

**NATIONAL WINNER  
USING PRIMARY SOURCES**



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**THE SYM CHOON FAMILY: SUCCESS  
AGAINST THE ODDS OF THE WHITE  
AUSTRALIA POLICY**

# National History Challenge 2021



## The Sym Choon Family: Success Against the Odds of the White Australia Policy

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### Abstract:

Despite Australia's modern multicultural society, there are periods in our history of oppression on the basis of culture. The Sym Choon family's significance in overcoming the barriers of racism and the White Australia Policy, cannot be denied. The use of primary sources allows critical thinking and understanding of their legacy.

Word Count: 996

*“Every voice raised against racism chips away at its power. We can't afford to stay silent.” Reni Eddo-Lodge: Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race.<sup>1</sup>*

The Sym Choon family were among the first of these said ‘voices’ in South Australia.

Present-day Australia has embraced multiculturalism by following a method of integrating different ethnicities. Yet, for the majority of the nation’s early history, a racist view of society drove immigration policies, and limited immigrants to those who qualified under the White Australia Policy.

Six separate British colonies joined in 1901 to form Australia – following the footsteps of the anti-Chinese legislation in response to the Gold Rush immigrants, securing a ‘white’ Australia was priority for the newly federated country and government.<sup>2 3</sup>

Thus, the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, also known as the White Australia Policy, became one of the first Commonwealth Laws passed subsequent to Federation. Its purpose was restricting non-white immigration to Australia. Prospective migrants were required to succeed the dictation test, consisting of fifty words in any European language – this enabled immigration officers to exclude those not of preferable origin, without being explicit.<sup>4 5</sup>

All ‘non-white’ people previously residing in Australia were required to apply for a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test (C.E.D.T.), permitting them to leave and re-enter Australia without being subjected to it. Each member of the Sym Choon family were obliged to apply for this during the 1920s, when they travelled to and from China and Hong Kong on business.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eddo-Lodge, R 2017, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, Bloomsbury Circus, London.

<sup>2</sup> The federation of Australia n.d., Parliamentary Education Office, viewed 18 August 2021, <[<sup>3</sup> Fung, P 2015, \*The Significance of the First Anti-Chinese Legislation in Australia\*, viewed 18 August 2021, <\[<sup>4</sup> National Archives of Australia n.d., \\*The Immigration Restriction Act 1901\\*, Australian Government, viewed 18 August 2021, <\\[<sup>5</sup> Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, \\\*Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia\\\*, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.\\]\\(https://www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/immigration-and-citizenship/immigration-restriction-act-1901></a>>.</p></div><div data-bbox=\\)\]\(https://peril.com.au/topics/politics/anti-chinese-legislation-in-australia/></a>>.</p></div><div data-bbox=\)](https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/history-of-parliament/federation/the-federation-of-australia/#:~:text=Australia%20became%20a%20nation%20on,form%20the%20Commonwealth%20of%20Australia.></a>>.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>6</sup> Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, *Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia*, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

With an adopted first name, 'John' Sym Choon is an early example of chain migration. Having arrived in Australia in the early 1890s, and settled in Unley, Adelaide, he began a career as a hawker, purchasing produce from the East End markets and using his handcart to sell it door-to-door. With the money he gathered over eight years, Sym Choon was able to transport his wife, So Yung Moon, whom he married in 1888, from Dongguan, southern China, to Adelaide.<sup>7 8 9</sup> Accordingly, Sym Choon played a substantial role in family reunification.

Together, while residing in Rundle Street, they initiated a business – *Sym Choon & Co.* – which became a successful supplier of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and fireworks. These humble beginnings were the first steps leading to generations of entrepreneurial pioneers in the Sym Choon family.<sup>10 11</sup>

The five Sym Choon children had opportunities from an early age to pursue a career in commerce. For instance, in 1921, 'John' Sym Choon applied for C.E.D.T. in order to travel to Hong Kong for business purposes, over a duration of twelve months. He had two children he was 'desirous of taking home to China with him, namely Gladys Sym Choon... Robert Kitchner General Gordon Gum Foy ['Gordon'] Sym Choon'. However, it was necessary to submit compulsory materials such as character references, providing evidence of one's 'credibility'.<sup>12 13</sup>

The said references were largely positive concerning the Sym Choons. Statements regarding 'John' affirmed he was 'a desirable citizen', as well as being 'of good character and [a] reliable man of business'. Additionally, Gladys had evidently excelled academically throughout her education, being 'an extremely bright student, much above the average in intelligence... her progress has been most

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<sup>7</sup> Gladys Sym Choon a thoroughly modern business leader and an exotic style setter in Adelaide from 1920s n.d., viewed 23 August 2021, <<https://adelaideaz.com/articles/gladys-sym-choon-a-thoroughly-modern-business-leader-and-an-exotic-style-setter-in-adelaide-from-1920s>>.

