Introduction

Reviewing Chinese-Australian Heritage: History, people and place, local and international

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Abstract

In the second decade of the twenty-first century a number of approaches are now used to examine Chinese-Australian heritage. This article reviews some of these with reference to key sites, research themes, methods of interpretation, historiographical debates, theories of diaspora and current trends in the field. In doing so it emphasises the need for further interdisciplinary collaboration in order to understand Chinese-Australian heritage. Drawing upon the current work of a number of researchers and practitioners, it argues that further integration of intangible cultural heritage with built urban forms and historical landscapes is required. It also highlights the need to consider local, often site-specific examples of Chinese-Australian heritage within the broader framework of international developments in heritage practice and policy.

Introduction

The presence of the Chinese in Australia is an enduring one much like Australia’s history of engagement with Asia. The first era of arrivals from southern China occurred during the nineteenth century, initially driven by a largely unsuccessful policy of “Coolie” labour. Later greater numbers of Chinese were lured by the attraction of winning gold in the eastern Australian colonies of New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland. This pattern of settlement has occurred as part of the broader pattern of Chinese movement throughout the Asia-Pacific region known as nanyang. It is an ongoing history that continues into the present day. (While nanyang can specifically mean the Nusantara region of South East Asia, for the purposes of this special issue it is used in its wider context to denote the South Seas.)

Many Australians’ first experience of Chinese-Australian cultural heritage is through visiting heritage places. These include Broome in Western Australia (where the Chinese were part of the pearling industry alongside Japanese, Indonesian, Filipino, European and Malaysian divers), Chinatown precincts in Sydney, Melbourne, and Atherton, and numerous smaller Chinese heritage sites dotted throughout regional Australia. Others may visit museums such as the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo, Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre in Ararat, the Museum of Chinese-Australian History in Melbourne or the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. Increasingly for many Victorian primary school aged children it may involve an excursion to Sovereign Hill, the outdoor heritage museum and historical theme park in Ballarat, situated in the former goldfields region of central Victoria. More often than not cultural heritage sites and museums are the introductory portals into Chinese-Australian heritage.

There is a growing awareness of Chinese-Australian heritage throughout the community. In turn, this development has held important consequences for public heritage policy and prevailing community attitudes towards Chinese-Australian heritage. The most important advance is that this heritage is now widely regarded as having great significance. This pattern of increased knowledge of Chinese-Australian heritage is part of a broader trend that has been gaining momentum since the mid-1970s. It is worth noting that this has occurred during a period where federal and state public policy has increasingly emphasised the importance of diversity and multiculturalism to such an extent that community harmony is now part of official government policy of the Victorian and Australian governments (Victorian Multicultural Office 2002; Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011). The Chinese diplomatic mission in Australia has also formally designated 2011-2012 as the year of Chinese culture in Australia (Government of China 2011).

This heightened awareness is also apparent in cultural institutions and throughout government heritage circles. In early 2011, for example, the Victorian State government recognised the contribution of Dennis O’Hoy for his role as a key advocate of Chinese-Australian heritage and supporter of goldfields history (Heritage Victoria 2011). The Victorian minister for Planning and Development, Matthew Guy, gave O’Hoy the inaugural Ray Tonkin award from the Heritage Council of Victoria. (Ray Tonkin, a well-known heritage professional, was the long-standing executive director of Heritage Victoria in whose name the award was founded.) The O’Hoy family are among the oldest Bendigo families (with numerous successes in aspects of local, state, and national cultural and corporate life over successive generations). O’Hoy’s sustained and often outspoken advocacy for the preservation of Bendigo’s built heritage is a hallmark of his lifetime dedication to public service, as is his commitment to telling the Chinese story of the Victorian goldfields experience.

