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Forum

Chinese Museums in Australia: characteristics and problems

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Ethnic Museums in Australia

I have visited nearly 100 local history museums in Australia. Most of them are presenting artifacts of everyday life in a particular locality regardless of ethnicity or national origin. However, a small number of them are devoted to an ethnic group. There are German, Italian, Greek, Jewish and Chinese museums. In view of multicultural character of Australian society: a quarter of the population was born overseas and a further one fifth had at least one overseas-born parent, the number of ethnic museums is surprisingly small. It is even more surprising that ethnic communities with hundreds of thousands of people do not sustain museums, while even a tiny town with a population of 100 has its own museum. Aboriginal cultural places or centers are the exception, there is a considerable number of them around the country. This is because Aboriginal cultural places are better funded and encouraged by government in comparison with local museums in most cases. Those centers are also communal organizations which play much larger role than ordinary museums.

Why are there very few ethnic museums? One reason, I believe, is that European ethnic groups tended to be more easily integrated or accommodated into local communities than in countries like Canada and USA. Starting with the first major minority group, the Irish, migrant groups were widely distributed over the country. Their history became interwoven with and inseparable from the history of locality. Even in the areas where a particular ethnic group was concentrated, the group in a relatively short period of time usually lost numerical dominance because successful members moved out to a more affluent area while poorer new comers with a different ethnicity came in. The above reason partly applies to Asians and other non-white peoples. But as to the Asians, the White Australia Policy is also an important factor. In the 20th century, the White Australia Policy virtually prevented them from migrating to Australia until the early 1970s. Actually they arrived in large numbers for the first time in the 1980s when many Vietnamese refugees were accepted by the Fraser government. Most Asian minority groups now still do not have enough numbers or sufficiently long historical experience in Australia to create their own museums except the Chinese.

The Chinese were the only Asians that lived in large number in Australia before the White Australia Policy was firmly established in 1901 and still constitute a large ethnic group in the

present population. They are now the biggest tourist group to visit Australia as well. While only one museum exists for Italians, Greeks, two for Germans and Jews if you exclude Holocaust museums as far as I know, Australia has at least five museums entirely dedicated to Chinese Australian history. Chinese museums thus have an important space in ethnic museums in Australia, though John Fitzgerald's claim that 'Chinese heritage museums are to be found all over the country' is simply an exaggeration⁽¹⁾. Chinese museums may not be most popular ones because Jewish museums attract a fairly big audience, but they still play a significant role in Australian public history. I want to briefly show you their common characteristics and some problems involved.⁽²⁾

Development of Chinese Australians

Five Chinese museums which we deal with here are the following: the How Wang Chinese Temple and Museum in Atherton, Queensland; the Museum and the Temple of the Chung Wah Society in Darwin, the Northern Territory; the Chinese Museum in Melbourne, Victoria; the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo, Victoria; the Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre in Ararat, Victoria. All the museums exist within a Chinatown or were closely connected with a former Chinatown which dates back to the 19th century. The How Wang Chinese Temple and Museum is on the historic site of 'Ceder Camp' or Atherton Chinatown. The Chinese museum in Darwin is on the southern end of the former Chinatown. The Chinese Museum in Melbourne is currently located in the City's thriving Chinatown. The Golden Dragon Museum was built on the historic site of Bendigo's former Chinatown. Although the Chinese Heritage Centre in Ararat does not have direct connection with a Chinatown, the origin of the town itself was largely due to the discovery of gold by Chinese miners, and thus, in a sense, Ararat as a whole was once an extension of a Chinese mining community.

The Chinese may be said to be the only non-white ethnic group with a large population in the present Australia (3.1% of the population in 2011) that constituted a visible minority group in 19th century Australia (3.3% of the population in 1861). The Chinese are the only ethnic group that has maintained towns prefixed with their ethnic name since the 19th century. They maintained tightly knit ethnic communities in a number of places in Australia. It is not easy for other non-white ethnic groups to trace their history back into the communal life in 19th century Australia and to build a museum like those of Chinese. One possible exception is Muslims, whom we might not regard as an ethnic group, were visible minority groups in the outback in the 19th century. They now maintain one museum, Islamic Museum of Australia in Melbourne.

