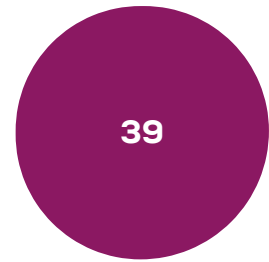




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The Polyphony of Migrant Archives: The Curating and Art-making of “Our Journeys, Our Stories” (2022)

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The article takes the exhibition "Our Journeys, Our Stories" as an example to investigate to which extent the curatorial and art practices can produce a synergy in reconfiguring migrant archives. Focusing on the exhibition's critical engagement with official and counter archives, I analyze how it unveils the making of a racialized Chinese migrant history and retraces migrant resistance. On this basis, I turn to two commissioned artworks by Guan Wei (b. 1957) and Lindy Lee (b. 1957) to examine their dialogic relationship with the curatorial narrative. While the artworks are based on the same document on display, the former deconstructs the racializing mechanism embedded in the White Australian archiving system and the latter revitalizes migrant resilience. I claim that Guan adds institutional critique to the exhibition and Lee uses family history to enrich the curatorial concept of micro-history. The artists and curators stimulate the polyphony of migrant archives, which challenges the monolithic historiography of Chinese migration and enables a self-reflexive paradigm in curating archives and archive art.

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The Polyphony of Migrant Archives: The Curating and Art-making of “Our Journeys, Our Stories” (2022)

The archive as an interface between art and research has become a prevalent topic in recent decades.¹ While the synergy of archive and contemporary art in knowledge production has been widely acknowledged,² Claire Bishop’s critical reflection on the information overload that research-based art and exhibitions face today enables us to reconsider the role of archives in artistic contexts: how do art projects generate situated knowledge rather than simply “cutting and pasting” and “aggregating” historical materials?³ In what ways can archives be adopted to counteract fragmented and monodirectional thinking modes?⁴ This article seeks to answer these questions by investigating the Chinese Australian art exhibition “Our Journeys, Our Stories,” held at Hurstville Museum & Gallery, New South Wales, from 30 April to 24 July 2022. The exhibition interweaves sociocultural history with archive art to recount Chinese migration to the Georges River area. Rather than being supplementary information, migrant archives serve here as a double hinge of the exhibition-making and commissioned artworks, which allows for polyphonic narratives of displacement and migrant resistance. This article first evaluates the archive-based storytelling of the curatorial strategy, and its efficacy in unlearning the racializing discourse of Chinese migration; I then choose the commissioned artworks of two participating Chinese Australian artists as case studies: the installation *Georges River* (2021) by Guan Wei (b. 1957), and the giclee print *The Market Gardener & The Restaurateur* (2021) by Lindy Lee (b. 1954). I argue that these artworks stimulate contrapuntal reflections on the same archival material and elicit a dialogue with the curatorial narrative. In my analysis of the reciprocity

between the curatorial and art practices, I claim that "Our Journeys, Our Stories" performs the polyphony of migrant archives to challenge the monolithic historiography of Chinese migrant history. Facilitated by its multivalent collaboration and research-based form, the exhibition signals a paradigm shift in curating migrant archives and archive art.

The (un)making of a racialized migrant history

Hurstville Museum & Gallery is a regional museum and gallery located in the St George district of New South Wales, maintained by Georges River Council. It plays an active role in preserving and displaying the history of its multicultural communities. In particular, its dedication to local Chinese Australian cultural heritage opens productive space for the art exhibition "Our Journeys, Our Stories." Despite its small scale, "Our Journeys, Our Stories" becomes the first contemporary Chinese Australian art exhibition to focus simultaneously on migrant history and archive art.⁵ The exhibition also materializes the institution's initiative to merge its facilities of a museum and a gallery, which received high praise from local communities.⁶ Curated by researcher and museum curator Dr. Claire Baddeley and visual art curator Renee Porter, the exhibition explores a twofold curatorial pattern, combining social history exhibition and contemporary art show. Baddeley investigated the local community and collected plenty of archival materials from the museum collection, individual collectors, local organizations, and other institutions in order to delve into migrant history. Based on this archival constellation, Porter invited six contemporary Chinese Australian artists to choose any of the materials as inspiration or subject for their practice, then interwove their works with the exhibits.⁷ The migrant archives and contemporary artworks transform the exhibition hall into an archival space of multiple temporalities, interrogating white superiority in the migrant history of the Georges River area and simultaneously

evaluating the colonial legacies in today's Australia.

The Georges River area is part of the southern suburbs of Sydney; twenty-six percent of the people there have Chinese ancestry.⁸ Their migration history can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, when indentured laborers from the Pearl River Delta region were recruited and transported to Australia.⁹ The number of Chinese migrants in the Georges River area proliferated in the 1870s, as the colony of New South Wales abolished its anti-Chinese measures in 1867.¹⁰ However, Chinese migrants were confronted with harsh conditions in the following period. Based on previous racist legislation in the colonies, the federal government of Australia passed the notorious Commonwealth law, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which aimed to exclude all non-Europeans, especially Asians (primarily Chinese), from migrating to there. Apart from defining a series of federal crimes about immigration, the 1901 Act introduced the Dictation Test, which stipulated that any would-be immigrant could be subjected to a fifty-word dictation test in any European language as decided by an immigration officer, and that those who failed the test were prevented from landing.¹¹ The 1901 Act represented the formal establishment of the White Australia policy that remained in force until the 1970s.¹² Under the lasting impact of that policy, Chinese migrants have struggled against institutional racism and inequality for more than a century.