This second issue of Historic Environment on the theme of Chinese-Australian heritage is part of the new wave of Chinese-Australian studies. This contemporary research has included exhibitions, walking tours, and events, as well as the reinvigoration of Chinese-Australian studies through conferences and research publications (such as the recent special issues of Amerasia and Australian Historical Studies). Numerous commercial and academically sanctioned archaeological excavations, journal publications (such as Peril which concentrates on Australian Asian arts and culture), increased awareness of Chinese-Australian heritage amongst heritage architects (including Roger Bee斯顿’s innovative conservation of the Singapore cottage, a private home in the City of Port Philip, Melbourne), the continued vibrant online
presence of Asian Australian Studies Research Network (AASRN), and the continued interpretation of the Chinese Kiln in White Hills, Bendigo (following its rediscovery during a period of VicRoads road work excavations in the mid-2000s), have also drawn further attention to Chinese-Australian heritage.

It was timely that the first issue on Chinese-Australian heritage for *Historic Environment* was published in late-2011, on the cusp of the second Dragon Tails conference held by La Trobe University at the Museum for Chinese-Australian history, which is situated in the heart of the formally designated Little Bourke Street Chinatown precinct of central Melbourne. The choice of the venue was important, as it is a key site for remembering Chinese-Australian heritage. Even a cursory glance at the institutional history of the Chinese Museum (as it is more commonly known amongst Melburnians) since its launch during the mid-1980s reveals both the triumphs and challenges of telling the story of the Chinese-Australian experience and conserving its heritage. Moreover, Melbourne Chinatown itself is a cultural marker that has its informal organic roots as a place where Chinese-Australians have lived, settled and traded since the mid-nineteenth century.

In his revealing interview with guest co-editor Damien Williams in the previous issue of *Historic Environment*, Mark Wang sounded a tocsin for the need for greater support for the Museum for Chinese-Australian History (see Williams 2011: 33). His closing call for increased support – presumably both financial and public – of cultural institutions such as the Chinese Museum is equally pertinent for other heritage sites and cultural institutions. Although not exhaustive by any means, indicative examples include the Bendigo kiln, the Golden Dragon Museum (home of Loong the oldest known remaining imperial – five clawed – dragon in the world and local motif of the enduring intangible heritage practice of the Easter procession of the dragon in Bendigo each year), the Sze Yup temple in Darwin, the Walter Burley-Griffin (renowned architect of Canberra, the Australian nation capital) designed Kuomintang (KMT) headquarters in Little Bourke Street, Melbourne, the historical Chinese mining landscapes of southern New South Wales, and those lesser known and sometimes unexpected sites, such as the Chinese constructed shearing shed at Lake Mungo (Lovejoy 2011; Dewar 2010; Heritage Victoria 2008). Lake Mungo is situated in the UNESCO Willandra Lakes Region (a world heritage inscribed area since 1981; UNESCO 1981). Mungo is redolent of immense cultural heritage values, a site where the Chinese and European roles in the development and growth of the Australian pastoral industry provides additional historical and interpretive layers to the broader historical narratives of Mungo Man and the Willandra Lakes Region as a cradle of Australian Indigenous culture (Lake Mungo is the oldest known cremation site in the world).

In this special issue (and its companion preceding issue), the editors emphasise the diverse ways of approaching Chinese-Australian heritage in order to gain new, sometimes contested, insights. Increasingly, one favoured approach is to consider people and places (or more formally ‘intangible’ and ‘tangible’ heritage) together to provide greater understandings of Chinese-Australian history in the present day (Reeves & McConville 2011; McConville & Reeves 2012). Throughout the two volumes the ambiguous nature of Chinese/non-Chinese relations has resonated. Questions of cultural identity, hybridity, and exchange remain. Further challenges include issues of racism, enduring exclusion, and (considering the nineteenth century) the often historically loaded question of ‘who was a pioneer’? The reason the experience of Chinese-Australian heritage and attitudes is described as ambiguous is because of a sense that the Chinese–non-Chinese (predominantly European) experience has historically been typified by moments of mutual understanding and collaborative enterprise between Chinese and non-Chinese Australians that are tempered by other experiences of institutional racism and hostility.