(1) Fitzgerald, John, 'Another Country: John Fitzgerald Examines Our Chinese Heritage Museums', *Meanjin*, 60:4, 2001, pp.59-71: the author examines mainly the three Chinese museums in Victoria, but refers to other historical sites, real or virtual.

(2) Schamberger, Karen, 'Still Children of the Dragon? A review of three Chinese Australian heritage museums in Victoria', *Australian Historical Studies*, 42:1, 2011, pp.140-147: the three Chinese museums in Victoria are reviewed in terms of representation of being Chinese and being Australia.

In the Chinese museums, 19th century history is especially important and it usually occupies major exhibition space. Nostalgic exhibits provide an impression of continuity of the Chinese Australians from the 19th century to the present and thus bridge the gulf of the period of the White Australia Policy. They stress the timeless presence of Chinese communities mostly through social history, family and individual lives. The displays of life on goldfields and in Chinatowns seem to create the image of unchangeable social life of Chinese in Australia without much disruption. In Melbourne's Chinese museum, visitors can experience the exhibition of journey from Canton to goldfields through a moving tunnel. The models of a Chinese temple, a tent of Cantonese opera company, a Chinese lottery shop, a Chinese dragon, etc., and the display of artifacts of a variety of lives of Chinese Australians reinforce the apparent continuity of Chinese presence in Australia. In Bendigo's Golden Dragon Museum, the display of participation of Bendigo's Chinese in the city's Easter festival emphasizes the unbroken presence of Chinese from the 19th century. The conspicuous displays of huge dragons which have been used in the Easter procession were effective together with a collection of precious Chinese antiques and animated displays. The displays of dragons succeed in showing the continuous existence of Chinese Australians by creating the image of unbroken commitment of Chinese in Australian mainstream culture. In the Chinese Heritage Centre in Ararat, the journey from Canton to Ararat was presented with model displays where you can dress up like a Chinese migrant and even try your luck by washing dirt with a pan to find gold. There is a tea room and a section where you can draw Chinese characters in calligraphy. There are also many artifacts of everyday life of which no concrete information of dates, places or owners is provided. You are surrounded by Chinese atmosphere with no connection to historically existed Chinese people in Australia. ⁽³⁾

In Darwin's Chinese museum, a video is provided by the Northern Territory Government at the entrance. It shows a brief history of the Chinese in the Territory. That video is indicative of the entire exhibition. It stresses the importance of Chinese migrants and their contribution to economy from the 19th century to the present without change, or any mention of the White Australia Policy, oppression of or strong prejudice against Chinese, which caused the decline of Chinese population and destroyed the Chinese temple, a hub of Darwin's Chinese community. The displays underscore the presence of Chinese merchants in Darwin's city and even its dominance in retail trade in the early 20th century, while cultural endurance is articulated by pictures of Chinese festivals, clubs and family trees. The suffering by the Japanese bombing and the devastation by Cyclone Tracy are conspicuously shown as a common experience with other Territorians, and at the same time, their contribution to the Second World War is showcased by pictures and interviews with former Chinese service men. The displays are focused on the common bond of Chinese residents with other Australians, and thus the continuous existence of Chinese as Australian citizens is especially highlighted.

(3) Schamberger refers to 'essentialised and celebratory 'Chineseness' (Ibid., p.141); In Han, Alan, 'The Gum San Museum: Inclusion by Virtue of Otherness', *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, 2:3, 2009, pp.7-19, the author argues that Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre Orientalises the town's Chinese heritage and excludes Chinese Australian communities.

The museum is not totally blind to the conflict between the Chinese and people of European descent in Darwin. If you are a meticulously careful visitor who reads all the panels, you will realize a few panels explaining about discrimination. However, there are several inconsistencies among them. Although it may be said that the museum attempts to present divergent perspectives, the way of showing has a problem. One perspective is displayed by a large number of collaborative and supportive pictures and evidence, while the other perspective has completely no follow-ups.

One panel explains, "The fear of Japanese invasion was shared by both Chinese and non-Chinese and this common threat meant that, perhaps for the first time the two communities shared a common fate". Most displays trace this line of story. However, in the post-war reconstruction of Darwin, all land in the Chinatown "was compulsorily acquired and reallocated to those who returned. The percentage of land owned by Chinese dropped from 10.6% before the War to 3.5% and the number of Chinese land owners was reduced from eighty to forty". We are ignorant of how Chinese residents felt or reacted, facing with this result.