Critical reflection on the racialized history of Chinese migration is the exhibition's primary focus. The displays include a wide range of archival materials that pay witness to racial discrimination in legislation and daily life. For instance, the official document "A blank poll tax receipt issued under provisions of the Chinese Immigrants Regulation & Restriction Act" (1861), lent by the State Library of New South Wales, is direct evidence of the racialized tax system targeting Chinese immigrants which was

enacted by the colony of New South Wales.

The 1861 Act was passed after the Lambing Flat riots, a series of anti-Chinese demonstrations and violence that year. Apart from a £10 poll tax on every Chinese immigrant, the 1861 Act imposed restrictions on the proportion of Chinese passengers on ships arriving at the ports of New South Wales, and prevented any Chinese from becoming naturalized.¹³ These rules epitomize how authoritative power controlled, regulated, and defined Chinese migrants on their arrival in Australia. While the 1861 Act was

repealed in 1867, it represents an early framework for the anti-Chinese legislation that was ubiquitous in colonial Australia.¹⁴ In the exhibition hall, the poll tax receipt is positioned on the wall directly above the showcase of materials about the White Australia policy. This spatial arrangement vividly demonstrates anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler's argument that obsolete colonial archives could function as an "arsenal" of sorts, renewed and reactivated to serve new repressive regimes.¹⁵ The pervasive racist legislation in the colonial period acted as a condition for the enactment of the nationwide White Australia policy, namely "*historical a priori*," which is "not a condition of validity for judgments, but a condition of reality for statements."¹⁶ It is under normalized racialization that the more covert racist apparatus of the White Australia policy, such as the Dictation Test that racially discriminated against Chinese migrants without mentioning their race, maximized its efficacy. What the curators understate, though, is that the document is underpinned

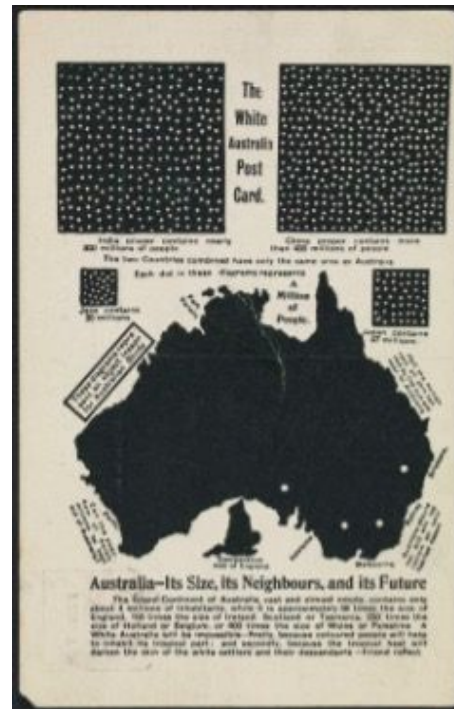


Figure 1 *The White Australia Post Card*, 1907. Postcard. E. W. Cole, Melbourne.

by a comprehensive archiving system, deciding “what can be said” about Chinese migration and how it is said, and that such a system is also integral to the institutional racialization of Chinese migration.¹⁷ This aspect is aptly foregrounded in Guan Wei’s artwork, as I will interpret later in a close reading, which demonstrates a productive dialogue between the artist and the curators.

Besides official documents, the exhibition displays several cultural objects, such as “The White Australia Post Card” (1907), lent by the National Library of Australia, and the sheet music “White Australia” (1910), lent by Museums Victoria. Compared with official documents, these materials instead use paintings and diagrams to reiterate racial difference and preserve colonial hierarchy. Their visual and affective registers left a deeper impression on the public in popular culture and everyday scenarios, extending racial discrimination in a subtler, more nuanced way. By paralleling official archives with daily materials, the exhibition unpacks racialization as an intricate process, stretching into every aspect of migrants’ daily lives.

Whose journeys, which stories?

The comprehensive archival materials displayed at the exhibition inform audiences of the development of the White Australia policy. However, in the catalog of “Our Journeys, Our Stories,” cultural theorist Michael Williams notes that, while necessary, much attention paid to the White Australia policy may lead people to overlook the resistance of Chinese migrants over time.¹⁸ This viewpoint responds to anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s argument that, in the narratives of public memory, migrants are commonly deemed as people who have only one story to tell, namely that of “abject loss and need.”¹⁹ To avoid “casting Chinese Australians in the light of perpetual victims,” the exhibition shines a light on the daily resistance of Chinese migrants.²⁰ Apart from displaying the racial discrimination

embodied by the White Australia policy, it uses archives to recapture the life stories of Chinese migrants. It displays various materials, including handmade clothing, Chinese restaurant menus, Chinese porcelain tea sets, craftwork headwear and costumes for Chinese operas and martial arts, photographs, private correspondence, and many other documents.

