BRAIDWOOD’S ENDURING CHINESE HERITAGE

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Abstract
This paper will focus on the importance of Braidwood’s enduring Chinese heritage as seen through the built environment, and also the Braidwood Museum’s Chinese collection. The Chinese have been an integral part of the Braidwood goldfields and the town of Braidwood in New South Wales from the late 1850s to the present. In fact, instead of a decline in Chinese population after the gold rush, Braidwood increased its Chinese presence during the first half of the twentieth century. The harmonious association and economic co-dependence between Europeans and Chinese is also reflected in the remarkable Chinese collection in the Braidwood Museum, recently noted as being of national significance.

Mining Camps, Towns and Villages
Although there are other mining towns in Australia with a Chinese legacy, the Chinese legacy in the New South Wales town of Braidwood is unique. With the gradual decline of the surrounding goldfields and villages, Chinese people came to live in the town for the first time, and many of the buildings occupied by them are still standing. A measure of the importance of the Chinese-Australian heritage to the town of Braidwood can be gauged by the number of buildings associated with them. A significant proportion of the commercial buildings in the town (almost all of which are on Wallace Street) have a Chinese heritage, much of it dating back to the nineteenth century. Indeed, the Chinese presence in Braidwood increased sharply during the first half of the twentieth century. The rate books held at the Braidwood Museum demonstrate that they rented and purchased a large number of town buildings, a rare phenomenon. The Nomchong family was the most prominent in the town, although extant buildings are also associated with the Chuchin, Ah You, and Chewying families. Braidwood’s Chinese heritage is also reflected in the remarkable Chinese collection of the Braidwood Museum, which focuses on Mei Quong Tart and the Nomchong family, and their respective roles in the town. This Chinese collection has been identified as being of national significance because it includes rare Chinese-Australian material that is not replicated in any comparable public collection.

The town of Braidwood (population 1,000) is situated in southeastern New South Wales, approximately half way between Canberra and Batemans Bay. It is a well-preserved nineteenth century township set within a rolling pastoral landscape (NSW Heritage Council Register n.d.). Both the town and its setting were listed on the State Heritage Register in April 2006, the only town on the east coast of Australia to be completely listed. Dating from 1839, the town is historically linked to the first European settlement of the area in the 1820s through the influence of land grants, surveying, settlement patterns, convicts, civil and judicial administration. Located at the southernmost tip of the nineteen counties proclaimed by Governor Darling, the town became the centre of the Braidwood Police District in the 1840s. After 1851, Braidwood developed from an early pastoral settlement to become the centre of the one of the richest gold mining areas in New South Wales. The Braidwood goldfields (and Araluen in particular) were the largest in New South Wales for many years. The first recorded Chinese presence in the Braidwood district was in 1858, at the commencement of a second mining boom which lasted until the early 1870s. By 1859 the Chinese miners were well established on the major alluvial fields in the Braidwood District, these included Araluen, Majors Creek, Bell’s Creek, Jembaicumbene and Mongarlowe. The peak years were between 1858 and 1862 when at least 1500 Chinese miners were on the Jembaicumbene and Mongarlowe fields combined, and at least 500 on other fields, though the figures may have been much higher (McGowan 2004a: 40, 2004b: 316, 2008: 6–11). In his reminiscences of the Braidwood goldfields, Richard Kennedy noted the large Chinese settlement in Jembaicumbene and that they made ‘an important addition to the human population’ (quoted in Maddrell 2000: 13). As elsewhere in Australia the vast majority were from Guangdong province in southern China, sponsored by merchants in Hong Kong and Australia to whom they were indebted for their passage. They were monitored by headmen or bosses, in association with fraternal organisations such as native place associations or secret societies (such as the Hung Men or hui), until their debt was paid off (Cai 2004: 36–39; Fitzgerald 2007: 64–65, 81–99; McGowan 2008: 7–11; Murray 1994; Owenby 1993; Smith 2006: 1–5, 14–15).

