Introduction

MADE IN CHINA: CHINESE-AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE PLACES, OBJECTS AND STORIES

Damien Williams and Keir Reeves

Abstract

This article updates recent research trends and trajectories in heritage and identifies potential areas for future research. In doing so it analyses the relationship between heritage studies and history in this area of research as it emerged at the 2009 Dragon Tails: Re-interpreting Chinese-Australian Heritage conference. The article points to ways in which recent scholarship has begun to reconceptualise the very notion of Chinese-Australian heritage by considering some of the broader currents of historical research that have informed heritage practice in Australia. The authors contend that it is only by considering material culture, heritage landscapes and associated histories that a comprehensive understanding of Chinese-Australian heritage can continue to emerge in the early twenty-first century.

Introduction

In early October 2009, the ‘Dragon Tails Re-interpreting Chinese-Australian Heritage’ conference was convened as an opportunity to reappraise Chinese-Australian heritage. Taking Jennifer Cushman’s (1984) challenge for ‘researchers to move beyond the prevalent one-dimensional approach to understanding the Chinese presence in Australia, which primarily examined Australia’s attitudes towards the Chinese’, the conference theme argued that with increased understanding of multiculturalism as a means for constructing Australian identity a more nuanced understanding of the significance of Chinese-Australian heritage and the Chinese-Australian experience had emerged since the mid-1970s (see Dragon Tails 2009).

The conveners’ assertion was that over the previous thirty-five years a considerable new body of research and associated debates had come to light through archaeological excavations, historiographical developments and regional area studies by cultural heritage practitioners and also better funded institutional and government research. The latter research often took place under official state and federal government policies designed to promote multiculturalism and community diversity. Yet it remains the case that the most accessible way to observe the Chinese experience in Australia is through the built environment and intangible heritage. Accordingly this special issue to highlight these themes. Cox’s work also emphasises the idea that Chinese-Australian heritage is best understood as part of a longer process of cultural exchange between China, Australia and the world – a process that continues in the present day (Cox 2005).

It is important to remind ourselves that in reviewing the changing patterns of Chinese-Australian heritage, the wider heritage movement has long been subject to varying styles of thought and regulation. As the British Empire faded and former colonies began to assert their independence after the Second World War, Australian historians began to examine more closely the particular patterns of government, labour organisation and settlement that they saw as defining their country. Geoffrey Serle’s (1963, 1970) work on the gold rushes, Margaret Kiddle’s (1967) study of the pastoralists of Victoria’s Western District and Michael Roe’s (1965) thesis on colonial government became classics of Australian history as a study in its own right. Moves to preserve the physical remnants of that particular past moved in step with the publication of Serle’s, Kiddle’s and Roe’s histories, as branches of the National Trust were created during the 1950s and 1960s. The Australian parliament took slightly longer to give the heritage movement the surety of Commonwealth legislation. The Register of the National Estate, itself now frozen in time, was established with the passage of the Australian Heritage Commission Act in 1975 (cf. Davison 1991: 14-27). Australia ICOMOS was formed in 1976 and in 1979 the first Burra Charter was adopted (see Australia ICOMOS 2000).

The creation of the National Trust, the Heritage Commission and the Burra Charter were certainly important steps in listing and preserving significant sites of Australia’s built and natural environment. The history of these bodies has also helped to create the view that heritage is a recent thing invented during a period of nostalgia for solid bluestone foundations. Like the Hydra of classical Greece, however, heritage is a many headed thing. The heritage movement that has focussed on old buildings, ruins and artworks reflects a significant strand within an even larger process of relating the past to the present: something that humans have done since they began to tell, sing and dance the stories of their creation, ancestors and dreaming. Along these lines, the English geographer David C. Harvey has argued for heritage to be seen as a process, as a verb (2001: 327). Heritage is given a much wider temporal span when it is considered as an activity of bringing the past to bear in the present, rather than as something solely concerned with artefacts and historic sites. For Harvey, heritage
has always been with us and has always been produced by people according to their contemporary concerns and experiences. Consequently, we should explore the history of heritage, not starting at an arbitrary date like 1882, but by producing a context-rich account of heritage as a process or a human condition rather than as a single movement or a personal project. (2001: 320)

The increased interest in intangible heritage (cf. Historic Environment Oct. 2009) has seen ideas of the universal and the particular converge in ways not previously considered. In looking for ways to link the physical remnants of the past with notions of intangible heritage, the experience of migration has become fertile ground for historians and heritage practitioners to turn over. Transnational history and its progeny, diaspora studies, have helped to renew interest in what people leave behind and what they take with them when migrating from one place to another. In the course of this study, several questions arise. When crossing a border, to sojourn or stay, what of the old is retained in the new? What traditions are reinvented or created in the process of moving, and how do they exist as heritage in the present?