Based on these materials, the stories unfold in the Chinese migrants' early workplaces in New South Wales: market gardens, grocery stores, and Chinese restaurants.²¹ Through his family portrait and photographs lent by Georges River Libraries and the State Library of New South Wales, the exhibition introduces Sun Ti Sing and his successful market gardening business. It also narrates the story of Susan Lee Moon Hing and her family-run business, the Golden Creek

Restaurant, through photos, ship tickets, restaurant menus, and many other personal belongings lent by the Susan Lowe collection.²² The archival materials of each protagonist are collected in a separate glass showcase.²³ This layout skillfully constructs situatedness so as to revitalize migrants' lived experience, making their traces visible and accessible to viewers. When walking in the space, audiences are immersed in one story after another, and are invited to visualize the daily scenarios of Chinese migrants. In the process of reclaiming the underrepresented migratory journey, the curators aptly shift the audience's perspective from collective victimhood to the resilience of migrant subjects. By recounting individual efforts to confront institutional racism, the exhibition also provokes



Figure 2 *White Australia*, 1910. Sheet music cover. Composers: W. E. Naunton, H. J. W. Gyles. Museums Victoria, Melbourne.

a negotiation between alternative and official archives, which draws attention to many other unseen migrant stories.

Besides the historical documents, the exhibition displays many materials about the contemporary lives of Chinese Australians, such as the trophy from sports community the Australian Light Volleyball Association, which was initiated by Chinese Australians, and the costumes offered by the St



Figure 3 "Our Journeys, Our Stories" Exhibition 3D view, Hurstville Museum & Gallery.

Georges Community Wushu Center, a Chinese martial arts community. The rich cultural activities embody the spiritual and cultural heritage continued by today's Chinese Australian communities. With the stories of different generations, the exhibition not only attracts widespread interest from local residents, but also formulates a bottom-up perspective to challenge the reductive narrative of victimhood, which finds an echo in sociologist Martina Tazzioli's argument: "The history of (the making of) racialized subjects is also the history of anti-racist struggles that have generated new collective political subjectivities."²⁴

Through understanding archival objects as context-bound and socially engaged players in cultural dynamics, the exhibition utilizes an object ethnography method in an attempt to formulate microhistorical representation.²⁵ Nevertheless, while this strategy redeems the migrant individuals from a generalized form of Chineseness, the exhibition could have further explored the heterogeneity of the Chinese migrant community by investigating the geographical differences, dialects, religions, social classes, and many other nuances of the exhibited individuals.²⁶ Instead of teasing out a detailed chronicle of local Chinese migration, "Our Journeys, Our Stories" introduces several significant events in Australian and Chinese histories,

via wall texts, to sketch history, such as the promulgation and abolition of the White Australia policy, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. While the two negative historic events undoubtedly promoted subsequent Chinese emigration, they are insufficient to explain migrants' varied motives.²⁷ This historical thread could have been enriched by other events, such as China's Reform and Opening-up policy, to annotate proliferated voluntary migration and China's socioeconomic engagement with Australia since the 1990s.²⁸ The rather simplistic discourse showcased in the wall texts is recalibrated by the commissioned artworks, since the six participating Chinese Australian artists – Lindy Lee, Guan Wei, Guo Jian (b. 1962), Xiao Lu (b. 1962), Cindy Yuen-Zhe Chen (b. 1986), and Jason Phu (b. 1989) – have highly diverse motivations for residing in Australia.²⁹ Each artist draws their works at the intersection of the exhibited archival materials and their personal migratory experience, which unpacks migrant history from different perspectives. For instance, the Chinese cookbook *Cooking the Chinese Way* (1948) inspires second-generation immigrant Jason Phu to recount his family history and childhood memories about food. Guo Jian bases his work on the colonial sketch "View of Georges River Near the Liverpool New South Wales" (1819), to ponder the link between colonial legacies and anti-Chinese racism. Cindy Yuen-Zhe Chen draws on the museum artifact fortune-telling sticks (a cylindrical bamboo cup and flat sticks with Chinese inscriptions, used for Chinese fortune-telling practice) to perform the impermanence and fragility of human lives. Their engagement with the exhibits complicates the singular curatorial narrative and counteracts the monolithic discourse of Chinese migration.

It is also noteworthy that the displayed archival materials were lent or granted by various collectors, including governmental agencies, cultural institutions, community organizations, and

individuals. The diverse sources of archives bring out a multiplicity of voices that are interreferential, dialogic, and even contradictory. These voices are not merely juxtaposed in the showcases, but carefully reevaluated and brought into discussion in art practices. For instance, in Guan Wei and Lindy Lee's commissioned artworks, the same archival material is unpacked and reshaped in different ways, and multiple materials are connected in order to deconstruct racialized history. Appadurai proposes that, when perceived as less a collection of traces than a deliberate project, archives refer to both memories and imaginations.³⁰ Following Appadurai, the reproduction of migrant archives in contemporary art practices is an inspiring process that bridges documented histories and imaginative scenarios. The process not only unveils the silenced stories, but also challenges linear and causal ways of storytelling. In this sense, archive art materializes a "post-narrative," in art historian Gregory Galligan's term, which reclaims the contingency and chaos of the past, rather than offering an "inclusive and equitable" narrative that is fundamentally essentialist.³¹