<sup>8</sup> Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

<sup>9</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/application-certificate-exemption-dictation-test-under-immigration-restriction-act>>. (Appendix: Source 8)

<sup>10</sup> Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family

<sup>12</sup> Ibid National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family

<sup>13</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/report-interview-sym-choon>>. (Appendix: Source 2)

creditable'. Gordon Sym Choon, again, was confirmed to be a 'well-known ...bright' young man.<sup>14 15</sup>  
16 17

Clearly, despite restrictions rooted in discrimination, the Sym Choon family thrived, being exempt from the White Australia Policy's Dictation Test, generating their own momentous history.

Two Sym Choon brothers, George and Gordon, were profitable businesspersons in their own right. Although they engaged in a somewhat public feud, over a woman of Chinese descent from Western Australia that So Yung Moon arranged for George to marry, nonetheless with whom Gordon eloped, they were respected businessmen.<sup>18</sup> Both ran lucrative businesses – that were, interestingly, rivals – and established 'reputations' in the community.

Gladys and Dorothy Sym Choon were women of Chinese descent in mid-1900s Australia. Hence, they found themselves in a disadvantaged position in society. However, they faced these challenges with indisputable courage and tenacity.

In 1926, Gladys, along with Dorothy, founded *The China Gift Store*. They used their Chinese heritage to their advantage – selling imported products from China, including napery, embroidery, and ornamental china. It resulted in instant success. To this day, the shop remains an Adelaide icon, reopened by Joff Chappel and his partner Razak Mohammed as a contemporary fashion boutique. Named *Miss Gladys Sym Choon*, it preserves its initiator's historical contributions as a female of foreign culture.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-accompany-migration-application-sym-choon-and-gladys-sym-choon>>. (Appendix: Source 1)

<sup>15</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-accompany-migration-application-sym-choon>>. (Appendix: Source 4)

<sup>16</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-accompany-migration-application-sym-choon-and-gladys-sym-choon>>. (Appendix: Source 1)

<sup>17</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-robert-sym-choon>>. (Appendix: Source 7)

<sup>18</sup> Kirkman, T 2021, pers. comm., 18 August.

<sup>19</sup> Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

The White Australia Policy impacted Gladys and Dorothy considerably through constantly meeting immigration officials' demands and unnecessary processes when re-entering Australia. Despite being born in Australia, they were required to undergo applications for the C.E.D.T. Dorothy Sym Choon, in particular, was outspoken with her opinions regarding this matter.

In 1923, Dorothy and So Sung Moon, her mother, intended to leave 'Adelaide by train about 24<sup>th</sup> February 1923' and proceed 'overland to embark on the S.S. 'ST. ALBANS' at Melbourne for China 1/3/23'. Dorothy's submitted passport, mandatory for the C.E.D.T., entailed information details such as her profession and physical appearance. She and her mother were additionally instructed to imprint their left and right thumb impressions. Dorothy 'objected to having her thumb prints taken and did not anticipate any trouble whatever as she was well known in Sydney and Melbourne'. This event reflects her personal resolve and significance in confronting prejudice. Additionally, their exemption demonstrates that occasionally, economic 'success', assisted in overcoming the discrimination-based bureaucracy in that time. Through their commercial 'significance', they challenged the White Australia Policy effectively.<sup>20 21 22</sup>

The last vestiges of the Act came to its conclusion in around 1973. The Sym Choon family story is significant, and is relevant historically in challenging discrimination and bureaucracy. This is reflected in the Sym Choon family's feature in a 2018 Adelaide Migration Museum exhibition, and the inclusion of Dorothy's portrait in artist Peter Drew's 2017 'Aussie Poster' series.<sup>23 24</sup> The Sym Choon family's success is noteworthy, in leaving a legacy that continues to 'matter' today.

