**Interview with Sophie Couchman, 3 July 2019**
**Interviewer: Jessie Matheson**

**Thank you for doing this interview Sophie, it's greatly appreciated. I guess the best place to start would be if you could please explain who you are and what your research background is?**

So, my name is Dr Sophie Couchman. I've got a very chequered past, is probably the way of explaining it. I actually started with a Science degree, but I've always been interested in Arts. At the time that I studied you couldn't do an Arts/Science double degree. So, I opted for science, but I did a lot of geography in that degree, a lot of human geography. It was on that basis that I was able to later move into history, in particular into public history and the museum space. I ended up specialising in Chinese Australian history through volunteering at the Chinese Museum in Melbourne, and getting interested in the history of Melbourne's Chinatown. Since working at the Chinese Museum, I have been expanding my research interests and working on projects related to British migration, historical photographs of factory work, Makassan contact with northern Australia and most recently women in farming.

**Was there something in particular that drew you to Chinese Australian history?**

I think it's a few things. People find it unusual because I don't have Chinese ancestry. But I think my interest really came from being a Melburnian. I was born, and grew up in inner city Melbourne so Chinatown's always been a part of my life. I've always seen it as part of Melbourne, and therefore part of my history as a Melburnian. That's shaped a lot of my work, I suppose at a broader level since then. I lived in Singapore when I was three years old, which I don't remember, but Asia's always been kind of around me, so it's never felt strange or different, it's always just been a part of my life.

**Can you explain a little about the work you do with the Chinese Hometown Heritage Tours?**

This was an idea that Dr Kate Bagnall had. We've been friends and collaborators for a long time now and we've worked on a number of projects together. She came to me a few years ago and said, 'Look, I've got this idea to run tours back to Southern China for family historians. Do you want to be part of this with me'? And I said 'absolutely'! And so we worked together, thinking about the route, planning the kind of sites, activities and experiences people might want and then Kate partnered with a travel agent in Canberra, which is where Kate is based. We provide the intellectual component of the tour and then we have a Cantonese-

speaking guide, who travels with us, who deals with the logistics of hotels and that side of things.

**Do you have any particular examples or memories from these tours that stand out to you?**

I suppose the thing about the tours is that we originally conceived of them as tours for people who didn't actually know where their hometown village was and that it was an opportunity for them to get a sense of the place and where their ancestors might have come from. But what we found is that we've ended up having, pretty much on every tour, someone who is actually returning to their hometown village, or even people who are Cantonese and dialect speakers who come on the tour and are interested in getting an Australian perspective on these places in Southern China. Without doubt, the really amazing thing about the tours is when you are travelling with somebody who goes back to their ancestors' village. We help to facilitate that. It can happen as part of the tour if we can fit it in and if they want to, or they can do it independently themselves. Regardless, we all travel with them on that journey. It's incredibly emotional. I think it's more emotional than the people themselves realise it's going to be. Quite often you go back to those villages, and there are going to be people there who remember your ancestors or remember an Australian connection. So, these are people, who, through historical methods, maybe a tiny bit of family memory, but mostly through archive work, are finding out what the village is. Then they go to the village, and there's someone who says, 'oh yeah, I remember your family,' or, 'this is someone who is related to your family.' So, there's memories of their family still in that space and that's very powerful. Then, we've had other people who've travelled with us, in fact two cousins who came independently on two different tours, and they were not able to determine the exact village their ancestors came from. But Kate was pretty certain it was part of a cluster of villages that had people of the same clan that they came from. So, there was no concrete connection, but they knew it was probably somewhere in that area. I'm quite emotional even talking about it now. Both these people were walking around imagining their ancestors, they were stopping and paying respect at shrines. We had translators there, so they could try and talk to people. They weren't able to get any more information, but the power of being in the place was very strong.

**How does that visceral, temporal experience compare to some of the other more traditional curatorial work you've done?**

I think there's always something a bit emotional about history work. Otherwise you don't do it. I think

there's always an element of emotion that makes it important. But these tours are much more powerful than that. And I think there's lots of things that are going on in them that are very interesting. Kate and I have just written a chapter together where we explore some of these issues and some of it is about loss of Chinese culture within families, loss of connection to country.[1] And that loss of connection to China, it was a two-way thing. Because the Cultural Revolution severed ties between families in China and in Australia and the White Australia Policy also made communication and exchange difficult. There's a loss of language, which means people don't have the characters or the names of the people and places associated with their families. But I also think Australians generally have a very poor Chinese cultural literacy. So, we don't have a sense of what these places are like. We can conjure up an Irish countryside, or an English countryside, or a you know, an industrial Manchester or something, but we don't actually have the skills to properly imagine China. We only have vague clichés that come to mind. So, the journey to Southern China is touching on all those issues. It's also about reconnecting with a culture that was part of your family but has been lost. It's amazing.