Recreating migrant archives

Lindy Lee and Guan Wei created their commissioned artworks based on the same archival material on display: the "Tiy Sing Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test" (1906) provided by the National Archives of Australia. The "Tiy Sing Certificate" is a double-sided duplicate of a certificate issued by the Commonwealth of Australia, with portraits and a handprint of the owner. Besides personal information and descriptions of Tiy Sing's physical appearance, it writes that he was entitled to exemption from the Dictation Test. While the test would in theory be given to everyone arriving in Australia so as to assess their English skills, in practice it was a racist regulation targeting non-European immigrants.³² It was delivered in any European language specified by the immigration officer; thus failure was

almost inevitable for the undesirable participant. Since Tiy Sing had become a long-term resident in Australia before the 1901 Act, he was fortunate to be exempted from the Dictation Test when he returned from a short travel to China.

The “Tiy Sing Certificate” was the major inspiration for *Georges River* by Guan Wei, an internationally prestigious artist born in China. In 1989, three years after graduating from the Department of Fine Arts at Capital Normal University, Guan migrated to Australia. He worked as an artist-in-residence, first at the Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart, then at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1992, and at the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, in 1993. In 2018, Guan opened a studio in Beijing, and has been based in Beijing and Sydney since then.³³ Guan is famous

for illustrating exile and migration history through mythological spectacle. Such a motif is embedded in the story of Tiy Sing in *Georges River* in the form of a Chinese-style folding screen [pingfeng] painted with acrylics. *Georges River* deploys a dozen elements from the “Tiy Sing Certificate” and other exhibited documents about Tiy Sing. Specifically, the front panel of the folding screen is Guan’s painting of the Georges River basin in the form of an illustrated map, at whose center is a collage of Tiy Sing’s profile portrait together with an ink stamp from the Australian immigration authority. Also positioned in the landscape are symbolic images, such as vegetables and a garden, indicating Tiy Sing’s work as a market gardener in the



Figures 4–5 “Tiy Sing Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test,” 1906. Facsimile image. NAA ST 84/1,1906/341-350, National Archives of Australia, Canberra. Courtesy of Lindy Lee.

area. The back panel is a collage of Tiy Sing's trademark surrounded by images of fortune-telling sticks, a plow, and Sing's left handprint. This double-sided folding screen transforms the "Tiy Sing Certificate" from a written document into a graphical representation of his lived traces. In particular, the mountains, waves, and clouds on the map are painted in acrylics in the form of *gong bi*, a technique of Chinese literati painting that features detailed brushstrokes. Next to the mountains are their fictional Chinese names, such as the Life Mountain [*shengming shan*], the Nostalgia Mountain [*sixiang shan*], and the Exploration Mountain [*tanxian shan*], as well as a Chinese south icon [*nan*] near the painted map's eastern coastline. Painting the Georges River area's landscape using a Chinese art technique and naming the mountains with Chinese words, Guan skillfully represents Tiy Sing's nostalgic feelings and visualizes his efforts to make a home in the host land. Nevertheless, this peaceful atmosphere is confronted by the striking slogan right below Tiy Sing's portrait: "Australia the White Man's Land" from the abovementioned sheet music "White Australia." Besides the ribbon, Guan adopts portraits of two white government officials from the document, Sir T. Gibson-Carmichael, K.C.B, State Governor of Victoria, and His Excellency the Earl of Dudley, Governor-General of the Commonwealth. Through the sharp contrast between Tiy Sing's life and the discourse of white superiority, *Georges River* implies the resilience of Chinese migrants and questions the legitimacy of the White Australian regime.



Figure 6 Guan Wei, *Georges River*, 2021. Acrylic on board, four panels (front). Courtesy of the artist. Figure 7 Guan Wei, *Georges River*, 2021. Acrylic on board, four panels (back). Courtesy of the artist. Figures 8–9 Guan Wei, *Georges River*, 2021. Acrylic on board (details). Courtesy of the artist.

Based on this interrogation, *Georges River* further reveals colonial legacies by investigating earlier Australian history. It is remarkable that, in contrast with the colorful illustrations of Tiy Sing, the map of *Georges River* depicts a constellation of silhouettes, including a Western figure in a hat chasing a pigtailed Chinese laborer near a farm truck, indigenous inhabitants, a ship, and local animals such as kangaroos and emus. The color contrast indicates the different temporalities. The silhouette is a signature visual language in Guan's oeuvre, used to illustrate the history of the British colonization of Australia.³⁴ For instance, in *Remarkable World* (2019), another series of Guan's folding screen paintings, silhouettes are also used to represent British settlers and indigenous Australians. In *Georges River*, the pigtailed Chinese figure refers to the Chinese people of the Qing dynasty who landed in colonial Australia in the 1850s; the emu is a prominent cultural symbol for indigenous