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<sup>20</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/australian-born-chinese-women-object-thumbprinting>>. (Appendix: Source 5)

<sup>21</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/extract-dorothy-sym-choons-passport-application-certificate-exemption-dictation-test>>. (Appendix: Source 6)

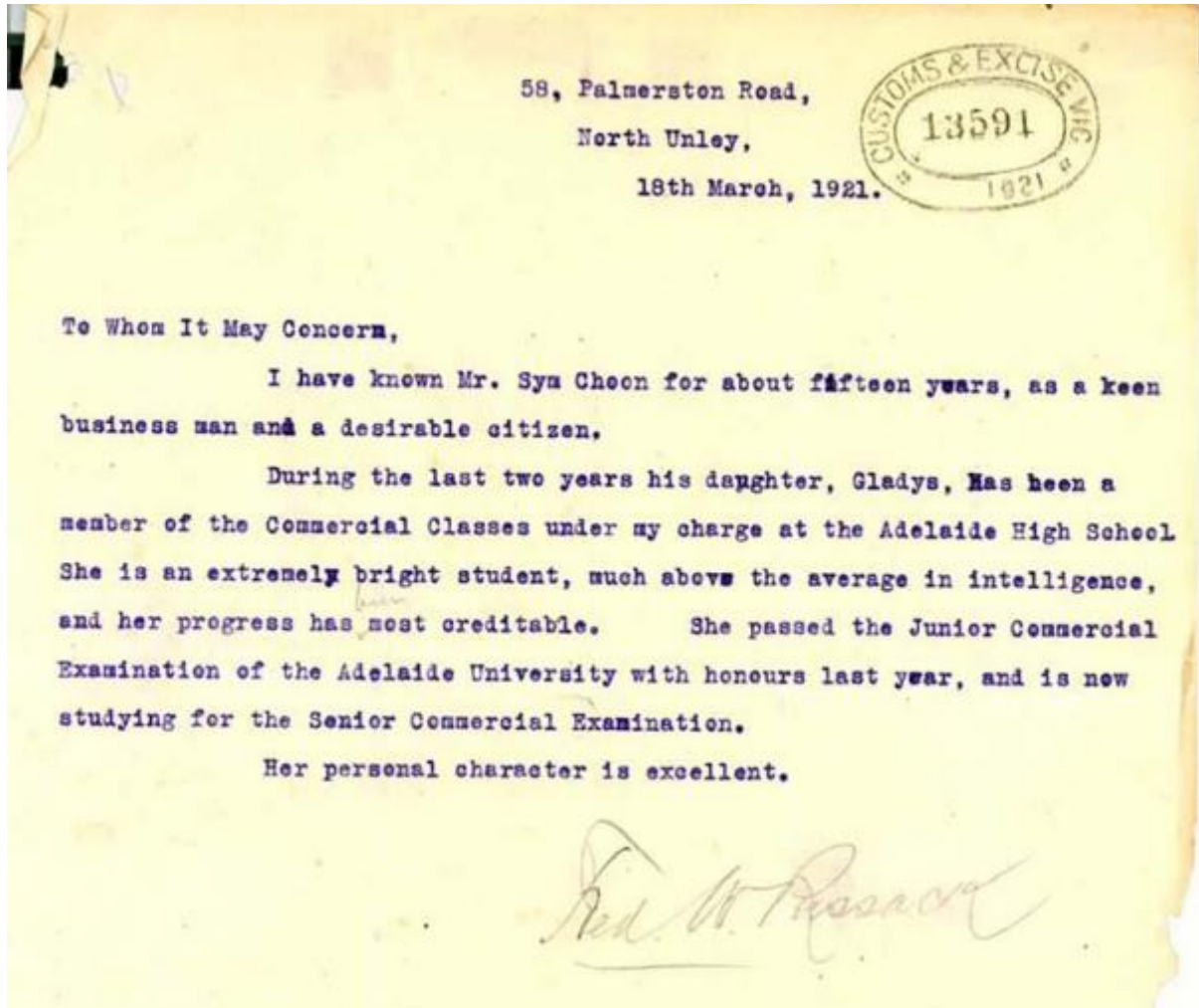
<sup>22</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/australian-born-chinese-women-object-thumbprinting>>. (Appendix: Source 5)

<sup>23</sup> End of the White Australia policy n.d., National Museum Australia, viewed 25 August 2021, <<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/end-of-white-australia-policy>>.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Drew Arts n.d., viewed 26 August 2021, <<https://www.peterdrewarts.com/>>.