This special edition of Historic Environment engages with these questions by looking closely at the ways in which the experience of Chinese people in Australia has come to be considered as heritage. In several of the articles published in this collection and the next accompanying issue, local and regional places of significance are the starting points for re-evaluating Chinese heritage in Australia. The act of travelling from one place to another, both of people and ideas, has also provoked new ways of thinking about the relationship of the past to the present; this heritage too is explored in this edition. While the notion of heritage being rooted in the nation remains strong in this sense, the practice of telling stories of individual lives in museum exhibitions, memoir and family history moves the idea of heritage as a particular national inheritance into the background. Narratives of survival, endurance and self-discovery in crossing from one culture to another continue to expand the very concept of heritage in new and engaging ways.

The ‘Dragon Tails’ organisers quite deliberately wanted to hold the conference in a regional location because of the extant Chinese heritage sites dotted throughout all parts of the country (including Tasmania). Although the conference was conceived of as an academic forum it was always intended as one where cultural heritage practitioners, genealogists, architects, archivists, media commentators, historians, museologists, curators, literary scholars, and tourism researchers could engage with each other to elucidate new research directions and to maintain the research momentum that had been generated in the area. A series of events meant that a new focal point was required to maintain research dialogues about Chinese-Australian studies: the deaths and departures from Australia of several notable scholars in the field, the conclusion of the initial research intensive phase of key major online projects such as the Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation project (2004) and the Golden Threads project, and a number of completed Masters degrees and PhDs in the area (see Bagnall 2006; Couchman 2009; Fitzgerald 2007; Kuo 2008; Lovejoy 2009; Rains 2004; Rasmussen 2009; Reeves 2005; Wilson 2004; Wong Hoy 2006). Moreover, it was also acknowledged that it was necessary for a new cohort of researchers to take up the agenda that had been mapped out by researchers and advocates since the mid-1970s, such as Morag Loh (1985), Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (1978; see also Markus 1979), David Walker (1999), and Henry Chan (1995; there are, of course, many other prominent figures whose research commenced during this era has informed subsequent researchers since the mid-1970s).

Initially the organisers envisaged a small group of no more than thirty people gathering at Sovereign Hill. Happily they were almost overwhelmed by expressions of interest. It resulted in over forty papers being delivered and many more people attending as guest speakers or interested listeners. This response highlighted that there was a much larger scholarly and public interest in Chinese-Australian history than initially thought. While a number of conference presentations confirmed what many have suspected, much of the Chinese experience in Australia can been seen in the remnant landscapes, heritage precincts, material culture collections, Chinatowns, and intangible heritage practices in the present day. The above observation is the raison d’être of this special issue – one that asserts that while Chinese-Australian heritage is now part of a mainstream understanding of Australian history and heritage, new perspectives and international comparisons are required in order to further understand the complexity of Chinese-Australian cultural heritage.

The prominence of Chinese heritage in Australia over the last two decades has in large part been the result of local community action and state sponsorship. The Museum of Chinese-Australian History in Melbourne and the Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre in Ararat (situated in western Victoria), for instance, trace their roots to the mid-1980s, when Victoria celebrated its sesquicentenary (Chinese Museum 2011; Gum San 2011). In the case of the Chinese Museum, its founders were encouraged by former South Australian Labor Premier Don Dunstan, a champion of multiculturalism and cultural diversity, who saw great potential in Chinatown being developed as a unique place of continual Chinese occupation in a largely European city. For the Bendigo Chinese Association, in Victoria’s north central region, the mid-1980s was also a time to consolidate its actions into a tangible expression of Chinese heritage. The Association incorporated in March 1986 and, in 1991, the Golden Dragon Museum was opened in Bendigo (Bendigo Chinese Association 2011; Golden Dragon Museum n.d.).

![Figure 1 Loong in the Melbourne celebrations marking Federation, 1901 (Source: National Library of Australia).](Image 323x99 to 567x269)
Loong, located at the Bendigo Chinese Association Golden Dragon Museum, is the oldest imperial dragon in the world (see Figure 1). Its status as such not only reflects the deprivations of the Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China but also the longevity of the Chinese community in Australia. The dragon (and its associated history and heritage) is also a valuable cultural tourism artefact. Chinese community participation in the Bendigo Easter Fair can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. It has survived against the odds. In the early twenty-first century it is not only a source of local civic pride but also an instrument by which Bendigo's rich legacy of history and heritage attracts and engages an international tourist audience, particularly visitors from China who have travelled in increasing numbers to Bendigo in recent decades (Pan & Laws 2003). This conjuncture of history, heritage and tourism is not an isolated example but instead is indicative of much Chinese-Australian cultural heritage.

This special issue, much like Loong and other Chinese dragons preserved in Australian museums, is a marker of the enduring significance of Chinese-Australian cultural heritage in the present day. It emphasises the need to better understand the relationship between history, heritage and other disciplines including museology, archaeology, architectural history, and tourism studies, through which most Australians encounter the past.