Australians;³⁵ and the ship image can be read as a symbol of the British Royal Navy “First Fleet,” which brought British colonizers and convicts to Australia in 1788.³⁶ These images formulate a metaphorical constellation that traces the British colonial period of Australia’s history. Indigenous peoples had inhabited the Australian continent for 50,000 to 65,000 years by the time of British settlement. Despite the numerous massacres, loss of land, and degradation of resources that they suffered in colonial activities, they actively resisted the British colonizers in the Australian frontier wars that lasted until the early twentieth century.³⁷ By juxtaposing the figures of the three groups of people, *Georges River* reminds audiences that the history of Chinese migration to Australia since the 1850s overlaps with the anti-colonial history of indigenous Australians. Both Chinese migrants and indigenous Australians suffered from violent repression in colonial Australia and the racist discourse of white superiority after Federation. Their traumatic histories reveal the consistent colonial paradigm underlying European colonization and the White Australia policy. In this case, *Georges River* reconfigures the “Tiy Sing Certificate” into a counter-narrative to the colonial paradigm that has recurred in modern Australian history. More importantly, *Georges River*’s critical exploration of coloniality behind the “White Australia” rhetoric engages the binary position of the British colonizers and the indigenous peoples with that of the Australian government and Chinese migrants, and transforms them into multivalent relationships. The artwork thus offers the possibility of rebuilding a decentralized and transcultural Australian history. This vantage point draws attention to the relationship-building between Chinese migrants and other communities, which insightfully broadens the exhibition’s focus.³⁸

Furthermore, *Georges River* reveals that the colonial paradigm is not only showcased by the rhetoric of “White Australia,” but also embodied by the archiving system behind the “Tiy Sing Certificate.” The certificate includes both a frontal and a profile portrait of Tiy Sing. Better known as a mugshot, this two-part photographic portrait is a technique developed by French anthropologist Alphonse Bertillon in 1879, part of an archival identification system for law enforcement based on anthropometry.³⁹ In “The Body and The Archive,” Allan Sekula argues that the semantics of photography in the Bertillon archival system are manipulated to differentiate the object and regulate social deviance.⁴⁰ That the mugshot functions as an objectifying apparatus exemplifies the repressive mechanism both imposed by archiving practices and embedded in the archival system. In his article “Archive Fever,” Okwui Enwezor quotes Thomas Richards’ book *The Imperial Archive* to explain how archival systems reconcile specific forms of knowledge into manipulative principles: “Unawares, the archival gaze has combined the triple register of inquiry, measure, and examination to prepare data to be acted upon by the variable modalities of power.”⁴¹ Projecting the colonial gaze onto the object, the “Tiy Sing Certificate” combines the mugshot with information including his nationality, birthplace, and dates of departure and arrival, so as to monopolize Tiy Sing’s identity. To deconstruct this racist manipulation, *Georges River* uses only one portrait of Tiy Sing, displacing the form of the mugshot. It also magnifies Tiy Sing’s portrait, making it larger than the images of the two white governors. By situating his figure in the center of the host landscape, *Georges River* reverses the power relationship between Tiy Sing and the governors, and reclaims



Figures 10 –11 Guan Wei, *Georges River*, 2021. Acrylic on board (details). Courtesy of the artist.

migrant subjectivity from the archive's racist representation. Guan's skillful reconfiguration of the documents offers a vital footnote to the exhibition: when archival materials are coded with racializing denotation, how they are represented decides whether an exhibition iterates racial differences or builds an alternative narration.

Georges River transforms the archival documents into an artistic object, the Chinese folding screen. Although folding screens were originally mounted with panel paintings in various themes and calligraphic specimens, since their extensive import to Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they were often decorated with exotic paintings, to cater to an Orientalist imagination.⁴² In this context, *Georges River's* reinvention of folding screens in the forms of collage and archive art challenges Orientalist aesthetics and adds to the work's decolonial connotations. It reveals that the three othering patterns in different fields, namely the political rhetoric of white superiority, the biopolitical regulation of migrants in archiving systems, and cultural appropriation, share the same basis of colonial epistemology. Through transforming archives, *Georges River* decodes the racialization of Chinese migrants and stimulates critical reflection on colonial legacies in Australian society.

Another artist who reappropriates the "Tiy Sing Certificate" at the exhibition is Lindy Lee. Born in Brisbane, Queensland, and now based in northern New South Wales, Lee is the daughter of a Chinese immigrant couple who fled Guangdong province with their two elder children in the mid-twentieth century, the period when the White Australia policy prevailed.⁴³ While Guan questions the legitimacy of the White Australia discourse by deconstructing archival mechanisms, Lee elaborates on migrant resilience by reconstructing unseen archives.

In contrast to the historiographical concern in *Georges River, The Market Gardener & The Restaurateur* reinterprets the “Tiy Sing Certificate” from a microhistorical perspective, through the lens of the artist’s family history. *The Market Gardener & The Restaurateur* juxtaposes the “Tiy Sing Certificate” with the certificate of the artist’s grandfather, Foy Lee. Lindy Lee notes that she came across her grandfather’s certificate just in time for the exhibition’s commission, which engenders an unexpected relation in her artwork.⁴⁴ Different from the color tint of *Georges River*, Lee applies a dark palette to the replicated, burned-edged documents, creating a somber mood. Along with the two certificates, Lee magnifies one of her grandfather’s fingerprints and replicates the back of the “Tiy Sing Certificate” with Tiy Sing’s handprint on it. The magnified images emphasize to the audience that the fingerprint and handprint are the two people’s only identifiers. Apart from these biometric signifiers, there are no signatures on their certificates. While handwritten signatures imply live, conscious, and willing bodies, impressions and fingerprints can be obtained from either live or dead bodies, with or without a person’s consent.⁴⁵ Deprived of the right to register their names in the official archive, Chinese migrants were deemed inferior, their lives reduced to biometric data. According to other archival materials on display, Tiy Sing was a successful market gardener, who prospered enough to buy a private truck and employ a driver.⁴⁶ While Tiy Sing and Foy Lee were archived with racial discrimination, the people who failed the Dictation Test suffered from involuntary immobility, and their stories remained silent and unseen. Cultural theorist Ernst van Alphen claims that the archive indicates two kinds of knowledge: knowledge that is identified by the accepted rules, and