By quoting the words of Sir Edward Dunlop, another panel says, "In balance too, the record testifies to the good sense of other Australians who, because of a sense of fair play and a belief that the country could ill afford to reject the service of loyal citizens, ignored regulations discriminating against those of Chinese descent or Chinese immigrants resident in Australia". A different panel suggests that for "those who served in the armed forces, there was a sense of equality and a reinforcement of their Australian identity". Again most evidence follows this line of story. However, "after World War II", Bill Wong, an evacuated Darwin Chinese found "that Chinatown had been reduced to rubble by Japanese bombs and Australian looters, whatever remained was bulldozed in the clean-up". The Chinese temple at Brock's Creek (another temple) was looted by soldiers and even during the bombing by Japanese a camera was stolen from a house of a Darwin Chinese resident.

Actually Darwin's Chinatown was hardly damaged by the first Japanese air attack. It was looted by American and Australian soldiers including military police afterwards. The Chinatown was set on fire by the military and many houses were burnt to the ground. You witness a panel where Wong says, "It was really heartbreaking. I went to look at where I used to live. And there was no home there". This does not tarnish the main story unless it refers to its real cause. The panel ingenuously omitted the part which Wong mentioned as its cause, he actually said in an interview that Chinatown was "swept away by the looting, burning and bulldozing of the locally-based provost troops after the bombing". "A common fate", "the good sense of other Australians", and "a sense of fair play" cannot sit safely with such a statement. The extent to which the Museum could proceed to quote from Wong is the above-mentioned expression "Australian looters" and "bulldozed in the clean-up" for what he mistook for the invasion by the enemy who wanted to obliterate all evidence of the Territory Chinese.⁽⁴⁾

(4) Giese, Diana, *Beyond Chinatown*, Canberra: the National Library of Australia, 1995, p.31; If you read the innocent looking

In the early 20th century one half of the population of the Northern Territory was Chinese, but it was reduced to about 3% by now. I want to know the story behind it in more detail. Any ethnic community has the right of expressing itself, but I also believe that divergent views should not be suppressed. The inconsistency among panels or contradiction with overall historical contexts will eventually discredit museums themselves.

Chinese Temples

Chinese temples were the core of Chinese communities in 19th century Australia. They were not only religious centers, but also hubs of social and economic activity. In Darwin the temple and the museum are part of the Chung Wah Society complex. In Atherton the historic temple site is part of the museum owned and run by the National Trust of Queensland. In Bendigo, the Bendigo Joss House Temple owned by the City of greater Bendigo, which may be counted as another Chinese museum, is supplementing the Golden Dragon Museum with religious information. In the other museums, Chinese temples are not attached to museums, but they are well illustrated in the displays.

In Australian Chinese museums a Chinese temple or a Joss house is well displayed, but not necessarily well explained. You are provided with little information on what kind of god is worshiped or how it is related to a local Chinese group. Does worshipping a particular type of god generate special features to the group who worship it? Or, a very simple question, are all the Chinese temples in Australia identical? Are they different from those in China or in other overseas Chinese communities? Many Chinese were members of secret societies. In what way secret societies were related to Chinese temples? If you want to know Chinese people in the 19th century, these questions seem to be critical.

A laminated sheet of paper at the Chinese museum in Darwin explains Chinese religious customs and temples.

The religion practiced in the Temple is a combination of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Although this is unusual in China, it is common in overseas Chinese communities. This demonstrates the unity and harmony within those communities. Lack of serious interest in Chinese religion in Australian museums is exemplified in the above explanation. Such explanation is praiseworthy so far as it attempts to locate the history of Australian Chinese religion in comparison with other countries, which is rarely seen in other museums. The problem is that the explanation is not necessarily true.

In 19th century China, it was not unusual that a temple included various statues of gods of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. This is the result of centuries of syncretism among different religions. Chinese people worshiped gods of various religions in the same building.

panel titled "Darwin's Temple: All the Sacred Deities", you know that the temple was burnt down in order to cover up the looting by the military. Although there are bits and bits of evidence of persecution in a few panels, they do not make a coherent story.