And the other thing that happens that's really significant, and that was part of the motivation for the tours, is that Kate and I were both aware, having spent time in Southern China, that it turns Australian-centric perspectives on Chinese Australian history upside down. When you're in Australia, you're looking at people who come and who go to somewhere 'other', lost in time. When you go to China and you go to the Overseas Chinese Museums there, all of a sudden, it's a different perspective. From a China perspective, they're looking at a whole lot of people who went overseas. Overseas is Cuba, it's San Francisco, it's Hawaii, it's Canada, it's New Zealand, it's Australia and it's South America and from a Chinese perspective there's not a lot of differentiation, like it doesn't matter. Australia and Cuba and San Francisco as far as they're concerned, are kind of the same. It's just 'Not China'. And the stories they tell are about what those people then bring back and have done to build China. So, it is really refreshing to have that perspective and it really enriches your understanding of what's going on in Australia. It enriches how you think about a, say, a Chinese market gardener, who's being very frugal who's working hard, who's sending money back, you can see some of what that money is building. You

[1] Couchman, Sophie and Bagnall, Kate, 'Memory and meaning in the search for Chinese Australian families' in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds.), *Remembering Migration,* Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies (forthcoming).

see some of the things which were important to returning overseas Chinese that are unrelated to how 'white Australians' have framed their lives. The architecture in Southern China is also fascinating, it's so interesting, it's a Portuguese-Chinese mix, so architecturally there's really interesting things going on. There was a lot of building and development in the 1930s and a lot of that still survives. You can see it.

**Seeing these things is so important, but is this experience something you think you can be made more understandable within Australia?**

Look, of course you can do that. I suppose Kate and I and other scholars do try to do this in various ways. But I've been in the position where I saw the photos and I heard people talk about it, but it didn't mean anything until I actually went there myself. I still think there is something about being there. You have to trace people's footsteps and be there to really understand.

**This is a slight deviation, but I think something that characterises a lot of history work is multiple jobs, being juggled at the same time, could you talk about how your work with these tours fits in with the other work you do, which I know is very diverse?**

I've always had a sort of hands on, get it done, sort of approach. I've built databases, developed web resources, an online journal, designed and self-published books, developed exhibitions and walking tours. I like the variety and while I've specialised in Chinese Australian history I'm easily interested in new ideas. It means I end up doing all sorts of different things and inevitably some jobs run over time and so the juggling begins! I suppose I also just close my eyes and leap in, too. The first conference paper I published (with encouragement!), I just did it. I didn't have a history degree; I had no background. If I need a database, I learn how to do it and just build it. Some of the work I've got to do within my job or studies, but I seem to always have a few other projects going on as well. While I was working at the Chinese Museum, there were lots of terrific projects that I was able to do within that job, which was great, but I also did things like organise a conference and publish a book of papers from that conference. That happened outside my work at the Museum because it couldn't be encompassed in the time that I had there. So, I'm always doing stuff outside my work and I like working part time as it gives me that freedom and leads to all kinds of projects. I've been really interested to explore other kinds of history since leaving the Chinese Museum. Some of that comes from the jobs that come your way. But this diverse work also all links together. So, the first job I worked on was the British migrants exhibition for the Immigration Museum. I

used to joke that I was going to the 'Dark Side', because I had done all this work on Chinese immigration that's all about White Australia and discrimination. Chinese were the original unwanted immigrant group. And then suddenly, I was in this space with the most desired immigrant group. Money was being thrown at British migrants and while Chinese were being disenfranchised and denied naturalisation, British migrants were the complete opposite. They were given all the rights of citizenship and naturalisation without having to become citizens of Australia. So, it was an incredible contrast. But I felt like it really added a depth to my understanding of the migrant experience and of characteristics shared by migrants. I found it really, really interesting, and really enjoyable.

My thesis was about visual representation, about how Chinese people were photographed, so as part of that I developed an interest in photography and using photographs as historical sources. My PhD was part of a linkage grant and we developed the Chinese Australian Images in Australia (CHIA) website, as part of that project, with a team at Melbourne University.[2] So that provided me with the skills to then take on another job at Museums Victoria which was a research project looking at historical photographs of work in factories, which I found absolutely fascinating. Again, it's nothing to do with all the Chinese stuff that I had before, but it was tapping into all the stuff I knew about historical photographs. As part of it I was thinking about how material that was held in multiple different public archives might be brought together to get a better sense of the history of Victoria and manufacturing and industry so very similar to the aims of the CHIA project.

