

CHINESE MUTTON-FISHERS OF MARIA ISLAND

Tom Dunbabin



Chinamans Bay, Maria Island. (author's photo)

Would-be predators—sharks, seals and octopus—have a hard time making a meal of abalone. Protected by a hard shell they are able to fasten onto rocks with enormous suction, leaving barely a crack between their shell and the rock. Divers are able to prise them off readily enough using knives made for the purpose, but only if the element of surprise is maintained. The lightest touch on the shell and the mollusc sucks itself onto the rock with such a force that it becomes impossible to slip the knife beneath the hard shell.



Abalone clinging to a rock substrate. (photo: Matt Dunbabin)

Abalone is a seafood delicacy that has to be prepared and cooked to perfection—get it wrong and this delicacy is as succulent as an old leather boot. For many people, particularly the Chinese, abalone is a culinary delight for which they will pay handsomely. Catching the prized mollusc can be very lucrative for abalone fishermen.

In Tasmania the tightly controlled and regulated licences are very valuable. The bulk of our wild abalone harvest is exported to Asia, mostly to China. The live fish are specially prepared and packed for the flight to Hong Kong, and on arrival are distributed to restaurants throughout the country. Patrons select the fish they desire live from an aquarium, and it is cleaned and cooked for them, on the spot.

For thousands of years Tasmanian Aboriginal people have caught and eaten abalone and the shell remnants in middens around our coast suggest they formed a substantial part of the indigenous seafood diet. The women were good swimmers and divers, and it seems it was largely their task to catch the abalone. They were cooked whole on a fire, the shell acting as the cooking pot. Early European settlers called abalone mutton-fish. They saw the Aborigines catch and eat them, yet no matter how they themselves tried to cook them, the flesh of the mollusc was always tough and virtually inedible. The Anglo-Saxon culinary skills did not extend to preparing this staple of the indigenous people. An early settler on Tasmania's east coast, George Meredith, wrote a letter to his wife in 1823, describing how Aboriginal women dived for abalone and crayfish. He accepted the crayfish they offered, but not the abalone.ⁱ

Although few of the locals developed a taste for them, abalone were harvested in Tasmania as far back as the mid 1800's, and the fishermen were not European. It took some more recent immigrants from the north, the Chinese, to recognise the potential of the seafood delicacy and capitalise on this abundant fishery.

Chinese immigrants, predominantly men, first arrived in Australia in the 1830's, but it wasn't until the middle of the 1850's that they came in large numbers. Thousands arrived, fleeing persecution and hunger and sought their fortune on the goldfields. By 1862 there were over 24,000 registered Chinese miners at the Victorian diggings.ⁱⁱ Newspaper reports chronicled conflicts between the locals and the immigrants,ⁱⁱⁱ and in some ports vigilantes attempted to stop them disembarking.^{iv} In spite of the difficulties they faced, the new immigrants persisted. Many established businesses to support their mining countrymen and supply the needs of the densely populated goldfields. They sold a variety of stores, including opium, the widely smoked drug of the Chinese at home and abroad.

The Chinese came from a range of backgrounds and trades. Many were farmers who established gardens and fresh vegetable growing soon became a major activity. Before long Chinese market gardeners dominated the fresh vegetable business, both at the gold fields and throughout much of rural Victoria.^v

They grew the staples of their countrymen, but also plants better known to the locals such as carrots and onions, and they soon learnt to grow that European standard—the humble potato.

Some among the Chinese were also fishermen who knew how to dry fish to preserve it, a vital skill in an age without refrigeration and where transport was slow and unreliable. They caught and dried a range of species, but abalone and crayfish were the most favoured. Dry and tough, the fish was not at all palatable to Europeans who were used to boiling or frying their fish, but to the Chinese, who added protein directly to their vegetable dishes, it was a luxury. Some of the Chinese immigrants made their way to Tasmania and among them were fishermen who established operations in south east Tasmania. Their catch was destined for the Chinese miners in Victoria, and exports were reported in the local shipping news.^{vi}

The activities of the Chinese fishermen in Tasmania remain relatively unknown, and the details of their fishing techniques are a mystery. Records are sparse but newspaper reports provide some clues. In March 1869 Mr Justin Bown sent a specimen of dried mutton fish to the Royal Society meeting in Hobart, along with a note describing the fishing and drying techniques.

‘The Chinese pierces the shell with a sort of spear, and the fish being thus paralysed is easily detached from the rocks; it is separated from the shell much as an oyster is, and then dried in a slow oven built for the purpose, after which the dried fish is packed in casks or cases for export. Before cooking it is soaked in water for a considerable time. Crayfish are treated in the same manner and are cured in large quantities.’

A Chinese man, John Ling, lived at Southport with his wife, a local girl, and their six children.^{vii}

S H Wintle, who undertook a geological survey of the area, described Ling’s abalone harvesting and drying technique.