Figure 12 Lindy Lee, *The Market Gardener & The Restaurateur*, 2021. Chinese ink, giclee print on cold pressed archival paper, fire. Courtesy of the artist.

knowledge that remains overlooked because of the same rules.⁴⁷ In other words, an archive functions as an inclusion of a specific kind of knowledge and an exclusion of the other kind. By zooming in on the handprint and the magnified fingerprint, *The Market Gardener & The Restaurateur* offers an alternative way to scrutinize the exhibited archives.

In her statement about *The Market Gardener & The Restaurateur*, Lindy Lee emphasizes that the White Australia policy was not abolished until 1973, one hundred years after Tiy Sing's birth, when she was nineteen.⁴⁸ The artist is therefore a witness to how traumatic memories are passed on across generations, and how the legacies of the White Australia policy stretch into the present. In a conversation with Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Lee discussed the racism of her surroundings in her childhood. When reflecting on her experience of being verbally bullied by the mother of a longstanding friend, she said: "Everything about being Chinese in this context of White Australia was painful. It was telling me that my difference was not acceptable. And that is an excruciating place to live in."⁴⁹ Based on these feelings, Lee's early art recreated European paintings as photocopies, to express her self-recognition as "a bad copy; a faded reproduction," which lasted until 2008 when she reconciled her Chinese heritage in art through Buddhist inspiration.⁵⁰ Lee's experience demonstrates the cultural memories shared by Chinese migrants under the lasting impact of the White Australia policy. This traumatic experience is now entangled with multiple modalities of identity construction in terms of ethnicity, class, and gender for the second generation of Chinese immigrants, which awaits public and academic attention. In "A Language to Come: Japanese Photography After the Event," Charles Merewether argues: "The temporality of the document appears to carry some residue of the past into the future: a passageway in and across time. If so, the document

would serve not only as a space of arrival, but equally as a point of departure.”⁵¹ Responding to Tiy Sing’s archive through her grandfather’s archive, her family history, and her lived experience, Lee reinvents the archive as an agency for the present, and urges audiences to critically reflect on the recent surge in anti-Chinese sentiment in Australia and beyond that was fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby formulating a productive tension with the curatorial narrative about the trajectory from the “dark time” of the White Australia policy to the “multicultural and tolerant present.”⁵²

In *The Market Gardener & The Restaurateur*, the ragged and burned edges of the replicated certificate are irregularly perforated. Using a soldering iron to burn holes in papers is a recurring method in Lindy Lee’s art, as with *Full Negative* (2012) and *Moonlight Deities* (2019–2020), which represent “Indra’s net,” a Buddhist metaphor for the interdependent existence of everything.⁵³ Drawing on the notion of “Indra’s net,” Lee adopts the tiny holes to symbolize the interrelationship between the ignored individuals.⁵⁴ It reminds audiences of the sympathy and mutual aid among countless people who suffered from the White Australia policy. When talking about her family’s history of migration, Lee notes: “A migrant’s story is really one of hope, of trying to find something better.”⁵⁵ Through reconnecting and reproducing the certificates of two strangers who shared a similar destiny, *The Market Gardener & The Restaurateur* celebrates the arduous efforts of the Chinese migrants struggling against racial violence, which endorses the exhibition’s curatorial rationale of foregrounding migrant resilience rather than perpetuating victimhood under the White Australia policy.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The research-oriented form and multivalent collaboration of “Our Journeys, Our Stories” provides a productive platform from which to recount Chinese migration in the Georges River

area. Based on its apt selection and arrangement of migrant archives, the exhibition offers a critical review of the making of a racialized history of Chinese migrants. If migrant archives serve as an agency to interrogate white superiority in the social history part of the exhibition, they are then reappropriated and reconfigured by the participating artists in order to produce alternative knowledge. My close readings of Guan Wei's and Lindy Lee's artworks demonstrate how their distinct art strategies – deconstruction and reconstruction – stimulate contrapuntal reflections on the same archival material, and contribute to decolonizing migrant archives in a broader sense. The artists' references to their personal migratory experiences and negotiation with the archiving systems of the White Australia policy respond positively to the curatorial strategy of constructing microhistory and defying victimhood. Paralleling the artists' reconfigured archives with institutional archives and personal archives, the exhibition demonstrates a "non-hierarchical heterogeneity," in Enwezor's term, which brings artists, curators, and audiences into discussion.⁵⁷ This equivalent relationship engenders critical thinking on the curatorial narrative and confronts a monolithic discourse of migrant history. By combining sociohistorical and artistic approaches to migrant archives, "Our Journeys, Our Stories" and its commissioned artworks create a synergy in practicing within and beyond the archive. The curating and artmaking not only open marginalized experiences and counter-narratives to a wider public, but also challenge the established historiography of migration and facilitate self-reflexive forms of knowledge production. Such a collaboration gathers insight into the curating of archive art. If artists act as archivists in the process of collecting, reorganizing, and displaying information, curators play a similar role in the making of an archive art exhibition. This parallel indicates a curatorial paradigm shift that asks for multilayered investigations of the archive and its

reconfiguration in art, which benefits from an equal and dialogic interaction between curators and artists, as shown in "Our Stories, Our Journeys."

