia escaping civil war and poverty in their homeland and seeking their fortune on the goldfields. By the 1860s it is estimated that one in ten adult men in the country was Chinese (there were virtually no women). The influx of large numbers of people who were physically and culturally distinctive stirred up widespread anti-foreign feeling. As gold fortunes ran out and competition between miners became progressively more intense, some argued that Chinese would never make good citizens because they were "fanatically loyal to a despotic foreign emperor who could order them to rise up at any moment" (Rolls 1992, 18). The Victorian Parliament passed an Immigration Restriction Act in 1855; in Ballarat there was the anti-Chinese

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Buckland Riot in 1857; and in New South Wales the Lambing Flat riots of 1860-61. For their own protection as much as for convenience, Chinese miners lived in separate camps on the goldfields. The Victorian government appointed officers to protect them but charged them the cost as a "residency tax."

Chinese immigrants did not blend in easily with the white population. Their most distinctive feature was their hairdo. Under the Manchu Qing rulers, all Han Chinese were made to shave their foreheads and wear their hair in a queue or pigtail. If a miner returned to China without his pigtail, he would be liable to arrest and punishment, so even though there was widespread anti-Manchu sentiment in the Chinese community, virtually none cut their hair. Chinese also dressed differently from Europeans, observed different religious rituals, and if they spoke English, their speech contained certain linguistic markers such as an inability to distinguish between "l" and "r" or to voice consonants at the end of words. All of these characteristics made them ripe for mockery.

Opium was in common use in China at this time (and the cause of the Opium Wars), and some Chinese brought this addiction with them to Australia. This and gambling were said to be particular Chinese evils. Several gambling games were popular among the Chinese, including *fantan*, where players bet on the number of beans or other small objects hidden under a bowl and marked their guesses on a table. This was banned in Victoria. There was also a lottery game called *packapoo* in which tickets were sold, each bearing Chinese text (unintelligible to non-Chinese). The player marked a number of characters in the text on his ticket, which was ultimately matched against the master ticket, with the closest guess winning. The non-Chinese population was not immune to these and other gambling games, often patronised opium dens (opium smoking was legal), and was considerably more addicted to alcohol than the Chinese. It was commonly thought that Chinese-run opium dens were also brothels, although this is disputed. White women were warned against associating with Chinese to prevent intermarriage. The various evils that Chinese were supposed to have brought were featured in a cartoon by Phil May (see Figure 1) in *The Bulletin* titled *The Chinese Octopus* (King 1976, 18*)*.

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Figure 1. "The Mongolian Octopus – Its Grip on Australia." Phil May, *The Bulletin* 21 August 1886

The Lambing Flat Riots of 1860-61 led to the restriction of Chinese immigration but were not isolated incidents. Racist attacks on Chinese were common on the goldfields. Dyson described them very candidly in his 1906 novel *The Roaring Fifties* (Dyson 1906, Chapter 17).

Card-playing was the recreation the diggers most indulged in here, if we except a decided penchant for Chow-baiting….

The Chinese and Mongolians came early to Victorian rushes, and remained long. They were never discoverers, never pioneers, but, following quickly upon the heels of the white prospectors, they frequently succeeded in securing the richest claims in the alluvial beds, and from the first they were hated with an instinctive racial hatred, that became inveterate when the whites found in Sin Fat a rival antagonistic in all his tastes and views, in most of his virtues, and in all his pet vices, bar one. The Chows were industrious diggers; they worked with ant-like assiduity from daylight to dark, and often long after that were to be seen at their holes, toiling by the light of lanterns.

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They had vices of their own, and not nice ones, but they gave way to only one of the amiable little social weaknesses in which the Europeans indulged, and displayed the overpowering passion for gambling that has since become characteristic of the China-men in all their Australian camps. They had no other amusement, and desired no leisure; they were squalid in their habits, and herded like animals; they were barren of aspirations, and their industry was brutish (though of a kind still belauded), since it left no leisure for humanizing exercises, no room for sweetness and light. They were law-abiding, but that was not a virtue to commend itself to the Victorian diggers at this date, and they were only law-abiding because of their slavish instincts and their lack of courageous attributes. The antipathy bred then survives in the third generation of Australians, but is less demonstrative now that laws have been enacted in accordance with the racial instinct.[5]

In the era when Darwinism introduced and made respectable the view that Europeans and European culture was the pinnacle of evolution, the general public looked down on all coloured people, regarding them as less evolved, of lower intelligence and mired in superstition. This prejudice also applied to Catholicism and to the Irish. Anti-Chinese sentiment was widespread and not unique to Australia. Many Chinese went to work on the goldfields and on the railroads of Canada, the United States, Mexico and New Zealand and they faced popular and official discrimination in all those countries (Wu 1982). In Europe, an earlier sentimental image of China and Chinese people was tempered by the hostilities of the mid-century Opium Wars. Following the opening up of China to trade through foreign concessions anti-Chinese feeling surged in the 1890s following accounts of attacks in China on European missionaries in the lead-up to the Chinese anti-foreign campaign of the Boxer Rebellion.