The success of the Chinese on the goldfields owed much to the fraternal bodies and to the traditional mining organisation known as the kongsil, which operated as a shareholding partnership; newcomers who paid off their debts were thereafter eligible to become shareholders and to divide profits between themselves (Heidhues 1993: 74–75; Peng 1995: 67–84; Trocki 1993: 89–95). On the Braidwood goldfields as elsewhere, the organisation of the miners had much in common with the kongsil, the men working in large groups with a defined chain of command under the control or tutelage of a ‘boss’, who organised the purchase of claims and the supply of provisions and payments (Barnard & Sheahan 1991: 11–12; Fitzgerald 2007: 46; McGowan 2008: 8–9; Smith 2006: 40). Their organisation gave them a distinct competitive edge over European miners, contemporary observers praising the diligence of the Chinese miners, while condemning the European miners for their sloth and inferior organisation. Their success allowed them to purchase claims from European miners – the Chinese miners were, in effect, the European miners’ market, allowing the Europeans to exit the diggings profitably and much sooner than may have otherwise been the case (McGowan 2004a: 40–48, 2004b: 316–320, 2008: 11–14).

Many of the Chinese miners lived and worked close to European villages and towns, although usually in separate villages or camps on the outskirts. The Chinese settlements
were important commercial and community centres, and usually had one or more market gardens attached to them or nearby. On the diggings proper, Europeans and Chinese miners were often, but not always, on different parts of a field, but these spatial arrangements were dictated more by geography than race. As in several other diggings investigated by historians, it seems likely that the close spatial and economic relationships on the Braidwood goldfields between the two groups contributed to the absence of strong anti-Chinese feelings (McGowan 2004a: 49–50, 2004b: 319–321; Reeves 2004; Rule 2004: 119–133). Prejudice and discrimination existed as elsewhere in Australia, however racial relations in Braidwood were generally harmonious. More common were complaints by Europeans about incidents of petty larceny and the behaviour of the Chinese miners’ wives, many of whom were Europeans of questionable repute. For their part the Chinese had to endure the taunts and provocations of the local lamkins, and, like many Europeans, suffered from the depredations of bushrangers such as the Clarke gang. Physical clashes occurred over questions of mining rights – but in these the Europeans were often bested by the Chinese. Inter clan disputes between the Chinese miners were much more serious (McGowan 2004a: 53–58, 2004b: 325–330, 2008: 17–20).

The main Chinese villages were at Mudmelong on the Araluen field, Mongarlowe, and Jembaicumbene. Stores, temples, and Chinese cemeteries were located at each of these three places. At Mongarlowe, Chinese stores were also located at the nearby European village, one of the stores belonging to Shong Foon Nomchong. Both Shong Foon and his brother Chee Dock later opened stores in Braidwood. While at Mongarlowe, he went to night school for six months where he was taught to read and write in English (Braidwood Historical Society 1977: 1). He returned to China where he married, and then to Braidwood in 1887. The Nomchongs had a large family of 14: seven boys and seven girls. On Shong Foon’s death in 1891, Chee Dock became the patriarch of the Nomchong family. Together with his wife, sons and daughters, Chee Dock’s family went on to own a large number and proportion of Braidwood’s businesses and buildings (McGowan 2004a: 50–53, 2004b: 321–324, 2008: 14–16).

From the 1870s an increasing proportion of Chinese people moved from their goldfield settlements to Braidwood and the main village areas at Jembaicumbene and Mongarlowe. Some, like the Nomchongs, had their own businesses, or worked in businesses owned by others, European and Chinese. Proportionately fewer were living in the Chinese villages and camps. A striking illustration of the latter was in 1890 when several Chinese people were reported to be living in rented accommodation in the European village at Jembaicumbene. More striking still, some of them were living in the same rented accommodation as Europeans. Many Chinese men were not so fortunate, their declining numbers and the lesser influence and eventual demise of the fraternal organisations such as the hui, meant for many a lonely death and sometimes suicide (McGowan 2008: 22–24).

