

Gibson, Peter C., *Made in Chinatown: Chinese Australian Furniture Factories, 1880–1930*; Sydney, Sydney University Press, 2022, paperback, pp. 198 + ii, RRP: 40.00, ISBN 9781743327852.

Peter Charles Gibson's *Made in Chinatown: Chinese Australian Furniture Factories, 1880–1930* is the first monograph to provide an in-depth examination of the history of Chinese-operated furniture factories in Australia. Focusing on the period of fifty years, Gibson argues that these enterprises were historically distinctive, noting the absence of comparable Chinese furniture industries in other Pacific Rim migration contexts, such as California. Through a richly documented narrative, the book traces how Chinese manufacturers and workers built a successful industry, despite facing persistent racial discrimination and exclusionary policies. In highlighting their entrepreneurial strategies and adaptive responses to a hostile socio-economic environment, Gibson challenges enduring stereotypes of Chinese Australians as passive victims of racism. *Made in Chinatown* addresses a significant gap in the scholarship, which has tended to solely emphasise Chinese involvement in mining, agriculture, or broader community histories. This book builds upon Gibson's earlier work, including articles in the *Australian Economic History Review* (2018) and *TAASA Review* (2019), and his doctoral thesis, while incorporating new archival sources, such as court and bankruptcy records, to offer a more expansive view of Chinese Australian industrial labour and enterprise.

The book is structured into five chapters. Chapter one traces the origins of Chinese involvement in furniture manufacturing from 1800 to 1880, placing their history within wider patterns of migration and adaptation. Chinese migrants from Guangdong's Pearl River Delta, arriving mainly after the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s, established nearly 200 factories employing around 2,000 workers by 1912, concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. The only other industry with significant Chinese involvement – with approximately 7,000 participants at the time – was market gardening. Chapters two and three shift focus to the lived experiences of owners and workers; chapter two examines factory ownership and financing arrangements, while chapter three foregrounds workers' voices through rare archival materials including court and bankruptcy records. Chapter four investigates marketing strategies and customer demographics, and the final chapter explores Chinese resistance to 'white labour' activism and exclusionary legislation, underlining their unique contribution to Australian labour history.

Gibson situates *Made in Chinatown* within a broader historiography that has often reduced Chinese economic activity to the trope of 'cheap labour.' Early twentieth-century commentators, many of whom supported racially exclusionary policies, portrayed Chinese workers as threats to industrial standards – narratives shaped predominantly by non-Chinese observers. Gibson demonstrates how the

labour movement and state policies identified Chinese factories as economic and racial threats. This prompted targeted legislation, such as the *Factories and Shops Acts* introduced in Victoria (1887) and New South Wales (1896), which imposed restrictions such as reduced operating hours, inequitable wages, and disproportionate safety and sanitation requirements. As Gibson argues, these legal mechanisms served not only as tools of economic exclusion but as instruments of the broader racialised logic underpinning Australia's settler colonialism.

Adopting a postcolonial perspective, Gibson revises narratives that cast Chinese furniture manufacturers as passive victims by centring their voices and highlighting their agency. Drawing on factory records, advertisements, and legal documents, he shows how Chinese Australians navigated and resisted exclusionary frameworks. Rather than retreating into ethnic enclaves, proprietors engaged with the Australian industrial context, adopting practices such as collective bargaining and, in some cases, fair wage principles uncommon in other migrant enterprises.

Chinese manufacturers also strategically marketed their products to working-class European Australians, combining affordability with style and utilising Western advertising conventions, while still celebrating Chinese craftsmanship. This hybridity is vividly illustrated through period advertisements and the Chinese labour stamp found on Wing Lee furniture. Gibson further shows that these enterprises often operated with the tacit or active support of non-Chinese Australians, who resisted the dominant xenophobic ideologies of the period. He is careful, however, to acknowledge the limitations of his sources, urging readers to interpret court testimonies critically, as products of a biased legal system.

The book also builds on historiographical shifts from the 1960s and 1970s that re-evaluated Chinese economic activity in light of the discrimination. While previous studies highlighted racism's role in shaping Chinese exclusion, Gibson extends his approach by examining the internal dynamics of Chinese enterprises and their strategies for success. He draws attention to factors such as specialisation and high-density worker dormitories, which contributed to their competitiveness. He also complicates the assumption of pan-ethnic solidarity, noting that while Chinese workers may have sympathised with their non-Chinese counterparts, they also pursued independent agendas within the labour market.

Made in Chinatown reframes Chinese Australian history by illustrating how migrant enterprise reshaped Australia's industrial landscape. Gibson convincingly demonstrates that Chinese furniture manufacturers were not marginal participants, but resourceful agents who forged a place at the heart of Australian manufacturing. This book is a valuable contribution to migration, labour, and economic history, and is recommended for scholars, students, and educators interested in Chinese diaspora studies and settler colonial economies.

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