British and American literature mirrored popular sentiment. American dime novels of the era featured anti-Chinese stories that sold in large numbers (Tousey 1900). The British author M.P. Shiel whipped up anti-Chinese feeling with his serialised stories later edited into a novel titled *The Yellow Danger: Or What Might Happen if the Division of the Chinese Empire should Estrange all European Countries* (Shiel 1999). The plot revolves around a sinister Chinese master-mind who launches a world war because of his infatuation with an English nursery maid who snubs him when they meet on a London bus. Outright racism was common, but, significantly, on the London stage it was tempered by humour that sought to establish a middle

[5] In other works, both verse and prose, Dyson mentions Chinese immigrants in a serious tone, for instance discussing opium smoking.

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ground between audience and characters in the dramas. Chinese people in these plays have funny names, for instance, Wun Hi in the musical comedy *The Geisha*. Li in *San Toy* sports a long pigtail, constantly pronounces "r" as "l" and adds "ee" endings to words (Gan 2018, 32-35).

5. Laughing at

Susan Lever, in her preface to Ouyang Yu's 2008 survey of the treatment of Chinese people in Australian fiction, describes the short story *A Golden Shanty* as nothing more than "crude racial humour" (Ouyang 2008, 2). In *Chinese in Australian Fiction 1888-1988,* Ouyang considers Dyson's work in detail. He regards him as typical of Australian writing of the late 1880s, when, he says, Chinese people were described as "most despicable and disgusting human beings: the only way to deal with them, it seems, was to expel them entirely from the country." He admits that Dyson may have intended *A Golden Shanty* to be a funny story with a surprise ending, but states that there is "a streak of negative Orientalism that characterises much of his later writing about the Chinese." The Chinese "became a symbol of human undesirability, steeped in diseases, crass crimes of theft, and opium running, as well as many other evils" (Ouyang 2008, Chapters 1 and 3).

Ouyang is disgusted by the negative portrayal of the Chinese that, for him, causes the humour to be absolutely un-funny. I maintain however that he misread both stories under discussion and failed to grasp the reasons for the humour or how it is applied. The Irish publican is the main butt of humour in *A Golden Shanty,* not the Chinese miners who nearly outsmart him, as I have shown above, and *Mr and Mrs Sin* Fat is not "a story of miscegenation that leads to violence and death" as he claims. Mrs Sin is the villainess, an alcoholic who has abandoned her former husband and child. She, a non-Chinese, kills the kind Chinese man who rescued her and gave her a home. Sin Fat is no saint, not even a flawed hero, but he is certainly not "an archetype of Chinese evil embodying the two worst qualities of the time: Sin and Fat, one spiritual and the other physical," as Ouyang claims.

Desmond Manderson, who has written about descriptions of obesity in Australian literature, states that fat is associated with depravity, and claims that Dyson's choice of name for Sin Fat is racist (Manderson. 2003. 39). Certainly, in the second part of the story *Mr and Mrs Sin Fat*, Sin grows richer and becomes "fatter than fat; his obesity was phenomenal," but Dyson makes the perceptive comment in the passage quoted above that in Chinese culture plumpness is associated with

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health and good fortune. This was not the case in British popular culture – there are plenty of examples of fat people being made figures of fun in 19th century literature that cannot be described as racist, the most famous being Joe, the Fat Boy in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* and fat jokes continue to be a staple up to the present time.

As for the allegation that Dyson was racist because he linked Chinese people with disease, Ouyang again is wrong. In several of his stories Dyson quotes the phrase "Can the leper change his spots?" but this is a mis-quotation that would have been immediately understood by readers and no doubt would have prompted snobbish laughs on their part at other ill-educated persons who did not know their Bibles. The correct version of the saying is from the *Book of Jeremiah* 13:23 "Can the leopard change his spots?" Dyson certainly knew his Old Testament and was not implying by the quotation that Chinese people were in fact lepers.

When set against general Darwinian prejudices against all non-whites and the pervasive influence of international literature as typified by Shiel's *Yellow Problem*, mentioned above, Dyson's accounts of the physical appearance of Chinese and their involvement in illicit activities are not surprising, but Ouyang is also wrong to claim that portraits of Chinese in Dyson's later works are all racist and negative in the extreme. The passage in *The Roaring Fifties* quoted above shows that Dyson actually had considerable sympathy with Chinese miners who were the object of "Chow baiting". He surely intends the reader to feel for those who were being persecuted in the following account:

A favourite way of tormenting the Chows was to rob them of their pigtails. A Mongolian's pride in his pigtail is very great, and his grief over the loss of it seems to be tinged with a superstitious fear. As soon as the diggers were made aware of this, they vied with each other in bereaving Sin Fat and his brethren of their cherished adornments, and the rape of the lock was a daily occurrence at Simpson's Ranges. No Red Indian was ever prouder of his trophy of scalps than the diggers were of their collection of tails, and the woe that fell upon the despoiled Asiatics was most profound, but touched no sympathetic chords in the callous hearts of the miners.