Economic co-existence and interdependence between the Europeans and Chinese was an important feature of the Braidwood goldfields. It had several facets: the buying and selling of gold claims, and commerce. Third, and of particular importance, was the Chinese role as market gardeners. The Chinese men were not just miners, but business entrepreneurs and market gardeners, forms of enterprise constituting profitable and relatively secure activities, for many of their customers were Europeans. Chinese gardens were located on all the main goldfields in and near Braidwood. Perhaps the largest was at ‘Mona’, just outside Braidwood. Several were located on the Jembaicumbene and Araluen goldfields. At Jembaicumbene a large garden was located near the Chinese village, and others on ‘Glendaruel’ and ‘Durham Hall’. Chinese gardens were also located near Braidwood on the slopes of Mt Gillamatorg, at Majors Creek, Mongarlowe and at ‘Manar’. At Araluen, an observer in 1896 commented that the Chinese gardens were the ‘only pleasant colouring in the whole landscape’ (Hodgkin 1896).

Braidwood town was a different world to the surrounding goldfields. But with the gradual decline of the surrounding goldfields some Chinese people sought refuge there, and many of the business buildings occupied by them prior to 1900 are still extant. According to the birth, death and marriage register and local rates data, the Chinese presence in Braidwood increased sharply in the first half of the twentieth century. This is a remarkable phenomenon, for over the same period of time almost every other regional town in NSW was losing its Chinese population.

Braidwood’s Chinese heritage as reflected in its buildings is impressive. As Peter Read (2003) has also observed in the case of Inverell in northern NSW, however, Braidwood’s physical debt to its earlier Chinese inhabitants has been neglected in official pronouncements on the history and heritage of the town (see also McGowan 2008: 24–28). What has not been recognised is that the economic co-dependence of the Braidwood goldfields was transferred to the town of Braidwood, and that is reflected in the dominance of buildings in the main street of Braidwood once occupied by Chinese merchants. The Nomchong family’s stores are extant, including Mick Nomchong’s liquor store, Paul Nomchong’s picture theatre (still used by the local film club), the large Albion complex (Paul’s main business premises and residence), the Nomchong family’s main 20th century business premises, which included a small service station (still extant), Bill Nomchong’s home, a small store owned by Paul located near the theatre, Billy Ahyou’s store, the Chu Chin family’s Royal Café and the Chewing family’s Monterey Café, and their family’s store. In fact, all of Chee Dock-Nomchong’s business premises remain intact today, with the shop fronts largely unchanged.

**Figure 1** Nomchong store, Chee dock on right, 1890s (Source: Braidwood Museum).
After 1875, the mining population – Chinese as well as European – was in serious decline because of falling gold yields and low rainfall. Many of the Chinese men and their families moved into the towns and villages, in particular Braidwood, and this movement was accompanied by a change in associations and allegiances. Their active engagement in local life, from mounting court cases to attending race meetings through to supporting school functions, caused most European residents to see them as individuals rather than as part of an anonymous and amorphous mass. Almost all the town dwellers were members of a Christian church and when deceased were buried in the town cemetery. Two of the most notable Chinese entrepreneurs in this period were Mei Quong Tart and the Nomchong brothers, Shong Foon and Chee Dock. Quong Tart was perhaps the best known Chinese person in late nineteenth century NSW. In the early 1870s, he made his fortune on the Bells Creek goldfields and was a member and patron of many Braidwood institutions, such as the lodges, sporting clubs and the Anglican church. In 1886, he married a Sydney women who was teaching in Braidwood, Margaret Scarlett, and departed for Sydney, maintaining close contacts with the Braidwood community until his death in 1903 (McGowan 2007, 2008: 20–22).

With the notable exception of Chee Dock Nomchong, all other Chinese men, including his brother Shong Foon, married European women, and their social allegiances were mutual and mainstream, such as the Christian churches; the only one to have a traditional Chinese burial was Shong Foon. Religious adherence in particular, played an important role in facilitating the wide acceptance of these Chinese townsfolk: it allowed them to meet other Braidwood people socially on an equal footing and encouraged them to join in church-sanctioned behaviour like education and charitable work.

