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## EXHIBITION REVIEW

# 'Still Children of the Dragon'? A review of three Chinese Australian heritage museums in Victoria

KAREN SCHAMBERGER

*The Museum of Chinese Australian History reopened on 29th August 2010 with newly refurbished exhibitions displaying Chinese Australian history and contemporary Chinese Australian identities. This article reviews the new exhibitions in comparison with the Gum San Heritage Centre at Ararat and the Golden Dragon Museum at Bendigo and specifically examines the way each museum represents being Chinese and being Australian. This will be shown by interrogating the historical representations, text and methods of display.*

'WHY DON'T WE forget about being Chinese and get along with being Australian?' Liam asks this question in a video about the importance of the dragon to Chinese culture in Australia and China shown in the Dragon Gallery of the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne. As is the case with many young people, Liam is critical of his grandmother's traditional beliefs. An older narrator explains the significance of the dragon in a simple and straightforward fashion, dispelling Western notions of fire-breathing ferocious dragons and notes the importance of continuing Chinese cultural traditions in Melbourne.

So why don't museums forget about being Chinese and concentrate on being Australian? If the purpose of community-centred museums is to serve and enhance the well-being of their communities<sup>1</sup> then how do Chinese heritage museums do this? Liam's question is indicative of the ways that three particular museums of Chinese heritage currently present their histories and identities and engage or don't engage their local communities in Victoria: The Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne which opened in 1985 and presented refurbished exhibitions in August 2010; the Gum San Heritage Centre which opened in 2001 in Ararat and the Golden Dragon Museum which opened in 1990 in Bendigo. All three celebrate Australia's Chinese heritage by separating and emphasising the community's 'Chineseness' in an essentialised sense—i.e. to be Chinese one must have origins in China and be 'authentic' by speaking the language and having a particular cultural knowledge.<sup>2</sup> This is problematic because such essentialised identities are constructed and imagined and obscure just as much as they reveal. The museums are also celebratory of the Chinese

<sup>1</sup> Elaine Heumann Gurian, *Civilizing the Museum The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese Living Between Asia and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 30.

contribution to Australia but not all give space to local community voices. As John Fitzgerald recently noted, the question is not what contribution the Chinese made to Australia, but how the Chinese and other communities came together to *be* Australian, and how this is acknowledged and celebrated.<sup>3</sup> Each of these museums grapples to varying degrees of success with how Chinese communities were and continue to be Australian. I will argue that the museums that succeed best are those that serve as forms of self-expression of the complex realities of being Chinese Australians.

The Dragon Gallery on the ground floor of the Museum of Chinese Australian History firmly emphasises the community's 'Chineseness' through its display and interpretation of Melbourne's Chinese dragons, traditional lion dancing, processions and an altar which is uninterpreted. The significance of the dragons and the contribution of Chinese associations to Melbourne and Australia society through their processions and charity work are celebrated. But the boy narrator Liam does have an interesting question: 'What's it got to do with Australia now?' The older narrator provides a telling answer—people of Chinese descent are the keepers of Chinese culture. But what is Chinese culture? And is there only one Chinese culture? 'Chineseness' in this space is defined by the colourful, noisy spectacle of dragons, lion dances and processions. The text and images do note that this 'Chineseness' was adapted—the dragon parade, usually reserved for Chinese New Year festivities, was used to raise money for hospitals, royal visits, celebrating Federation in 1901 and still features in the contemporary Moomba festival.

This essentialised and celebratory 'Chineseness' is presented more explicitly in the dragon displays of The Golden Dragon Museum. The wealth of the Bendigo Chinese Association's processional memorabilia emphasises a distinctly historical and brilliantly visual 'Chineseness' unique to Bendigo. In 1869 the citizens of Bendigo organised the first Easter Festival to raise money for the Bendigo Base Hospital and the Benevolent Asylum. By 1871 it had become an annual event. The Chinese community first participated in the same year and throughout the early 1870s carried colourful banners and dressed in spectacular costumes specially made and imported from China. The Easter Fair was very important to the Chinese community and vice versa. The community contributed a one-mile long oriental pageant in 1879 when attendances at the Fair were falling. Its involvement included a Chinese opera, feasts of Chinese delicacies and utilised many customs usually reserved for Chinese festivals. The first reported appearance of a dragon in Bendigo was in 1892 when Loong, a five-clawed imperial dragon was imported from Fat Shun, Canton, as a gift to the citizens of Bendigo. Loong became the centrepiece of the Easter Fair to the present day. Both Chinese and non-Chinese continue to participate in the dragon procession, uniting the citizens of Bendigo as one community. In 1901,

<sup>3</sup> John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2007), 216.