As a contractor, I have to kind of follow my nose a bit and I'm doing some very interesting work. Much of the work of a curator is project management so this has led to some project management work with Associate Professor Richard Frankland on a couple of projects at the Victorian College of the Arts at Melbourne University. One was an artist exchange between Yolgnu artists in East Arnhem Land and Indonesian artists in Makassar, Sulawesi [Indonesia]. There's a Chinese connection there because the Makassans came over to Australia prior to British colonisation to fish for trepang, a sea slug that they then sold onto Southern China!

[2] The linkage grant was between La Trobe University, the Chinese Museum and we worked with the Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre (now the e-Research Scholarship Centre) at the University of Melbourne. One of the project outcomes was the Chinese Australian Historical Images in Australia website, http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au.

**All your jobs end up speaking to one another in unexpected ways**

That's right. And I must say I'm really enjoying that at the moment. It's fun. And probably the one that I'm working on at the moment, the Invisible Farmer Project, which is how we got to know one another, is the most kind of, out of the box. But really, the way I see the Invisible Farmer Project, and certainly the component I'm working on in this role is about storytelling.[3] It's about telling individuals' stories and that's something I've always been interested in. In Chinese Australian history, I've always been drawn to the underdog. I'm always interested in the person whose story is ordinary but extraordinary. I'm less interested in the really famous people who do all the kind of amazing things that are easy to write about. I'm interested in the woman who is a Chinese herbalist in Little Bourke Street, who looks after the children in the street, who is unrecognised. So the Invisible Farmer Project is an opportunity to use the skills I've developed in working with communities, working with British Australians, working with the Chinese community and taking it into the present. In this project I'm talking with women in agriculture about their lives now and thinking about the best way to tell those stories, and share them.

**The theme of our issue for MHJ this year is 'Narratives and Power' I was wondering if you could maybe comment on any thoughts you have on the connection between family history and heritage, and accessibility, and where public history fits within that?**

What do you mean by accessibility?

**We are coming from the perspective of largely postgraduate students and Early Career Researchers from inside academia and there seems to be this slightly artificial divide between training as a historian, and then people we see doing their own family histories, or seeking out family histories from history professionals. So, I guess I'm asking whether there is any kind of gatekeeping or challenges that you think people who are engaging in more public history space face?**

I think at the moment history is in a really interesting space. There are so many digitised historical records that are now openly available, and this has hugely empowered family historians. I'm part of a Chinese Australian family history group as well, and in the past, it would take a whole retirement to build a family tree that had the births, the marriages

[3] Invisible Farmer is the largest ever study of Australian women on the land. This three-year project (2017 –2020) is funded by the Australian Research Council (LP160100555) and involves a nation-wide partnership between rural communities, academics, government and cultural organisations.

and the deaths of people in the family. Now you can almost do that in an afternoon, so family historians are now starting to think about the 'whys' and the context around their family's history. I see this particularly with Chinese Australian family historians; the White Australia policy has put such a big stamp on families' lives and trajectories. So, it's natural in that space for family historians to already be thinking about that racial context, and I think they're a bit ahead of the curve because of that. But what this means is that there is now this very interesting kind of overlapping between very skilled amateur historians and professionals working in a community public history space, which I suppose I do, who are academically trained, and then a university space. Universities are also increasingly engaging with community and stepping outside of academia to do this work. In fact, with family history we've got recent examples of people like Graeme Davison going into their family history and reimagining that as a historian. And I think that's fine. I'm quite happy for there to be overlap around those things, I think it is happening naturally. It's good.

I think everybody is doing something slightly different in this space and there's benefits in conversations between all of these approaches to the past. One of the things about family historians is that they are very focused on individuals within their family and drilling down and getting enormous detail about those individuals, and generally academic or public historians take a much broader view. So, there's huge potential in the overlap there, in terms of providing understanding about the background to the historical sources that family historians are using, but also the historical context, helping them to understand why things are the way they are. And then at the same time, they have this rich archive, that most historians often don't have the time, or the resources to build. It costs a fortune to purchase every single death certificate and birth certificate and marriage certificate of a whole community, or even of a family. And I suppose I straddle those different spaces.

**That seems like a really fitting note to end on, thank you very much Sophie.**