

## S.S. Changte

S.S. Changte was built in 1925 in Kowloon Hong Kong for the Australian Oriental Line. It contained a triple expansion engine and could travel at 13 knots. Made from steel, it required a single crew and functioned as a passenger and cargo steamship. In 1939 it was requisitioned at Sydney by the Royal Navy and converted to a Naval Stores Issuing Ship, where its name was changed to RFA Changte. At the conclusion of World War II, it was returned to the Australian Oriental Line, and eventually scrapped in August 1961.<sup>1</sup>

On a journey to Sydney from Hong Kong in 1930, a case of smallpox was discovered on board the ship, the steamer continued its journey, however the crew and passengers were placed under strict quarantine regulations and arrived in the harbour on September 11.<sup>2</sup> Prior to its arrival in Sydney, the steamer stopped in Brisbane to deliver mail, which was taken away for fumigation. During this process, hurdles were placed upon the wharf to prevent onlookers and members of the crew or passengers of the vessel coming into contact with one another.<sup>3</sup>



At Quarantine Station, there are two inscriptions relating to the *Changte*, they are dated two days apart, September 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>. The earlier inscription refers to being trapped and “not allowed to see the shining sun and the blue sky”. The individual who suffered a case of smallpox whilst on the journey is most likely a European child, based on a line in the inscription, “their children’s horrible cruel smallpox”.<sup>4</sup> While it is unclear whether the author laments the presence of smallpox as a threat to his own health, or the terrible suffering of the child, it is clear he resents the quarantine measures taken which prevent him from leaving North Head.

The second inscription paints a lightly happier picture describing the experience of “kind treatment” by the hands of officials presiding over quarantine measures, and how it relieved the worries of the crew. The inscription also refers to “smallpox hill, waiting for the medical examinations”. The term “smallpox hill” was a fairly common term at the time referring to quarantine, rather than a literal reference to the location of North Head and the presence of the disease. This seems to indicate that there wasn’t a term for quarantine in Chinese, and that the makeshift term was widely disseminated, as it can be found in inscriptions as far away as Angel Island in San Francisco Bay.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the immigration patterns of the Chinese crossing the Pacific, it is likely that both inscriptions were written by men but we will never know for certain.

<sup>1</sup> Hoskin, J. 2009. ‘Flotilla Australia’, Web: <http://flotilla-australia.com/nsw-other.htm#changsha-yuil>

<sup>2</sup> “Quarantine: Changte’s Passengers”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1930.

<sup>3</sup> “Quarantined Steamer Changte”, *The Telegraph*, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1930 (Brisbane, Qld).

<sup>4</sup> Sin, Maria, ‘Quarantine Project database, University of Sydney’, p. 15

<sup>5</sup> Sin, p.3