when the Chinese community brought Loong to Melbourne for the Federation parade they became part of the newly-formed Australian nation.<sup>4</sup>

Currently though, another kind of 'Chineseness' is also portrayed at the Golden Dragon Museum. Contesting the local Chinese Australian stories, objects from the St Albans collection are speckled through the first room and take over the museum's second room. This collection comprises an enormous and rich array of Chinese antiquities donated to the museum by a businessman who lived in China during the Cultural Revolution. These objects provide a wonderful material record of Chinese history—especially through the lives of the elite. Unfortunately, this collection is not contextualised in this way and accidentally overwhelms the Chinese Australian historical objects. While the labels for items from this collection have a maroon border to separate them from the rest of the collection, it is difficult for visitors to separate the Chinese historical artefacts from the Chinese Australian historical artefacts in the second room. With further building works planned at the Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo, hopefully this collection can be better housed and contextualised.

'Chineseness' at the Gum San Heritage Centre is purposely represented as exotic, historic, something to be marvelled at, tried on and then put back on the shelf. As Alan Han argued, this museum Orientalises Ararat's Chinese heritage through its traditional architecture and generic historical representations.<sup>5</sup> It is clearly an effort by Ararat councillors and business leaders to lure contemporary Chinese government and corporate investors and tourists to the only Australian city founded by Chinese.<sup>6</sup> There is a language centre where visitors can learn to recognise Chinese words, write Chinese characters and have their name transliterated into a Chinese character.

There is very little space at Ararat's Gum San Heritage Centre for local Chinese Australian community voices or research. With no mention of any living residents of Chinese descent, there is no engagement with a local Chinese community and only a very small space at the beginning of the exhibition is dedicated to information about local Chinese Australian history or genealogy. Instead, the museum exhibition introduces traditional Chinese architecture and culture through panels donated by the Chinese government with spectacular views of traditional Chinese architecture, culture and life, reading as an exhibition worthy of a tourist bureau and essentialising Chinese identities.

These panels provide a confusing context for the two central glass cases filled with artefacts from the museum's collection. The artefacts are given very basic object labels with little or no links to actual Chinese Australians. An exception is a pair of hand-made silk shoes dated to the early 1800s associated with Miss Chin Hook. Unfortunately we are not told anything about Miss Chin Hook and her story in the local area, other than that she had bound feet and

<sup>4</sup> Fitzgerald 2007, 218.

<sup>5</sup> Han Alan, 'The Gum San Museum: Inclusion by Virtue of Otherness' *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, 2:3 (2009), 7–19.

<sup>6</sup> John Fitzgerald, 'Another Country: John Fitzgerald Examines Our Chinese Heritage Museums', *Meanjin* 60:4 (2001), 62.

thus belonged to the Chinese elite. Visitors also have the opportunity to read more about foot-binding practices in China and can view graphic images of the physical damage inflicted by foot binding. However, there is no interpretation of how widespread the practice was in nineteenth-century China, whether the practice continued in Australia, and how bound feet may have affected Miss Chin Hook's life in Australia. This general and superficial treatment only serves to emphasise the difference and weakness of Chinese cultural practices and maintain Western superiority and rationality. It is an interpretation that actively discourages visitors to relate to or even empathise with Ararat's Chinese Australian residents.

The Golden Dragon Museum at Bendigo in contrast has engaged the local Chinese Australian community and provides personal stories alongside artefacts, providing a local historical context. This museum also expands the definition of 'Chineseness' and also 'Australianness', by portraying Bendigo Chinese Australians as active participants in the broader Australian community through personal stories of market gardeners, a jockey, retailers, launderers, a clergyman, carpenters, herbalists and restaurateurs. This museum has also seized the opportunity to show historical and contemporary events and lives 'through more than one pair of eyes, and narrated within more than one story, which calls for a 'democratising approach'.<sup>7</sup> As part of the exhibition, this museum maintains a 'Family Album' where visitors can provide copies of their own family photographs to be included as one of many Bendigo Chinese families. There are also labels which attempt to engage with visitors through 'Did you know' questions. Being a community-centred museum, enables the Golden Dragon Museum to encourage broader participation in the dialogue about Bendigo's Chinese history.

Also engaging the local Chinese communities, the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne has used personal and community stories, many with objects, to illustrate 150 years of Chinese immigrant history in Australia in the new Gallery of Chinese Australian history. This gallery includes stories of significant individuals, such as Melbourne Chinese Australian John Ian Wing and his enduring suggestion of allowing athletes from all nations to mingle together in the closing ceremony of the 1956 Olympics—a tradition which continues today. This gallery also explains aspects of Chinese culture, including a section on Chinese inventions. This is odd as these were not inventions by Chinese Australians and reflects more pride in 'China' the nation than it does in being Chinese Australian. This is an interesting tension and seen more prominently at Ararat's Gum San Heritage Centre.