## Appendix: Sources

**SOURCE 1:** Character reference to accompany migration application for Sym Choon and Gladys Sym Choon<sup>25</sup>



<sup>25</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-accompany-migration-application-sym-choon-and-gladys-sym-choon>>.

SOURCE 2: Report of interview of Sym Choon<sup>26</sup>

S. AUST.  
C. & E.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

**CUSTOMS AND EXCISE OFFICE.**

SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

A. G.

**MINUTE PAPER.**

T.M.P.—T.A.30 5722

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Subject:—

Immigration Act.  
Sym Choon (Chinese) Application for C.E.D.T.

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The Detective Inspector,

I have to report having interviewed the applicant and compared attached photos with the original and am satisfied they are those of the applicant.

2. Attached photos and references have been shown to the respective writers and verified.

3. I have personally known applicant for the past twelve years in business at Rundle Street, and believe him to be of good character.

4. He has two children he is desirous of taking home to China with him, namely -

Gladys Sym Choon, born Arthur Street, Unley,  
Dec. 18, 1905

Robert Kitchner General Gordon Gum Foy Sym Choon  
born September 24th, 1910 at Rundle Street,  
Adelaide.

Birth Certificates and references attached.

*Howney*  
19.3.21 Watchman.

*The Insp. Submitted application be approved*

*Approved*

*Acting Collector  
of Customs, S. A.  
19 MAR 1921*

*R. Burford  
to Insp.  
19/3/21*

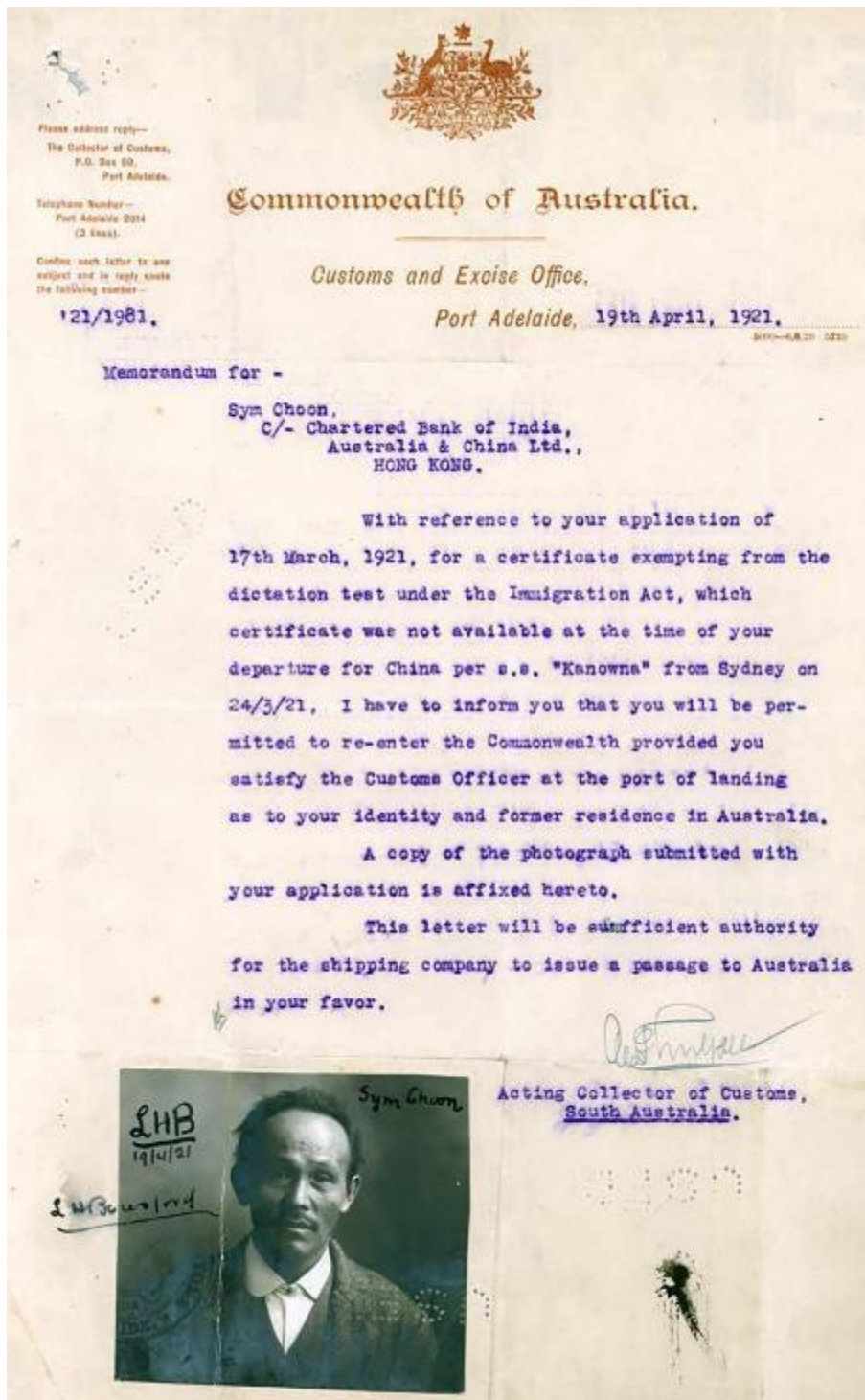
*Fee £2 - paid  
warrant no 1591.*

*Ap. MacV.  
Acty Collector  
19/3/21*

<sup>26</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/report-interview-sym-choon>>.