- 1 Sara Callahan, *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 151–154.
- 2 Anthony Downey, "Contingency, Dissonance and Performativity: Critical Archives and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Art," in: *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 13–42. See also: Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* no. 110 (2004): 3–22; Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), 11–52.
- 3 Claire Bishop, "Information Overload: Claire Bishop on the Superabundance of Research-Based Art," *Artforum*, April 2023.
- 4 Bishop, "Information Overload."
- 5 The debut of the contemporary Chinese Australian artist community in Australia can be traced back to "In & Out: Contemporary Chinese Art from China and Australia" (1997, Melbourne). Featuring ten Chinese artists who were either based in Australia or China, "In & Out" was curated by Binghui Huangfu and took place at the Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore, from May to July 1997. It then toured multiple cities in Australia, such as Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra, and Hobart, as well as Shenzhen and Beijing in China, from 1997 to 2000. Other early group exhibitions involving contemporary Chinese Australian artists include, among others, "The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art" (1996–1997, Brisbane), "Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian Interactions" (1996, Melbourne, Canberra, Adelaide, Brisbane), "The Rose Crossing: Contemporary Art in Australia" (1999–2000, Sydney, Hong Kong, Singapore), and "Process–Journey: A China–Australia Exchange Exhibition" (2007–2008, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong). Australian institutions focused on Asian Australian artistic dynamics, such as White Rabbit Gallery, the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, and Vermilion Art, have also inaugurated many solo and group exhibitions of contemporary Chinese Australian artists in the last two decades. Most of these revolve around art practices, with little attention paid to the interaction between contemporary art and its associated migrant history. "Our Journeys, Our Stories" fills this gap by bridging archive art and research-based curating, which initiates an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary Chinese Australian art.
- 6 "Our Journeys, Our Stories" received extensive support and loans provided by many local and national institutions, community groups, and oral history participants. The exhibition was nominated for the "IMAGinE Awards" (2022) and praised as "Highly

- Commended Medium Museum Exhibition Project” by the not-for-profit organization Museums & Galleries of New South Wales. “IMAGinE Awards Winners 2022,” Museums & Galleries of NSW, November 17, 2022.
- 7 Bethany MacRae, “Foreword,” in: *Our Journeys, Our Stories* (Hurstville: Hurstville Museum & Gallery, 2021), 4.
 - 8 “Georges River Council Community Profile,” Georges River Council, (accessed May 3, 2024).
 - 9 James Beattie, “Dragons Abroad: Chinese Migration and Environmental Change in Australasia,” *RCC Perspectives* no. 2 (2017): 59.
 - 10 Michael Williams, “Chinese Migration in Georges River: An Historical Context,” in: *Our Journeys, Our Stories* (Hurstville: Hurstville Museum & Gallery, 2021), 6, 14.
 - 11 Alexander T. Yarwood, “The Dictation Test—Historical Survey,” *The Australian Quarterly* vol. 30, no. 2 (1958): 24.
 - 12 Ien Ang, “From White Australia to Fortress Australia: The Anxious Nation in the New Century,” in: *Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture, and Nation*, eds. Laksiri Jayasuriya, David Walker, and Jan Gothard (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2003), 62.
 - 13 “CHINESE IMMIGRATION ACT.,” *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, 11 1861.
 - 14 Joseph Lee, “Anti-Chinese Legislation in Australasia,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* vol. 3, no. 2 (January 1, 1889): 218–224, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1879468>.
 - 15 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3.
 - 16 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 127.
 - 17 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 127.
 - 18 Williams, “Chinese Migration in Georges River,” 10.
 - 19 Arjun Appadurai, “Archive and Aspiration,” in: *Information Is Alive*, eds. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: V2, 2003), 22.
 - 20 Williams, “Chinese Migration in Georges River,” 10.