In one respect, Helene Chung’s article in this issue is the furthest removed from heritage studies. Yet, from another perspective, it is the most important article in this collection. It
Nonetheless, orthodox understandings of Chinese-Australian heritage are still largely associated with gold rush era colonial narratives of the second half of the nineteenth century that emphasise historical archaeological approaches. This trend is quite understandable, since the major movement of Chinese people and the associated remnant heritage is most prevalent at places and sites associated with the nineteenth century gold rush era. Chung’s biographical approach not only not reveals a personal present day perspective on Chinese-Australian identity, but also emphasises the potency of intangible heritage to tell stories and to reveal insights that are not necessarily apparent through observation of built heritage forms. This intangible heritage is best obtained through oral histories, the cultural mapping of community memories, family narratives, institutional and business histories that reveal so much about the people and ongoing modalities of everyday life. By combining intangible heritage and associated histories with detailed and technical understandings of place, a more accenteduated picture of Chinese-Australian heritage is revealed. The inclusion of Chung’s article in this second collection also highlights the increasingly diverse ways of understanding cultural heritage in the second decade of the twenty first century.

One trend in Chinese-Australian heritage studies has been that research has tended to focus on particular areas or signature sites. My own PhD experience was typical in this respect. It was undertaken between 2001-2005 as part of an historical archaeology project that concentrated on the former Mount Alexander diggings situated at the Castlemaine and its by-ways and laneways through an oral history approach of reclaiming local, regional, and sometimes national heritage (Bannear & Annear 1990; Bannear 2002; Holst 2004; Rasmussen 2004; Frost et al. 2009; Mountford & Reeves 2009; Lovejoy 2011). This, quite understandably, has meant that close readings of key regions, precincts, and sites have emerged. These include northern Queensland, central Victoria or the Sze Yup temple in Glebe and Chinatown in Sydney (Mak 2003; Wong-Hoy 2006; Grimwade 2011). Yet in many respects this research (while vital in reclaiming local, regional, and sometimes national heritage) often doesn’t engage with the broader international context.

One way of avoiding potentially myopic localised approaches that focus on the specific is to contextualise Chinese-Australian studies and heritage (as with this special issue) in an international domain. It is desirable to move from the particular to the general in order to observe wider perspectives of Chinese-Australian heritage. Two articles, by Kirsty Altanen and Sharon Sullivan – on the implications of the China Principles for the development of national cultural heritage conservation and management guidelines – and by Agnieszka Sobocinska – in interview with eminent Australian-Asian studies academic David Walker – highlight the need for Australian heritage themes and management to continue to fully engage with international developments, cultural diplomatic trends, and with forums such as ICOMOS and UNESCO. While a close reading of developments in Chinese-Australian heritage studies are understandably the major focus of Australian researchers and practitioners, it is only by

**Figure 2** The Walter Burley-Griffin designed Kuomintang (KMT) headquarters in Little Bourke Street, Melbourne.
contextualising localised or site-specific studies into a broader context that a richer understanding emerges and the full significance of Chinese-Australian heritage is realised.

In this special issue, much discussion of Chinese-Australian heritage is grounded in Australian case studies that highlight links between China and Australia. However, it is important to note that the Chinese-Australian diasporic experience is best understood in a regional context that includes New Zealand and the countries of the South West Pacific. The heritage of the Chinese gold seekers in central Otago, New Zealand is a good example. Neville Ritchie's excavation of the Chinese precinct of Arrowtown in 1984 provided new information about the Chinese who had resided there. The most revealing information came from Ah Lurn's store, the best known and most intact Chinese building in the town. It was still operating up until Ah Lurn's death in 1927, and one area had served as a guest room for visitors. In 1985, Ritchie observed that his excavation was aided by the fact that many Arrowtown inhabitants still remembered the Chinese men who had lived there. This enabled him to ‘link specific dwellings with particular individuals and record details of their way of life, personal characteristics and habits which would otherwise have been lost’ (Ritchie 1985: 9).