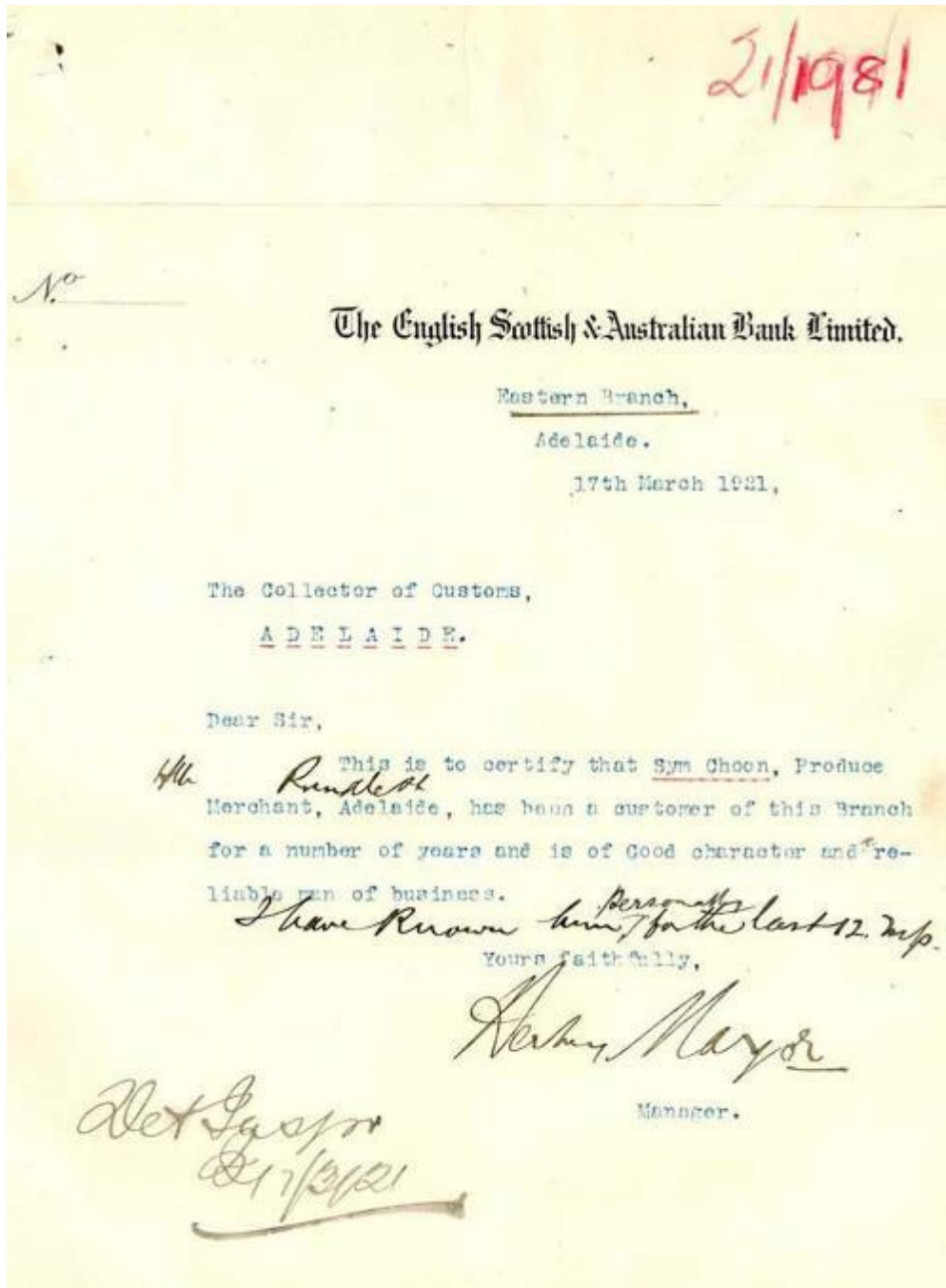


**SOURCE 3:** Sym Choon's exemption from the dictation test, 1921<sup>27</sup>



<sup>27</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/sym-choons-exemption-dictation-test-1921#>>.

**SOURCE 4:** Character reference to accompany migration application of Sym Choon<sup>28</sup>



<sup>28</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-accompany-migration-application-sym-choon>>.

**SOURCE 5:** Australian born Chinese women object to thumbprinting<sup>29</sup>

M.B. S. AUST.  
C. & E.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

23/391

**CUSTOMS AND EXCISE OFFICE.**  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

**MINUTE PAPER.**

TM-322 9093

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**Subject:**  
Immigration Act 1901-1920.  
Application for C.E.D.T.  
Mrs. So Sym Choon (Chinese) and her daughter Dorothy Sym Choon -  
Australian born Chinese.

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The Collector,

Herewith C.E.D.Ts for signature.

2. Mrs. So Sym Choon and Miss Dorothy Sym Choon intend leaving Adelaide by train about 24th February 1923 and proceeding overland to embark on the S.S. "ST. ALBANS" at Melbourne for China 1/3/23.

3. They have been instructed to call on the Collector of Customs, Customs House, Melbourne, for their certificates. Fees paid Receipt No. 88661/2 of 8/2/23.

4. Miss Dorothy Sym Choon was informed that it would be advisable to have her left and right thumb impressions on the C.E.D.T. to save her any trouble should she require to land at any other port in the Commonwealth, but she stated that she certainly objected to having ~~in~~ her thumb prints taken and did not anticipate any trouble whatever as she was well known in Sydney and Melbourne.

5. Taxation certificate attached.

*M. W. Alder*  
Senior Boarding Inspector.

9/2/23.