- 21 Williams, 6.
- 22 *Our Journeys, Our Stories* (Hurstville: Hurstville Museum & Gallery, 2021), 57.
- 23 For a 3D view of the exhibition, see: "Explore 'Our Journeys, Our Stories' in 3D," Matterport, (accessed April 2, 2024).
- 24 Martina Tazzioli, "The Making of Racialized Subjects: Practices, History, Struggles," *Security Dialogue* vol. 52, no. 1 (2021): 111.
- 25 Cristiana Strava, "Object Ethnographies," in: *Reading Objects in the Contact Zone*, eds. Eva-Maria Troelenberg, Kerstin Schankweiler, and Anna Sophia Messner, Heidelberg Studies on Transculturality 9 (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2021), 238–239. Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 91.
- 26 Karen Schamberger, "Whose Stories Are We Telling? Chinese Australian History in New South Wales and Victorian Museums," *Australian Historical Studies* vol. 52, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 571, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2021.1926521>.
- 27 Alex Burchmore, "Reframing the Post-'89 Generation of Chinese Artists in Australia," *Di'van | A Journal of Accounts*, December 2022, 76–93.
- 28 Guofu Liu, "Changing Chinese Migration Law: From Restriction to Relaxation," *Journal of International Migration and Integration / Revue de l'integration et de La Migration Internationale* vol. 10, no. 3 (August 1, 2009): 315–316, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-009-0105-0>.
- 29 Guo Jian and Xiao Lu emigrated from China after the Tiananmen Incident. Guan Wei first went to Australia for an artist residency project. Cindy Yuen-Zhe Chen immigrated in her childhood. Jason Phu and Lindy Lee are second-generation immigrants. Luise Guest, "Dialogues of Diaspora: Six Chinese Australian Artists," in: *Our Journeys, Our Stories* (Hurstville: Hurstville Museum & Gallery, 2021), 24.
- 30 Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," 24.
- 31 Gregory Galligan, "Re-Visioning the Archives: On the Creation and Curation of Relational and Decolonial Visual Art Archives in Asia," in: *The (Im)Possibility of Art Archives: Theories and Experience in/from Asia*, ed. Lu Pan (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2024), 36.
- 32 Yarwood, "The Dictation Test—Historical Survey," 24.

- 33 "Guan Wei | MCA Australia," (accessed May 1, 2023).
- 34 Alex Burchmore, "Guan Wei's 'Australerie' Ceramics and the Binary Bind of Identity Politics," *Index Journal* no. 4 (2020): 14.
- 35 Margaret Raven, Daniel Robinson, and John Hunter, "The Emu: More-Than-Human and More-Than-Tnimal Geographies," *Antipode* vol. 53, no. 5 (September 2021): 1526, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12736>.
- 36 Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 3rd ed., Cambridge Concise Histories (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.
- 37 Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 61, 147.
- 38 Hurstville Museum & Gallery, "Hurstville Museum Showcasing Chinese Migrant Experience Through Art and History," June 28, 2022.
- 39 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* no. 39 (1986): 18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778312>.
- 40 Sekula, "The Body and The Archive," 55.
- 41 Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 116, quoted in: Okwui Enwezor. "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and The Monument." in: Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document In Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), 19.
- 42 Robert Hans van Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc, 1993), 34. Robert A. Leath, "'After the Chinese Taste': Chinese Export Porcelain and Chinoiserie Design in Eighteen-Century Charleston," *Historical Archaeology* vol. 33, no. 3 (September 1999): 54.
- 43 Michael Young, "Lindy Lee's Drum Tower in New York," *Asian Art Newspaper*, August 28, 2019.
- 44 *Our Journeys, Our Stories* (Hurstville: Hurstville Museum & Gallery, 2021), 40.
- 45 George Tyler Mairs, "Fingerprint Signatures (A Word of Caution Concerning Their Use)," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* vol. 27, no. 3 (September–October 1936): 409–411.
- 46 *Our Journeys, Our Stories* (Hurstville: Hurstville Museum & Gallery, 2021), 56.

- 47 *Productive Archiving: Artistic Strategies, Future Memories, and Fluid Identities*, ed. Ernst van Alphen (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2023), 10–11.
- 48 Abigail Kim, "Lindy Lee: The Market Gardener and the Restaurateur," *Vermilion Art*, October 5, 2022.
- 49 Lee, "Lindy Lee Explores Chinese-Australian Identity in Major Sydney Exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art," *ABC News*, October 7, 2020.
- 50 Guest, "Dialogues of Diaspora," 25.
- 51 Charles Merewether, "A Language to Come: Japanese Photography Alter the Event," in: *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether, *Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 129.
- 52 Guangyi Pan and Alexander Korolev, "The Struggle for Certainty: Ontological Security, the Rise of Nationalism, and Australia-China Tensions after COVID-19," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* vol. 26, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 115–138, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-020-09710-7>.
- 53 “然帝釋天珠網者。即號因陀羅網也。然此帝網皆以寶成。以寶明徹遞相影現涉入重重。於一珠中同時頓現。……即此一珠能頓現一切珠影。此珠既爾。餘一一亦然。既一一珠一時頓現一切珠既爾。餘一一亦然。如是重重無有邊際。有邊即此重重無邊際珠影皆在一珠中” [As for the imperial net of heavenly jewels, it is known as Indra’s Net, a net which is made entirely of jewels. Because of the clarity of the jewels, they are all reflected in and enter into each other, ad infinitum. Within each jewel, simultaneously, is reflected the whole net], Dushun, *Huayan Wujiao Zhiguan*, Sui Dynasty, T1867, translated by Thomas Cleary, in: *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, eds. Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000), 58–59.
- 54 Lindy Lee on the Power of Swimming, Meditation and Collaboration, 2023.
- 55 Tiarney Miekus, "Lindy Lee Inside the Seamless Tomb," *Art Guide Australia*, September 22, 2017.
- 56 Williams, "Chinese Migration in Georges River," 7.
- 57 Enwezor, *Archive Fever*, 14.

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