Chee Dock’s family was heavily involved in philanthropic and charitable activities and owned many businesses. Some time in the early 1900s he added fruit and confectionery to his shop, developed a flourishing general store business and began a carrying business plying between Braidwood, Tarago and Nelligen. With the advent of motorised transport, he acquired a trucking fleet to carry a wide range of produce throughout the district and the south coast. Later he purchased several pastoral holdings in the district. Chee Dock’s thirteen surviving children were almost all, whether male or female, involved in the family businesses, although some also started their own. One of his sons, Leo (known as Mick) also managed several rural properties in partnership with his father, and ran a liquor business in town. Another son, Paul, began showing moving pictures, and ran several other enterprises such as an electrical business, a furniture and drapery store and an auctioneer’s business. The Nomchong family business did not close until 1980, after 103 years of trading, and those buildings are still known locally as Nomchong’s corner. However, the Nomchong name continues with Eddie Nomchong’s retail electrical business.

Preserving Braidwood’s Chinese heritage: people, place and material culture

While the focus of this article has so far been on people and buildings, the town’s Chinese legacy can also be seen at the Braidwood Museum. The Museum is owned and operated by the Braidwood and District Historical Society. The Society was founded in 1970 and over forty years has built a collection of objects of considerable significance. While community support for the Museum has been strong (members purchased a former hotel for use as a museum) it is operated entirely by volunteers, with the assistance of institutions such as the Royal Australian Historical Society and the Powerhouse Museum.

In 1977 the Braidwood Historical Society gave a dinner for the Nomchong family in recognition of their contribution to the town. The Society created a small four page souvenir booklet for the occasion, with Helen Nomchong writing the Chinese characters for the booklet and making Chinese paper lanterns to decorate the hall. Eileen Nomchong remembered the dinner with great affection and said ‘it was a beautiful night’ with about 250 people present. The Museum’s activities reveal the strong and enduring link between its Chinese heritage collection and the contemporary community.
As well as the Nomchong family collection, the Braidwood Museum also contains a film projector used in the 1920s by Paul Nomchong. This is a significant item in the Braidwood Museum collection, as it exemplifies the place of the Nomchong family in the cultural life of Braidwood. Paul began showing moving pictures in 1913 (Parkinson & Wright 1997: 10). He employed a live orchestra until the introduction of talkies in 1930. Performers included his sisters, Nellie on the piano and Eileen on the violin. Paul showed films in Braidwood for forty years and he certainly was a resourceful entrepreneur. He provided a radio repair business to the district, engaged live stage shows including boxing tournaments, managed a jazz orchestra for local functions, marketed fresh fish from the south coast and arranged motor trips to Araluen and Bateman’s Bay during the Easter holidays (Parkinson & Wright 1997: 16).

Also in 2003, the Braidwood Museum participated in celebrations to mark the centenary of the death of Quong Tart in a couple of ways. The Museum hosted a visit to Braidwood by participants in the international conference Quong Tart and his times, and Barry McGowan organised walks to the site of his villa, now on private property. One of the participants in the walk to Quong Tart’s villa was his great grand-daughter, Karen Webster. The Braidwood Museum is fortunate to hold two items from Quong Tart’s personal dinner service, a bowl and a spoon dated c1880, one of which was donated by Karen Webster. As part of those celebrations, the Braidwood Museum expanded its Chinese collection and created a photographic exhibition titled Chinese: Merchants, Miners and Entrepreneurs highlighting the contribution of the Chinese people to the Braidwood district. The exhibition was opened by the Cultural Councillor of the Chinese Embassy in Canberra, Wang Xhigang.