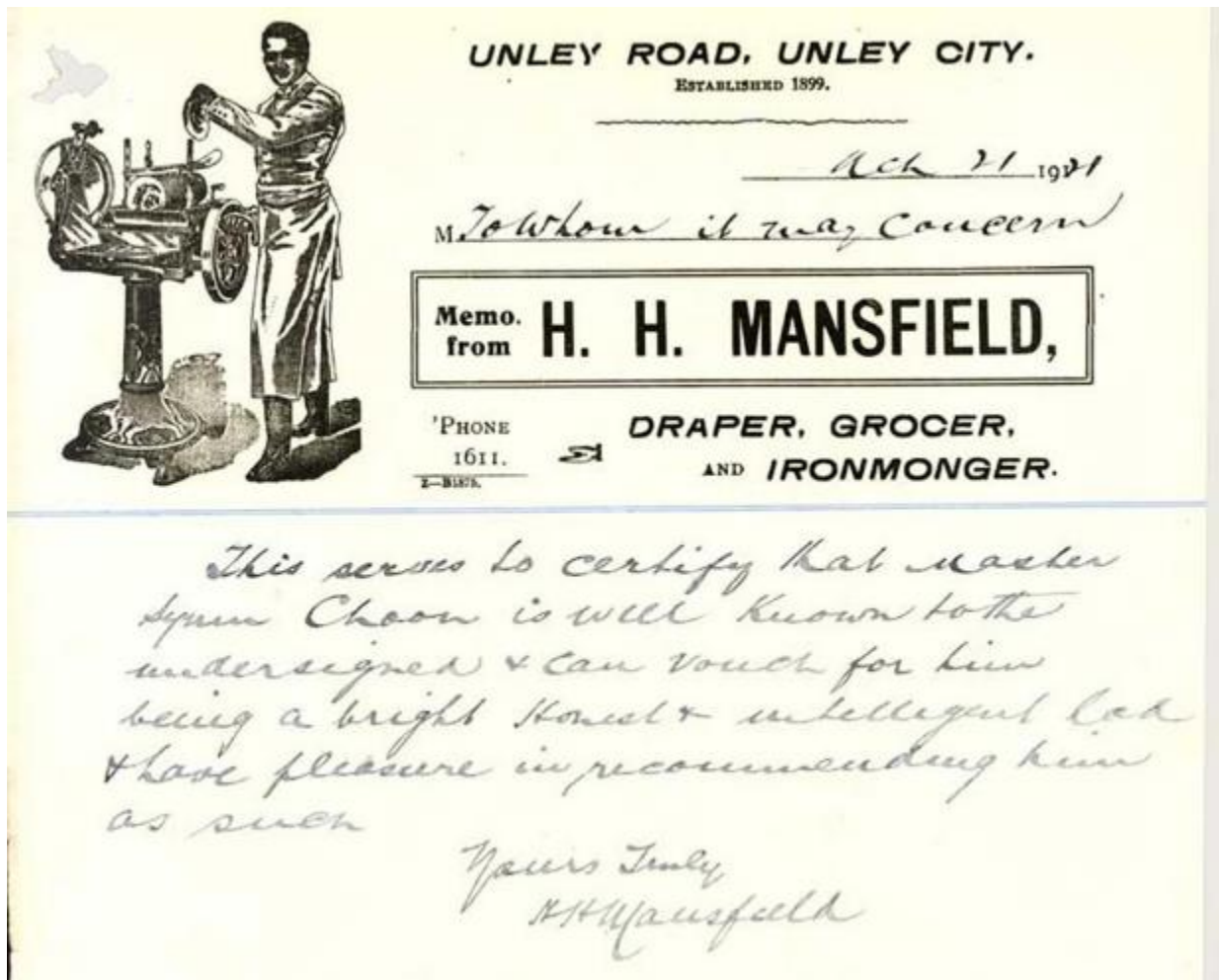
<sup>29</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/australian-born-chinese-women-object-thumbprinting>>.

**SOURCE 6:** Extract from Dorothy Sym Choon's passport – application for Certificate of Exemption from dictation test<sup>30</sup>

2		3	
DESCRIPTION SIGNALEMENT		PHOTOGRAPH OF BEARER	
		WIFE - FEMME	
Profession Profession	Shop assistant shop assistant		
Place and date of birth	Australia Melbourne		
Lieu et date de naissance	Australia Melbourne 1904		
Domicile Domicile	Australia		
Height Taille	5 ft. 2 in.      ft.      in.		
Colour of eyes Couleur des yeux	dark brown		
Colour of hair Couleur des cheveux	black		
Special peculiarities Signes particuliers	-		
CHILDREN - ENFANTS			
Name Nom	Age Age	Sex Sexe	
		WIFE FEMME	
		(photo)	
		AUSTRALIA	
		SIGNATURE OF BEARER    SIGNATURE DU TITULAIRE <i>Dorothy Sym Choon</i>	
		SIGNATURE OF WIFE    ET DE SA FEMME	

<sup>30</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/extract-dorothy-sym-choons-passport-application-certificate-exemption-dictation-test>>.

**SOURCE 7:** Character reference for Robert Sym Choon<sup>31</sup>



<sup>31</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-robert-sym-choon>>.

**SOURCE 8:** Application for certificate of exemption from the dictation test under the Immigration Restriction Act pg 1 of 2<sup>32</sup>

Form No. 22

CUSTOMS & EXCISE  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA  
601987  
15-3-21

**COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.**

**IMMIGRATION ACT 1901-1912.**

*Adelaide*

*March 17<sup>th</sup> 1921*

Sir,

I beg to apply for a Certificate under the *Immigration Act* 1901-1912, Section 4 (b), and Regulations, and I forward herewith a Statutory Declaration in support of my application.