‘The mode of capture is by spearing. The habitat of these fish is on stones below the surface of the water, and to which they adhere, with a tenacity truly wonderful, by which is called a foot. Armed with a long, iron-pointed spear, the fisher thrusts it through the shell, whereupon the mollusc relaxes its hold, and is brought to the surface. Vast numbers of these perforated shells may be seen among the rocks at Southport. The mode of preparing these fish for exportation is to parboil them, when the mollusc comes away freely from the shell. They are then dried, and in that state have the appearance and consistence of leather. The estimation in which such pabulum is held by the disciples of Confucius,

I regards as being solely due to a taste acquired by long cultivation. This opinion is founded upon the fact of having partaken of one of these molluscs after it having been cooked according to true Celestial fashion.'



Maria Island coast—an ideal waterway for spearing Abalone.(author's photo)

Ah-Sin Yung, Chow and Sing lived on Maria Island during the 1860's and early 1870's, where they too caught and dried abalone. In 1869 Tom Dunbabin took a seven year lease of the island and he had many exchanges with them.^{viii} From Cape Peron, on the south end of the island, to Darlington in the north, the shoreline is mostly rocky, with headlands and points separated by cobble, and occasionally sandy, beaches. It is a good area for abalone, and they were plentiful in the 1800's. Most importantly for the Chinese fishermen, the water is shallow and the bays sheltered. No matter which way the wind blows there is almost always a sheltered bay somewhere on the west coast of Maria Island.

Yung, Chow and Sing would almost certainly have used fishing and curing techniques similar to those of John Ling, at Southport. By looking over the lee side of their boat as they drifted they would have been able to see abalone on the rocky bottom in water up to three or four meters deep. Using long spears similar to Ling's, they could have speared the mollusc from the boat. Alternatively they may have dived for them, although there is no record of this.

Prior to federation, in 1901, the independent Australian colonies had the right to charge tariffs on goods imported from other areas of Australia. Victoria, wanting to protect their fishing industry and the employment it provided, instituted a tariff on seafood in 1872, and substantially increased it in 1875. This made it very difficult for Tasmania's Chinese fishermen to remain competitive with their Victorian counterparts.

Sing and Chow left Maria Island in July 1875^{ix}, but Yung stayed, supplementing his income by working for the Dunbabins.^x He became adept at harvesting crops, driving bullocks and pitching sheaves. Although generally well accepted by his fellow workers, Yung was the butt of their jokes at times. On one occasion Will Skinner, a young man helping with the harvest, handed Yung the whip expecting the older man to do what was generally considered the junior's job of driving the bullocks. Yung was not amused and used the whip with such good effect about Will's legs that he was more than happy to take it back. Another worker, Tom Tapner, once tipped hot tea on Yung who responded by grabbing a pitchfork, threatening his tormentor with grievous harm. When urged to settle the argument with his fists Yung replied, '*No savvy fight him with fists; too big.*' He may have been hot headed, but he was not silly!

Yung not only became attached to the island, but also to a young maiden who lived there. Will Skinner's sister Fanny came over to the island to do domestic duties for the men employed on the farm. In November 1875 Yung and Fanny were married and they lived in a small hut at Encampment Cove. It was an ideal location, close to the cropping fields and in a good harbour for fishing. Ah-sin Yung later changed his name to Thomas Young, and he died in Triabunna in 1897. He had a number of children, at least one of whom, William, lived and worked in the Triabunna area, including on Maria Island.

Today there is little evidence of the Yung's dwelling and their fishing activities. A road and jetty, built in the cove in the early 1900's, obliterated any remains of their presence. A few pieces of abalone shell in the earth next to the road and an area of beach cleared of stones that may have been Yung's boat ramp, are the only the only evidence of their fishing exploits.

The written record of the activities of these early fishing pioneers is sparse, and the physical remains of their establishments has all but disappeared, removed by the progress of time. There remains just a few tantalising pieces of information about the life of the celestial fishermen who developed an industry from a resource that Europeans spurned.

Today the wild abalone fishery is a multi-million dollar industry, producing what most Tasmanians consider a delicacy to aspire for, but so highly priced that few can afford to eat it.



Stones cleared for a boat ramp: was this Yung's work? (author's photo)

ⁱ A Harrison

ⁱⁱ Melbourne Argus 1862

ⁱⁱⁱ Sydney Morning Herald 1861.

^{iv} Brisbane Courier,

^v Mercury March 6, 1865.

^{vi} Mercury, March 21, 1861, 1865, & 1868,

^{vii} Ling Chow changed his name to John Ling.

^{viii} Dunbabin, T (1952) Farm at The Worlds End.

^{ix} Tom Dunbabin (2010) Making their own way: Dunbabins on Maria Island 1869 – 76.

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^xTom Dunbabin (2010) Making their own way: Dunbabins on Maria Island 1869 – 76.