Part of the expanded collection includes the temple (Joss House) doors from the former Chinese village at Jembaicumbene. The opening of the temple was mentioned in the Sydney Morning Herald on 11 February 1861: ‘There will be great doings this evening at Jembaicumbene amongst the Celestial bodies, who are inaugurating the opening of a new Joss House’. The doors are important for their association with the spiritual and cultural life of Chinese miners who lived and worked on the Braidwood goldfields during the late nineteenth century (McGowan & Smith 2008). Also in the exhibition were the remains of two headstones from the Chinese cemetery at Mongarlowe.
The Braidwood Museum of today, though still in the same building, does not resemble the museum of forty years ago. Since its creation, the Museum has valued its Chinese-Australian collection, and so have the many visitors to the museum. One report highlighted the 'fabulous Nomchong collection', and noted that it was a favourite with many visitors (Herzog 1999). In 2008, a significance assessment report was commissioned. The aim of the assessment was to define the historic, aesthetic, cultural, and social values of the object or collection for past, present and future generations. The Braidwood report noted that ‘the artefact and photographic holdings of the Braidwood Museum represent, comprehensively, the history of a harmonious bi-cultural European-Chinese settler community, associated initially with mining, and the ongoing association of both groups in the area’ (Jones 2009: 3).

After the report was written, the volunteers at the Braidwood Museum became aware that the collection includes rare Chinese-Australian material that is not replicated in any comparable public collection, particularly the items in the Nomchong collection. The highlight of the collection is the wedding outfit made by Mary Nomchong in China using silk from her own silk worms, which she spun and wove into a highly decorative outfit. She wore it for her wedding to Chee Dock Nomchong in 1887. This wedding outfit is significant historically not only because of its association with the Nomchong family, but also because there were very few Chinese women in Australia during the nineteenth century, and traditional clothing from these years is rare (McGowan & Smith 2008).

An increasing awareness of the importance of the Chinese collection led to a complete re-arrangement of the Museum in 2009. The Nomchong room was dismantled and the collection housed in the much larger upstairs hall, together with the Quong Tart objects, the doors of the Jembaicumbene temple, and the Chinese Merchants exhibition.

All activities of the Braidwood Museum, whether collecting photographs, putting on exhibitions, operating the museum, operating a family history service and tours is done by the members. No monetary or other assistance has been received from the Palerang Council or tourist bodies. The latest local tourism project was a website, Kings Highway to Discovery, for which a grant of $250,000 was received from the Australian Government, but none of that money found its way into the Museum’s exhibition. Pointedly, the town’s tourist brochure makes no mention of Braidwood’s rich Chinese heritage. Most other museums with Chinese-Australian collections are professionally staffed, like the Gold Museum at Ballarat, the Chinese Museum in Melbourne and the Western Australian Museum branch at Kalgoorlie-Boulder (Jones 2009: 24). While the Braidwood collection is smaller than these, it nonetheless has national heritage significance, as highlighted in the recent significance assessment report.

Braidwood and its goldfields provide an excellent example of how Chinese could make the transition in rural NSW from restless outsiders to settled locals, in effect to Chinese-Australians. A measure of the importance of this Chinese-Australian heritage to the town of Braidwood can be gauged by the number of buildings associated with them. A significant proportion of the commercial buildings in the town, almost all of which are on Wallace Street, have a Chinese heritage, much of it dating back to the nineteenth century. Fortunately, there is documentary and photographic evidence of these buildings and people at the National Library in Canberra and at the Braidwood Museum. The buildings have changed little in appearance and are easily recognisable from photos. Thus, within the heritage listed streetscape of the town of Braidwood there is a distinctive Chinese element, rare in New South Wales country towns. The continuing harmonious association and economic co-dependence between the Chinese people and Europeans in Braidwood since the gold rush days of the 1850s is also reflected in the prominence of the Chinese collection of the Braidwood Museum. The Nomchong family in particular has a continuing sense of their Chinese identity combined with a sense of history, and they continue to add material to the Museum’s collection. Thus, Braidwood’s unique Chinese legacy is reflected in both the town’s heritage listed streetscape, and the national significance of the Chinese collection of the Braidwood Museum.

Figure 8 Mary Nomchong’s wedding dress (Source: Braidwood Museum).
References


Sydney Morning Herald, 11 February 1861.