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Growing against the grain

The Chinese tradition of market gardening in Sydney

The traditions of Australian Chinese market gardeners trace back to the Pearl River Delta, where lightweight plastic cans are a modern twist on an age-old practice, photo Christopher Cheng

Flicking through old photos and newspaper reports about Chinese market gardeners, one wonders how they not only survived but thrived in Australia. The country is notorious for its extreme climate and history of systemic racism yet, despite these challenges, Chinese gardeners excelled. Their produce was reliable, and their crops grew quickly, even during dry spells. By properly listening to the experiences of Australia's diverse agricultural communities, we can gain a better appreciation of the valuable contributions they made to the country's multicultural heritage.

Most literature on Chinese market gardening in Australia from the late 19th and early 20th centuries is from European perspectives. Take, for example, this observation of Chinese gardening techniques made by the Fraser family who resided at the James Ruse's Experiment Farm in Harris Park, Parramatta from 1903 to 1913:

Beyond the paddocks in front of our house, there was an enormous garden, with many coolie Chinese. There was a creek running through the bottom of our land and through the Chinese gardens. The Chinese had several large planks of wood where the men would

run with a long pole over their shoulders and large watering cans at each end. They would dip down one can at a time and all day long this happened.¹

Setting out to find the Chinese perspective, I began researching historical records about Parramatta's Chinese gardeners, but soon my research expanded to interviews with active and retired gardeners and their descendants across Sydney. I sought out these Chinese sources from a later period to examine continuities and changes, but even as a Chinese-speaking oral historian, I encountered problems reaching these vegetable growers. Their demanding work schedules made it difficult: one uninterested gardener abruptly hung up when I called; another spoke to me while masked and spraying pesticide, so was barely audible.

Along with the paucity of first-hand accounts, the documentary archive is also sparse. Unlike the Italian horticultural community, which arrived in Sydney usually as families, the Chinese gardeners came as 'single men', most with wives and children in China. Many passed away while in Australia or returned to China without leaving any records, and just a few relatives to carry on their stories. The interviews I was able to conduct with retired Cantonese-speaking gardeners and their English speaking descendants reveal a distinctive way of life and shed light on how Chinese market gardeners overcame adversity and flourished in their new home.

Water wisdom

During a research session at Ryde Library, local studies librarian Angela Phippen uncovered for me valuable clues from SIX maps (1943 aerial photographs of New South Wales) that showed ditches and mysterious dark spots dotted among vegetable plots. In oral history records, Italian gardeners from Ryde mentioned that these 'holes' were distinctive features of Chinese gardens. When I consulted contemporary market gardeners about what these might be, they speculated that the holes were used for rainwater collection. This was confirmed when I found a photograph of Bill Gay, a young man working his family's garden in Guildford, filling watering cans from one of these wells. It turned out the 'black holes' were indeed part of sophisticated waterworks system, featuring channels or ditches, and wells (chih 池, meaning pond in Cantonese) that ensured a steady water supply long before modern irrigation. Such water redirection methods can be traced back to Chinese gardening on the goldfields.



Top 1943 aerial photo of two Chinese market gardens in Ryde, Sydney, show ditches and ponds (indicated by darkened spots) that reveal a complex irrigation system. Image from SIX Maps

Middle Bill Gay collecting water at his Guildford garden in the 1940s. Rainwater-collecting ponds stand as a living testament to Chinese market gardeners' ingenuity, image courtesy the China-Australia Heritage Corridor Project, 2019

Bottom The watering can used by Bill Gay, image City of Parramatta Cultural Collections / Cultural Significant Objects ACC174 .003

Fertile areas with a high water-table, such as Botany, La Perouse and Kogarah in Sydney, proved ideal for these gardens. The retired market gardeners I spoke to noted that inner-city areas, with easy access to market, hosted the longest-running gardens. In my conversation with Colin Soo, now 100, he recalled that sites with flat terrain were preferred because it made manual watering easier.

Drawing on generations of rice farming knowledge, the Chinese transformed their adopted garden landscape to harness erratic rainfall. This ‘water wisdom’, along with hard work, perseverance, strong community bonds and lesser-known practices like manuring and diet, laid the foundation for their thriving agricultural enterprise in a foreign land.

Human capital: the backbone of success

Chinese market gardeners in Australia worked harder than the sun itself, labouring from dawn until night, pushing themselves to the limit despite the heat, rain and cold. Mr SO Foon Tong, a gardener in Blacktown in the 1980s, recalls in Cantonese his exhaustion after working during the Christmas season when temperatures soared: ‘By bedtime, I had to pull my thighs up into bed; my body was so worn out’. In an interview with a retired Sydney Chinatown restaurateur Eileen Lai, commissioned for the National Library of Australia, Lai recalled how her grandfather, a market gardener in Maroubra, was so tired that he would wrap a bag around his feet before resting to keep his bedding clean.²

Colin Soo, who arrived originally from Go Yiu in 1950, witnessed the hard labour first-hand, when delivering Chinese groceries to gardens in Kogarah and Rockdale. He heard stories of gardeners from his hometown waking before the sun; saw them working through the rain in hessian raincoats fertilising their crops. The realisation that families in the Pearl River Delta could never appreciate the physical toll behind sending home a remittance of just a few pounds deeply affected him. After witnessing the hardships, he vowed never to enter market gardening and chose a career in the restaurant industry.

