

## “CHINAMAN” PLACENAMES

### *Statement*

**HON PIERRE YANG (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary)** [6.35 pm]: In March, I talked about a few places in Canada and New Zealand bearing the word “Chinaman” in their names. It is a sign of social progress when more people—I hasten to add that it is people from all backgrounds—start to raise this issue in their respective communities. Today I turn my attention to placenames bearing the word “Chinaman” in Australia. I want to refer to some of the content in an article written by Ms Jan Tent, which was published in the September 2019 edition of its newsletter known as *Placenames Australia*. In that article, Jan correctly and helpfully pointed out that placenames —

... can reveal much about a region’s historical, geographical, social and linguistic background. They also offer insights into the belief and value systems of the name-givers, as well as the political and social circumstances at the time of naming ...

The first documented person of Chinese cultural heritage arriving in Australia was a gentleman named Mark Sai Ying, or John Shying. He came as a free settler in 1818. The gold rushes of the 1850s attracted many people from around the world, including people of Chinese cultural heritage. By 1858, 42 000 people of Chinese cultural heritage arrived in Victoria. Racial prejudice, discrimination and economic competition contributed to anti-Chinese riots, including the Buckland riot in Victoria and the Lambing Flat riots in New South Wales, which saw much loss of life and livelihoods of people of Chinese cultural heritage. The generational prejudice and racism also resulted in many Chinese immigration restriction acts being passed in all the colonies around Australia.

This historical background gives us the context for the reason that so many places in Australia have “Chinaman” in their full name. According to Jan’s article, there are 325 toponyms bearing the word “Chinaman”, of which 113 are in New South Wales, 60 in Victoria, 48 in Queensland and 22 in Western Australia. Thanks to her research, it was also revealed that some places carry a Chinese personal name such as Ah Chong Island in WA and Foochow Inlet and Maa Mon Chin Dam in Tasmania, and some other places. Nevertheless, these are far and few between when compared with the places in Australia carrying the derogatory word “Chinaman”.

Of the small number of toponyms based on Chinese personal names, Jan wrote —

On the face of it, this is perhaps surprising given the longstanding Chinese presence in Australia as well as their social, cultural and economic contributions to the nation. Nonetheless, when we consider the anti-Chinese sentiments shown towards the Chinese throughout the nineteenth (and twentieth) centuries, it is perhaps not so surprising after all. If my supposition is correct, it may also explain the relative abundance of placenames we encounter that contain simply *China* or (more often) *Chinaman*.

...

Using this generic term for Chinese people in placenames rather than personal names, I think, underscores the anti-Chinese sentiments of the time.

I think Roger Mah Poy from Canada would agree that Jan was absolutely on the money. In my speeches on 15 and 30 March 2023, I thanked Roger and the Canmore community in Canada for choosing inclusion and social justice over prejudice and exclusion by renaming a mountain that had the derogatory name Chinaman’s Peak to Ha Ling Peak to honour the story of Ha Ling and his achievement in climbing that mountain in a short space of time. I want to also share a story I learnt about very recently from Chaffee County in the state of Colorado. That community successfully lobbied its local authority to change the name of one of its gulches—a beautiful place in Colorado—from Chinaman Gulch to Yan Sing Gulch. The reason I wanted to talk about this example today is to show that local communities can work together to persuade their local authority to make a change. This story is very inspiring, like the Ha Ling Peak renaming story. Chaffee County’s governing body is a three-member board; they are all elected positions. Initially, the commissioners were opposed to the idea of changing the name. However, after commissioning a community consultation process, they changed their minds. In fact, the commissioners initially thought the word “Chinaman” was a benign title that acknowledged a Chinese person who was likely to have lived in the local area. However, after hearing witness testimonies, one of the commissioners, Keith Baker, said that he thought the general feeling among the members of the community was that it would be appropriate if the intent truly was to honour the contribution of Chinese people. They agreed with the testimony that the term “Chinaman” was used in a contemptuous and derogatory fashion. This is in contrast to a situation in Queensland. In response to a question from the Daily Mail Australia, the mayor of Longreach Regional Council said that he was not expecting any change to the name of Chinaman Creek in Longreach. He said —

‘It would depend on whether anyone was offended by that,’ ...

‘But I think you have to be reasonable—that one —

The word “Chinaman” —

probably wouldn't be offensive to many people. It is a little bit subject to interpretation,' ...

As far as I am aware, there was no community push to have that name changed.

I also want to mention some quick research that I conducted on my phone. I have two navigation apps. One is Apple Maps, which I think is supported by TomTom—that is the company that provides the technology—and the other is Google Maps. I searched for Yan Sing Gulch and found nothing on Google Maps, but Apple Maps has been updated and had replaced the old name, Chinaman Gulch, with Yan Sing Gulch. Well done, Apple and TomTom. If anyone is listening from Google, it is time to update your data; get on with that, please!

As we have seen from the examples I have mentioned on 15 March, 30 March and earlier today, it is clear that if concerned community members call for change, work with their local authority and bring the wider community with them on this journey, with the clear understanding that the purpose is to not cancel history but to restore history to its true state and to respect those who came before us, then most people would prefer a more inclusive and respectful method to commemorate pioneers from all different backgrounds. With those words, I will conclude my remarks today and seek a further opportunity to discuss placenames in Western Australia that include the word "Chinaman".