The Museum of Chinese Australian History also intertwines archaeological objects and personal stories. On the ground floor of the museum a small display shows artefacts from the archaeological dig in 1999 under the current Punt Hill Serviced Apartments just opposite the Museum of Chinese Australian History.

<sup>7</sup> Bhikuh Parekh, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain. The Parekh Report* (London: Profile Books, 2000), 163.

The dig uncovered the foundations of five house—both Chinese and non-Chinese residents. Some of the artefacts are known to have come from the home of Chin Tong, a merchant and his family between 1900 and 1912. It is known that Chin Tong and his wife Sue Hoe raised five children in Lacy Place, off Burke St until Chin Tong died in 1912. Sue Hoe took the children back to China. Alice and Elsie, the eldest daughters, later returned to Australia, marrying and settling while Willie Kay Sing, the eldest son, trained as a herbalist and lived between Australia and China until immigration restrictions were lifted and then he settled in Australia. This story takes the ‘contribution’ of the Chinese a little further by mentioning the transnational links retained by the Tong family as they moved between Australia and China. The story also shows how personal narratives can be rediscovered and reconstructed to a certain extent using archaeological remains and historical records.

Despite its situation on top of a Chinese mine shaft, the Gum San Heritage Centre at Bendigo fails to utilise the archaeological record to provide more than a shallow interpretation of Chinese gold mining heritage in the area. Ararat sits on the site of the Canton Lead, a rich vein of gold discovered by the Chinese walking overland from the port of Robe to the Sandhurst goldfields in 1857. Visitors can view the mineshaft through clear Perspex and are able to walk through a re-created underground mine replete with plastic rodents and spiders. There is also a tank of water and gravel where visitors can pan for real gold. However, specific stories and artefacts relating to Chinese gold mining at Ararat are missing. The way the text is written is also somewhat disconcerting with quotations from secondary sources more common than primary sources. For example a passage from Geoffrey Serle’s 1961 book *The Golden Age* is included: ‘Incidents between the two [European and Chinese] were common and sometimes violent, but newspapers of the day recorded both sides of the arguments and showed that the majority of the Chinese respected and worked within the laws of their new country.’ By including Serle’s words and excluding actual quotations from Chinese Australians or newspapers of the day, the museum minimises the difficulties faced by the Chinese on the goldfields. It also denies Chinese Australian agency and voice.

Essentialising the Chinese experience and Chinese identities occurs in the goldfields dioramas at both the Gum San Heritage Centre and the Museum of Chinese Australian History. Before arriving at the goldfields at Ararat, visitors walk past dioramas of ‘Leaving China’, the sea journey, reaching South Australia and Trekking to Ararat. It is a similar, more expansive, but less immersive experience to the ‘Finding Gold’ experience at the Museum of Chinese Australian History. ‘Finding Gold’ also begins the journey at Canton, and includes a ship which visitors can walk into, and a slightly surreal experience of stepping straight into the Australian goldfields. Visitors to the Museum of Australian History then step into a tunnel and see a diorama of gold diggings through Perspex windows. Opposite the diorama is a scene of Ah Chang’s Chinese cook shop replete with dried garlic, mushrooms, Chinese cooking implements, plastic vegetables and thousand-year-old eggs. Further into the

tunnel one finds a Chinese Joss house where a voice-over explains Chinese religious beliefs. Around the next corner is Poon Toy's Cantonese Opera Company and the Chinese Lottery shop. Unfortunately it is unclear whether any of these names are real historical characters or general impressions of life on the goldfields.

Beyond generalisations, the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo contextualises local goldmining history and Chinese migration to Bendigo through photographs, artefacts and personal stories where possible. The stories provide a nuanced and complex perspective of Chinese and non-Chinese relations on the goldfields. For example, photographs of the solid gold medallion that members of the Chinese community in Castlemaine presented to Henry William Frod upon his retirement as a police sergeant in 1889, reminds visitors of both the difficulties and ill-treatment faced by the Chinese and also of their active participation in Castlemaine society. The inscription on the medallion reads: 'He treated us as his own people—a gift from the Chinese people'.