The success of Chinese gardeners was also rooted in strong communal bonds. Single men teamed up with fellow villagers or clansmen living in Sydney. Having a common language was crucial, as many had limited English, and working alongside someone who spoke their dialect made a huge difference. Cooperation extended

to practical matters, like sharing home-style food. This blend of perseverance and mutual dependence, along with hidden ‘secret sauces’, fuelled their accomplishments.

Secret sauces

One little-known practice was the use of a mixture of animal manure, human excrement and urine — what Sandi Robb has dubbed ‘liquid gold’.³ This ‘rocket fuel’ boosted seed growth, increased disease resistance, and sped up yields. However, the strong odour drew complaints from locals who were unfamiliar with the methods behind the gardens’ productivity. An article on 8 August 1924 in the *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate* called a garden on the south bank of the river, at the old David Jones site in Parramatta (now next to Powerhouse Museum), a ‘stink hole’. While European Australians were alarmed by the application of human waste as fertiliser, it was a well-established practice in Chinese culture. Nightsoil from Shanghai was considered a superior fertiliser due to richer urban diet compared to rural areas, and was viewed as a form of productive recycling.

Just as gardeners used ‘rocket fuel’ for their crops, they had secret ‘sauces’ for their bodies: soups and herbal remedies. In southern China, medicinal cooling teas like *lèuhng chàh* 凉茶 and nourishing slow-cooked bone broths like *lòuh fó tōng* 老火湯 were staples that energised and boosted immunity. Hot soups kept the gardeners hydrated and replenished sodium to restore electrolytes after long hours of toil. Bill Lee, from Kogarah, remembers that local game like pigeon, rabbit and even turtle was not ‘off the table’ because his gardener-parents recognised its nutritional value. Unlike the Western habit of eating salads, Chinese gardeners believed that ‘raw and cold foods’ *sāng láahng* 生冷 disrupted the body’s balance, so they blanched lettuce in boiling water and oil to enhance the taste and eliminate contaminants like *Salmonella typhi*, the cause of typhoid.

Food was not just body fuel for these gardeners; it was a continuation of a tradition. These practices — often overlooked by outsiders who do not realise how embedded they are in Chinese culture — were just as vital to survival as the gardeners’ wide-brimmed hats and the long-sleeved shirts they wore to shield themselves from the harsh sun.



Artifacts from excavations at George and Charles Streets, Parramatta, now displayed in Meriton Apartment lobby (180 George St), offer insight into the dietary habits of Chinese market gardeners. Larger than Western bowls, the household ceramics were designed to hold both broths and solid ingredients, photo Christopher Cheng

Cultural resistance through time-honoured practices

The work ethic and cultural practices of Chinese gardeners in Australia were out of kilter with prevailing norms in the mid-20th century. Unlike the standard 40-hour work week enjoyed by Australian wage earners, with weekends for rest and church,⁴ the routines of the market gardeners mirrored those of rural peasants in China, with no set breaks. Other customs, such as following the lunar calendar, celebrating different festivals and seeking blessings from folk deities, were also unfamiliar to most Australians.

Australia's agricultural history reflects the practices of distinct cultural groups. Indigenous people 'touched the ground lightly', managing the land with low-intensity fire and aligning with the natural seasonal rhythms. British colonists introduced grain cultivation, symbolising the idea of 'breaking new ground'. The Chinese, in contrast, left their mark with labour-intensive and often misunderstood methods for growing vegetables – an approach I call 'growing against the grain'.

Many Chinese arrived in Australia to escape economic hardship, were separated from their families and driven by the hope of repaying debts and improving their loved ones' lives.

Their unique approach, especially in managing water and heat, allowed them to deliver crops to market quickly and reliably. Uncovering their garden sites and stories will enrich our understanding of Australia's urban horticultural and culinary history.

Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in Colleen Morris, 'Chinese Market Gardens in Sydney', *Australian Garden History* vol. 12, no. 5, 2001, p.6
- 2 'Eileen Lai Interviewed by Christopher Cheng [Sound Recording]'; National Library of Australia, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/8855986>
- 3 'Wanted – Chinaman Gardener; First class wages - references required', *Australian Garden History* vol. 32, no. 3, 2021, p.16
- 4 Mei-Fen Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia*, 2013, p.64

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