I wish to visit *Hong Kong, China*  
for *twelve* months.

I attach *two* Certificates of my character, and six unmounted photographs of myself (three full face and three profile).

I undertake and intend not to bring with me or to introduce into the Commonwealth on my return to the Commonwealth any relative who is not possessed of an unexpired or unrevoked certificate excepting him or her from the provisions of paragraph (a) of section 3 of the above Act, and I also undertake and intend not to be directly or indirectly privy to the bringing to or introduction into the Commonwealth of any such relative.

If my application is granted, please intimate the fact to me at the above address.

Yours faithfully,  
*Sym Choon*

THE COLLECTOR H.M. CUSTOMS,  
*at Adelaide. S. Aus.*

NOTE.—The Statutory Declaration should set out the length of residence in Australia, and should verify all documents accompanying the application, and should be in the form required by the "Statutory Declarations Act 1911."

4.001110.—C.1288.

<sup>32</sup> National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/application-certificate-exemption-dictation-test-under-immigration-restriction-act>>.

CUSTOMS & EXCISE  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA  
001987  
15-7-21

STATUTORY DECLARATION.

(1) Name of declarant. I, Sym Choon  
now residing at 237 Rundle St East  
do solemnly and sincerely declare that the answers to the following questions  
are true:—

- 1. Of what nationality are you? ... 1. China
- 2. Where were you born, and when? ... 2. Hong Kong
- 3. When did you first come to Australia? ... 3. about 28 years ago
- 4. Where have you lived since you came to Australia?  
(State places and period of residence in each.) ... 4. Wukey and Adelaide  
9 or 10 years at Wukey  
rest of time since at Adelaide
- 5. Have you ever been absent from Australia since your original arrival? If so, state—(a) on how many occasions; (b) for what period on each occasion, giving date of departure and return. ... 5. No
- 6. What is your present occupation? ... 6. Green grocer and Importer of  
Chinese Goods
- 7. What other occupations (if any) have you carried on since you came to Australia? ... 7. and importing & selling Groceries

And I make this solemn declaration by virtue of the *Statutory Declarations Act 1911* conscientiously believing the statements contained therein to be true in every particular.

(2) Signature of declarant.

Sym Choon

Declared at Adelaide the

Seventeenth day of March 1921.

Before me,

William Charles  
Justice of the Peace

(3) Place before whom declaration is made.

(4) Title of person before whom declaration is made (a).

(a) This Declaration may be made before a Police, Special, or Stipendiary Magistrate; a Justice of the Peace; a Commissioner for Affidavits; or a Commissioner for Declarations.

NOTE.—Any person who wilfully makes a false statement in a Statutory Declaration is guilty of an indictable offence, and is liable to imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for four years.

# Bibliography

## Cover Image

National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 13 August 2021, <<https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/dorothy-sym-choon-portrait-application-certificate-exemption-dictation-test>>.

## Primary Sources

### Archives

Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

**Annotation:** These panel proofs were used in the 2018 *Sym Choon: Changing Fortunes in White Australia* exhibition, and were obtained through emailing Natalie Carfora and Corinne Ball, curators at the Migration Museum that had key roles. This source was extremely effective being both reliable and detailed, and provided a basic foundation for the research essay.

Chinese periodicals and newspapers 1995-2001 (simplified characters) 2002, National Library of Australia, viewed 20 August 2021, <<https://www.nla.gov.au/asian-accounts-of-australia/periodicals-and-newspapers>>.

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**Annotation:** This primary source from the National Archives of Australia proved to be particularly useful due to the direct insight it provided into both John and Gladys's characters. It clearly demonstrated the esteem and good reputations they had earned in the Adelaide community.

### Interviews

Bowler, M 2021, pers. comm., 16 August.

Kirkman, T 2021, pers. comm., 18 August.

**Annotation:** This interview was conducted via phone. I spoke with Tony Kirkman, a co-manager at the current Adelaide shop *Miss Gladys Sym Choon*, who had conducted research for a paper a few years prior regarding the Sym Choon family. He supplied previously unknown details such as George and Gordon's feud over marriage.

## Secondary Sources

### Books

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Sumerling, P 2013. The Sym Choons of Rundle Street, Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia (41), pp.80-88.

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