These words echo across time to the way contemporary Chinese Australians are portrayed, or not, in these museums. One can be Chinese at the same time as being Australian. The displays at the Gum San Heritage Centre deny that possibility both historically and in its contemporary displays. At the Centre contemporary Chinese artefacts such as embroideries, porcelain, traditional Chinese clothing and artworks are displayed without personal stories to emphasise contemporary relations with Ararat's sister city Taishan. By internationalising the 'Chinese', the Centre deflects attention from the structural challenges—racial, class and gendered<sup>8</sup>—of being Chinese Australian in the past and in the present. The Centre fails to mention the lack of Chinese descendants in the local area, the neglect of the Chinese graves in the local cemetery<sup>9</sup> and ignores any recent Chinese Australian arrivals. The Golden Dragon Museum at Bendigo on the other hand, continues to engage with a significant local Chinese Australian population that consists of descendants and newer migrants through festivals, its collecting and community programs. The text labels indicate the continuing relevance of Chinese cooking skills, cultivation of the pomelo tree, Feng Shui and the observance of festivals like *Ching Ming*—the annual cemetery day for Bendigo residents of Chinese descent.

A different kind of window into the lives of contemporary Chinese Australians can be seen in the 'Bridge of Memories' exhibition at The Museum of Chinese Australian History. This exhibition explores the complexities of 'identity' through the personal experiences of Chinese Australians who have migrated relatively recently from China, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Taiwan. The display acknowledges the diverse origins of the Chinese migrants to Australia and is an attempt to include the experiences of members of the Chinese Australian community who

<sup>8</sup> James Clifford, *Routes Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 258.

<sup>9</sup> (Han Alan 2009), 11.

may not identify with the older Chinese Australian community organisations and traditions in Melbourne. However, it is mostly celebratory of contemporary Chinese contributions and identities and presents migrants who are grateful for the opportunity to live in Australia. It is not inclusive of the Chinese Australians who are in Australia unwillingly or critical of the way that people of Chinese descent are treated, questioned, tolerated or not accepted in Australia.

The 'Bridge of Memories' display provides basic information about each geographical location and statistics about migration to Australia from each place with photographs, personal quotations and a personal story explored in more depth. There is no material culture which is a contrast to the object rich historical displays. The audio visuals are made up of thematically-titled interview snippets and provide insight into aspects such as feeling different, migration, and life in Australia. They illustrate a range of experiences, from being a refugee from Cambodia or Vietnam, to being a business migrant from Hong Kong or a student from Singapore. For instance, Angela Ang Siew Choo, who came to Australia as a student from Singapore, says that in Australia she learnt to relax more. For her Australia is 'The land of choice'. Her experience is a contrast to that of Melinda Trong, who came from Cambodia with her grandparents in the 1970s, split from her birth family that migrated to the USA. Melinda speaks of the strength of the women in her family and her identity: 'It's ironic because I'm a Cambodian-born Chinese who knows little about Cambodia. Although I wasn't born here, I feel totally Australian'.

It is a sentiment echoed in Bendigo's Chinese Australian community in the way that the Golden Dragon Museum was founded and is maintained. Both the Golden Dragon Museum and the Museum of Chinese Australian History find ways of equating 'Chineseness' with 'Australianess' through their historical and contemporary displays of individuals and associations. The Golden Dragon Museum particularly shows the way traditions and customs have been adapted to bring both Chinese and non-Chinese community members together. The newly-refurbished exhibitions at the Museum of Chinese Australian History go some way towards reflecting contemporary Chinese Australian identities, but it would also be enlightening to see material culture from contemporary Chinese Australians.

However, the Museum of Chinese Australian History fails to interrogate some of the more difficult experiences and the legacies of structural inequalities and racism. The section about racism and the White Australia policy unfortunately gives the impression that racism against the Chinese happened only in the past as there is no interpretation of the way people of Chinese descent continue to be discriminated against in contemporary Australia. Perhaps added engagement with the local and more recently-migrated Chinese communities could have given this gallery a more critical and deeper insight into Chinese Australian history and what that heritage means to the myriad of Chinese communities in Melbourne. Unlike the Golden Dragon Museum, the Museum of Chinese Australian History has not taken such a 'democratic approach'. Its new exhibitions retain the museum's curatorial authority and it maintains a



distance from the numerous Chinese associations and communities of contemporary Melbourne.

Unfortunately, the Gum San Heritage Centre portrays Chinese Australian lives and identities through ethnic authenticity, sepia-tinted images and exotic cultural traditions. The Centre has no local community links and primarily serves a tourist audience which shows in its process of 'othering' the Chinese through their difference and exoticism. The Museum of Chinese Australian History and Golden Dragon Museum on the other hand, serve as forms of self expression for their respective communities, portraying real, complex and nuanced experiences of being Chinese Australian. Both of these museums are widening participation in curatorial authority, who can speak and who can listen and why. They are contributing to new ideas of how our nation has been and is being constructed.