Dyson's sympathy for Chinese immigrants is also evident in his 1908 novelette *The Missing Link* where he recounts the story of a touring human freak show that featured a real gorilla named Ammonia as well as a man masquerading as an ape/human "Missing Link." In the fictional town of Wangaroo, the circus troupe camps next to a Chinese family's house. The Missing Link steals preserved ginger and "Chinese brandy" from them (in a neat reversal of the stealing of bricks

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in *A Golden Shanty*), and Ammonia the gorilla steals the Chinese baby and takes it up onto the roof of the house, from where, fortunately, it is rescued by the Missing Link. The whole episode borders on farce and the dialogue certainly mocks Chinese mispronunciations, but I do not find the story racist, rather, the reader's sympathy is directed to the Chinese parents and the stolen baby, as is evidenced by the following passage (Dyson 1908):

Kit See burst in upon the dinner party, his Celestial face pale with terror, his usually benignant eyes round with apprehension.

> "What' for? Wha' far?" screamed the Chinaman at Professor Thunder. "Come! Come! You come dam quick! Monkey he stealem my baby."
> "Wha—at?" yelled the Professor.
> "The monkey cally baby away alonga house-top si'." Kit pointed to the ceiling. He was dancing with anguish.
> The Professor dashed for the caravan cage, and was back in a minute. "It's Ammonia," he cried, wild with excitement. "He's broke loose. He's got the Chinaman's baby on the roof."
> Kit See ran into the street, the Professor turned to follow, but Nickie seized him.
> "Hold hard," he said, "there's no hurry, no hurry in the world. Let us think this thing out."
> "No hurry!" snorted the Professor, "and that infernal gorilla waltzing round up there with a live baby?" [6]

6. Laughing with

To understand jokes, it is essential to understand their historical and cultural context, as has been demonstrated by the late Christie Davies in his lifetime study of jokes reflecting different regional and national cultural contexts. He highlights the importance of factoring in the social circumstances of those about whom the jokes are told and their relationship to the joke tellers, while at the same time avoiding circular arguments in which theory or ideology is used to explain the existence of the jokes. It is problematic to explain a pattern of jokes simply by reference to motives or anxieties of a certain sector of the population. Following

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the same argument, then, if we wish to understand the humorous treatment of Chinese in late 19th century Australian literature, it will not do to label the author racist or to describe the literature as orientalist by today's standards. We need to factor in the nature of urban society and the boom time of the late Gold Rush. Opium, gambling, police corruption and petty crime were widespread in white society and the Chinese were easy scapegoats.

Davies has shown that, internationally, the largest group of national, ethnic or regional jokes involve two opposed qualities: stupidity and canniness. He posits that such opposed pairs of jokes emerge in a society that stresses individual achievement through merit. This was certainly a characteristic of protestant white Victorian Australia. Seen in this light, the joking references in the two Dyson stories that are the subject of this paper are predictable: Mickey Rourke is a stupid Irishman; the Chinese are crafty; Sin Fat's good fortune is not due to hard work or moral rectitude but to the accidental collapse of his Ballarat home. It is also worth noting that Dyson's jokes were not directed solely at the Chinese. He also made fun of Mickey Rourke and other stupid Irish. Such Irish humour was common in the British Empire and travelled around the world along with Irish migration. Jokes about industrious but sly Chinese were also found in other parts of the British-speaking world.

Davies has concluded that there is no connection between hostility and jokes, since the content of jokes is the same regardless of whether there is actual conflict or not in the society that produces them. Jokes based on ethnic stereotypes, now usually labelled "hate speech," are not a cause of marginalisation although they may reflect it. Humour indeed has limited power to effect changes in politics or public attitudes, or to bring about social change (Davies 2017, 13-15, 223-228 and *passim*). At best, they can take away some of the pain for the targets. Davies' work has been extended recently by Wendy Gan in her study of historic humorous descriptions of Chinese society in British and American literature. Gan argues that laughter directed at an inferior from a presumed superior position is an "intricate negotiation of power relations" and "certain kinds of humor, when shared in a contact zone conceptualized as a fluid space of multidirectional exchange, can level the playing field." Writing about the depiction of Chinese characters on the London stage in the late 19th century, she states that European mockery of the comic Chinaman does put the Chinese in their (inferior) place, but that place is enlarged by laughter derived from "the mental resolution of the seemingly contradictory or nonsensical." At that moment of resolution, she writes, there is a breakthrough in communication, and both imagined sides meet in "a transient comic space where the potential for hierarchies to be reworked is

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present…. Humour, in other words, challenges the status quo and encourages reassessment of the norms" (Gan 2018, 17).

Dyson wrote the two short stories discussed in this paper at a time when the dominant discourse in Australia was undoubtedly nationalistic and chauvinistic. In both instances, however, by injecting touches of humour into his accounts of the fortunes of Chinese on the goldfields and in Melbourne's boom years (1889-1890), his approach is evidently and distinctly different from the savage racism of other writers. The true purpose of his humorous tales was to create some sympathy or even compassion in the mind of the reader for the fate of the Chinese immigrants. Surely, he was not simply laughing at them but laughing with them.

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