However, the temple of Buddhism, the shrine of Taoism, and the shrine of Confucianism maintained separate identities in most cases. This is true of so called Australian Chinese temples. The How Wang Chinese Temple at Atherton is a Taoist shrine. Darwin's Chinese Temple is also a Taoist shrine, though it has a Buddhist statue in the same building. The god that the statue represents is Guan yin niang niang, a Goddess adopted from Buddhism many centuries ago. The religion practiced in Darwin's Chinese Temple simply reflects that of the mainland China. The practice in Darwin's Chinese communities, therefore, does not especially testify the unity and harmony within those communities. The practice of worshipping three gods of the three religions side by side is seen in Japanese Chinatowns like Kobe and Yokohama, where the syncretism of religion is completely worked out. Darwin's temple is more comparable with those of the mainland China than with those of Chinese overseas communities.

In other Chinese communities in 19th century Australia, the worship of Guan Yu (Kuan Gung) was widely practiced. In Bendigo, Melbourne and Ararat, Chinese had Taoist shrines dedicated to him. This is also a wide spread religious practice in Chinese overseas communities, especially among Cantonese speakers. In present Australia, the Sze Yup Temples in Glebe, Sydney and in South Melbourne are Taoist shrines mainly dedicated to Guan Yu. The Sze Yup Temples were originally built by Sze Yup societies, whose members came from the four districts in Canton province in the 19th century. The Guan Yu worship in Victoria and New South Wales represents a phase of Chinese migration to Australia as well as to California in the same period. On the other hand, the Chinese shrines in Atherton and Darwin seem to represent a new phase of Chinese migration who came from various parts of China rather than the four districts. The association and organizations of Chinese migrants as well as religious practice must have changed in the course of the 19th century.

Non-white peoples other than Chinese

Chinese communities in the 19th century were tightly knit ones centered on Taoist Guan Yu temples established by Sze Yup societies, so called secret societies. However, later in the century, Chinese communities in the north probably became more inclusive of a variety of Chinese dialect groups and other Asians. In Atherton's Chinatown "Japanese, Javanese, Malaysian, Cingalese and other marginalized groups found a home". If you look at the map of Port Darwin of 1897, you will notice that part of China Town was once called Malay Town. Ethnically mixed character of Chinatowns in the north was not paid due attention to. When Chinese museums focus on the Chinese-White relations in terms of the growth of Chinese Australian citizenship, their relationship with other Asians is overlooked.

This is also true of their relationship with Aboriginal peoples. It is very strange that Chinese miners never met Indigenous people during their long trek from distant ports to goldfields. Darwin's museum in fact mentioned attacks by Aboriginal people on the road to goldfields, but only once. Is the relationship between the Chinese and Aboriginal people almost totally absent

in the Northern Territory? A story of Chinese migrants successfully becoming proud Chinese Australian citizens tends to imagine a dichotomous world where residents are only Chinese and Australians of European descent.

Some people went too far in that direction to fabricate an imagined Chinatown. The Chinese museums are too modest to go beyond factual limitations, but an Australian government official site is willing to venture into Neverland.

Australian government site 'Chinatowns across Australia' states:

Over time, many of the early buildings were demolished subject to decay, lost to fire or, in Darwin, bombed in the Second World War. Today, Chinatowns are a unique part of Australia's cultural heritage. Broome Chinatown, for example, is recognised as having rare 'historical, cultural, architectural, archaeological and social qualities'.⁽⁵⁾

I would like to insert "and looted and burnt down by Australian troops" after "in Darwin, bombed".⁽⁶⁾ I also want to insert "originally called Jap Town" after "Broome Chinatown". The site euphemistically states that "about 3000 people of Asian and South-East Asian origin were" in Broome by 1901, but actually only dozens of Chinese were among them. Japanese and Malays constituted the overwhelming majority of population. Broome's historical, cultural and economic heritage is mostly connected with former Japanese inhabitants. Though the site says that Broome's Chinatown flourished around the turn of the last century. A place called Chinatown simply did not exist at that time.

After all, Chinese museums in Australia are interesting places to visit. They serve for the contemporary Chinese communities in a number of ways and at least help promote the Chinese Australian identity. However, selective use of historical evidence tends to generate questions rather than provide simple illustrations.

(5) 'Chinatown across Australia' in Helping you find government information and services (<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/chinatowns-across-australia>), 25/10/2016.

(6) The government site later explains that "Darwin's original Chinatown was damaged both by Australian troops and by bombing during the Second World War and was later destroyed completely by a fire".