Accordingly there are two key themes for this double issue. The first emphasises the national significance of research into Chinese-Australian heritage. During the past twelve years this has been driven in large part by the extensive work of archaeologists, cultural historians and heritage practitioners. Several examples are worth noting here, for instance Jane Lydon's (1999) work on colonial Sydney and Grace Karskens's (1998, 1999) historical archaeological investigation of The Rocks precinct. Alan Mayne's (2004) guest-edited special issue of the Journal of Australian Colonial History developed his earlier research into Hill End and the Bathurst goldfields in New South Wales. The Australian Research Council funded the Mount Alexander Diggings historical archaeology project that examined Chinese-European encounters on a key nineteenth century Victorian gold field, while the La Trobe University Chinese-Australian studies programme was very active during the 2000s. Kate Bagnall's and Henry Chan's research made significant contributions to colonial Chinese-Australian history (see Bagnall 2006; Chan 1995; Curthoys, Chiang & Chan 2001). Kevin Rains and Kevin Wong-Hoy's (2009) work, along with others, concentrated on local research of the Chinese legacy in North Queensland through the Rediscovered Past: Valuing Chinese roles across the North conference series. Tseen Khoo, Dean Chan and Jacqueline Lo investigated transnational and comparative perspectives between Asian Australian and Asian American studies in their Australian Research Council Discovery project “Being Asian in Australia and the United States” (see Khoo & Lo 2008; Lo, Chan & Kho 2010). Institutional research has been undertaken at the Bendigo Golden Dragon Museum. Area studies of Broome in North Western Australia and Cathie May's (1984) pioneering work into the Northern Territory are examples of work undertaken in remote Australia (see also Karskens 1998, 1999; Mayne 2003, 2004). Other prominent researchers have summarised the research into hitherto little known areas and in doing so have brought the enduring story of the Chinese in Australia to wider audiences (good examples include Henry Reynolds’ (2003) North of Capricorn and Janis Wilton's (2004) Golden Threads.

The second theme builds upon an internationally framed conversation about Australian cultural heritage practitioners' and other allied disciplinary researchers' engagement with Chinese researchers. Given the recent announcement of a Chair of Australian Studies at Peking University, Beijing, this issue anticipates an increased level of research exchange between the two countries. It also highlights the potential for cultural heritage to act as a conduit for further research and the exchange of ideas. Accordingly while this volume takes stock of research that has been done, it also quite deliberately aims to discuss more international perspectives. A key question that has emerged asks how recent developments in Chinese-Australian heritage might lead to closer transnational historical and heritage comparisons of Australia and China. This is an important point that is investigated more thoroughly in a series of articles that will be published in the second volume of this special issue. As indicated above, perhaps the most pertinent issue to emerge from this is the question of whether or not the work done by Australian cultural heritage practitioners will herald an era of greater collaboration between heritage professionals and historians in developing new transnational histories of Australia and China.

...we have seen more nuanced understandings of ‘heritage’ emerge in recent years, placing less emphasis on material culture per se, and more emphasis upon the (many) stories these materials can manifest and inspire. Objects become a starting point not an end in and of themselves, and heritage becomes reconceptualised as a ‘process’ of passing on and receiving memories, not just the artefacts themselves. (Smith 2006 quoted in Kidd 2011: 24) There are quite profound implications in seeing heritage as something that we do, rather than as something that we point to. (The same might be said for other ways of approaching the past: when an Australian historian, now dead, suggested to his colleagues that history was a social system, a senior member of the audience turned to his neighbour and said: ‘We have a viper in our midst.’) Thinking about heritage as an activity need not be so shocking. The most recent version of the Burra Charter, for instance, recognises that there is a circular ‘process’ in deciding how best to research and conserve a significant place (Australia ICOMOS 2000: 10). In this example heritage remains the object of a particular expert activity, whether it be architectural history, conservation management or something similar. While heritage as an activity in itself is something beyond the realm of the Burra Charter, research into this area might provide further insights into the ways that Chinese-Australian pasts are being celebrated in the present.

Reuniting an older, participatory understanding of heritage with a more or less broadly-defined and officially sanctioned process of listing historic places shows how dynamic the relationship between past and present becomes as soon as something is labelled as heritage. Festivals, pilgrimages, ‘back-to’ celebrations, and historical re-enactments are powerful means of creating memories and connections with the past. They greatly expand the notion of what constitutes an historic environment. Television programs such as the House series (recall the 1900 House, Outback House, Edwardian House, Frontier House and the like) are not aberrations in this sense; they are part of a much older act of performing heritage, which humans have done for millennia, albeit in a more technologically sophisticated manner and with larger audiences than ever before.

In identifying the relationships that exist between place, material culture and story a tension can often emerge between local
practices of heritage and expert determination. From the articles presented in this volume, it seems that the various practices of Chinese-Australian heritage that exist today are not exempt from feeling that tension. Yet the most successful examples of preserving Chinese-Australian heritage and presenting it to a wider audience have occurred when local activism has combined with state support to put stories of Chinese migration and life in Australia in its local, national and international context.

This special double issue of *Historic Environment* presents a wide range of articles on topics that begin with appraisals of the built environment and conclude with more personal narratives that reflect upon questions of identity and intangible cultural heritage. These different approaches to the one theme illustrate the richness that can be brought to bear on Australian history in general by focussing on a particular group of people. The potential do similar work with other groups of people is only limited by the willingness and the imagination of historians and heritage practitioners. It seems that there is much to gain by combining scholarship on landscape, material culture and personal narratives. It is, after all, the places on which lives are lived that give rise to stories, and stories which constitute culture.

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