In other parts of the Pacific region Chinese heritage is not as thoroughly researched. The Chinese heritage in Fiji and other parts of Melanesia is less well known and remains an under-researched area of study. Notwithstanding Bessie Ng Kumlin Ali's (2002) invaluable history of the Fijian Chinese, little remains from the first era of Chinese settlement in Suva. The handful of remaining sites include the China Club, the Chinese Cemetery, and the Sun Yet Sen School. Likewise, for intangible heritage there is no Chinatown or Chinese Museum (Ali 2002; Cheer 2011). Other areas in Melanesia, such as the former historic Chinatown precinct in Honiara, Solomon Islands have been destroyed as a result of ethnic violence towards the Chinese (Stanley 2006).

One indicative example of the interplay between local and international approaches to heritage is the former brick kiln situated in White Hills, North Bendigo. In one respect it is a major archaeological find by virtue of its large scale. The extent remains of the kiln and its associated buildings are clearly of immense local and state significance in the information they reveal about the scale and nature of everyday life and commerce of the Chinese and Chinese-European relations in nineteenth century Bendigo. Further information gleaned by local heritage activists, historical researchers and Heritage Victoria archaeological representatives established that the kiln is one of the largest discovered outside of mainland China and is of international significance (Taylor 2005). The point being made here is that the international perspective establishes an enhanced threshold of significance for the site. Moreover this new level of significance reinforces its validity in any discussions about its local, regional, and national significance. Similar arguments can be made for the extensive Sze Yup temple complex in South Melbourne, Victoria and other key Chinese-Australian heritage sites and precincts throughout the country.

While this special issue is methodologically grounded in heritage studies (albeit through a lateral definition of heritage), it also engages with a number of allied disciplines. These include history, historical archaeology, architecture, cultural diplomacy, autobiographical narrative, cultural landscape studies, tourism studies, heritage management, public policy, planning, and museum studies. Elements of all of the approaches are required to culturally map tangible and intangible Chinese-Australian heritage. As the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (2011) cultural mapping project has observed, this process is one that aims to consult as widely as possible in order to create a continuous dialogue between a community and its history. However it is also a process that can be contentious and often leads to contested viewpoints. What this highlights is the increased need for a greater dialogue between community representatives, heritage bureaucrats, academics and cultural heritage practitioners.

In conclusion, it is important to reflect upon the broader objectives of the current spate of research, increased professional interest, and heightened awareness of Chinese-Australian heritage throughout the Australian community since the turn of the last century. With this greater awareness and the critical mass of work undertaken in the area, much of which has been discussed or presented in these two special issues, a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese-Australian heritage continues to emerge. The trend away from close readings of nineteenth century historical landscapes and built heritage forms toward a broader range of intangible heritage reveals a sustained longitudinal history up to and including the present day and a commensurately greater amount of Chinese-Australian heritage. This more comprehensive view of Chinese-Australian heritage works best when built and intangible cultural heritage are considered in tandem. It is not case of one approach or the other.

Chinese-Australian heritage is not a static concept anchored in an important mid-nineteenth century gold seeking moment. Instead it is enduring. Because of this, new debates and perspectives from different heritage viewpoints continue to emerge in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. As the title of this introductory article

Figure 3 Chinese cemetery – Suva.
suggests, these new insights are best realised when disciplinary approaches are combined. In this way heritage, history, people and place, local and international approaches of Chinese-Australian heritage are all considered together.

Endnotes

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This article is for Maurice and Eunice Leong.

2 The Chinese Government in Australia (the People’s Republic of China), through its diplomatic representation throughout the country is using the Chinese lunar calendar to mark the 2011-2012 Year of Chinese in Australia. Hence the celebration spans two calendar years having commenced in February 2011.

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