PERSPECTIVES ON CHINESE - AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK WANG

Damien Williams

Mark Wang’s family has a long and distinguished association with Melbourne that stretches back to the arrival of his mother’s forebears in Australia in 1854. His father, David Neng Hwan Wang, was an army officer who came to Melbourne during the Second World War to represent Chinese Nationalist forces allied with the Australians and Americans fighting Japan. While in Melbourne David met Mabel Chen, whom he married in Shanghai in 1946. With his new bride in tow, David was granted re-entry to Australia on a business visa in 1948 and was allowed to stay in the country on the condition that his business (an emporium) turned over a minimum of £500 a year. Mark Wang talked about his parents at some length when he was interviewed on 774 ABC Melbourne’s Conversation Hour in 2008.

In the early 1970s, David was approached by members of the Chinese community in Melbourne to help import a dragon from China so that dragon parades – which had taken place in the city during the colonial era – could be revived. After David died on New Year’s Day 1978, Mark and his mother continued the project. The dragon that eventually arrived in Melbourne was the first to be made in China since 1949. Before David’s death, the emporium regularly took calls from people asking for information on Chinese festivals and associated events in the city. Mark and his mother could see that there was a thirst for knowledge in the wider community about Chinese history and culture. With the encouragement of former South Australian premier Don Dunstan, who had been appointed chairman of the Victorian Tourism Commission in 1982, the Museum of Chinese-Australian History was opened in 1985 (the year of Victoria’s sesquicentenary project).

In the late 1980s, David Wang’s city emporium was wound up. In 1992, Mark combined his artistic training and business acumen to found Designs Australia, which is currently situated at 28 Victoria Street, Carlton. As a young art student, he demonstrated his entrepreneurial flair when he began a scheme to order materials for sale to his classmates at wholesale prices. (If they were all using the same media, why pay retail?) Later, he became one of the first people to export Australian wine to China. Mark continues to serve as deputy chairman of the Chinese Museum and is actively involved in other community projects.

DW: The story of the Chinese Museum will be known to more than a few readers of Historic Environment. For those who aren’t so familiar with its history, could you briefly outline how and when the Museum came to be?

MW: The Museum was opened in 1985, but one or two years earlier the germ of an idea came from Don Dunstan, the previous Premier of South Australia. When he left South Australia he was appointed director of the Victorian Tourism Commission. He travelled around Victoria and identified Chinatown as one of the most underrated precincts or locations in Victoria that required recognition as a tourism precinct. It’s a cultural tourism precinct so it needs a cultural heart and he thought we should establish a museum in the heart of Chinatown. So he visited a few people, of which I was one, and said that he’d like to start a museum. Could we get the community to rally together to start one? It was about the time of the Victorian 150th anniversary, and it was the sesquicentenary project that paid for the Museum site. At that time a few of us formed the Museum of Chinese-Australian History Incorporated and we ended up with a derelict building in which to start a museum. We had no collection and no staff. So from that time we had to virtually build it up from nothing. In fact it was that derelict that three floors were uninhabitable. The first thing we had to do was try to find some money just to try to replace the floors, it was that derelict. 25 years later, up until last year, it’s taken us all that time to get enough capital together to finally finish the building to a complete state.

DW: Looking back, how important has the Melbourne Dai Loong Association been in creating an appetite for Chinese heritage in this city?

MW: The Chinese dragon has in fact always been the finale of each Moomba parade so, other than a couple of years, the Chinese dragon’s always appeared at Moomba, more so than Chinese New Year. It was sort of part of Melbourne’s landscape in having a Chinese dragon. From the 1950s to the ’70s, in that twenty year period, we had a dragon there which was run by the Young Chinese League. But they only last about twenty years before they wear out. In 1978, my father, who ran a large shop in Chinatown, came up with the idea to bring out another dragon from China. Regrettfuly he passed away in 1979 and I was the next person standing! So I got the job of going to China to get the new dragon. When we went back to China to get one, we thought, ‘Oh we’ll just go to China a buy one,’ but, in fact, they hadn’t made one for thirty years because of the Cultural Revolution. We found that we’d fallen on something of a cultural desert. We had to go back and regroup and say, ‘Oh we better take all the parts back and get them to make a copy of one that we have.’ So we took the parts back but, at that time, in ’78, it was only two years since the Cultural Revolution had ended. As a result, the culture couldn’t just reinvent itself – it had to be started again.

Only a few years ago we found out that the people who decided to make it for us had used their own ration coupons to get all the materials to make the ’79 dragon. So it was a big exercise internally in China to get them to do that. They had to sacrifice a lot personally for that to happen and there were many hundreds of people who made that ’79 dragon, or Dai Loong, and it was really the first dragon out of China that had
been made in those thirty years. So it was quite satisfying to think that we were taking culture back to China; the Chinese diaspora taking Chinese culture back to China. The Dai Loong dragon lasted another twenty years. Around 2000 we brought this other dragon out, the Millenium Dragon.

Dragons are very much a part of Melbourne and Victorian culture. We have the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo and because of the gold rush of the 1850s, Chinese culture and that kind of cultural parading is part of the landscape, our local landscape. Before the big street parade featuring Dai Loong was established in 1979 we had lions running around on different days – because of the political factions in the different parts of the Chinese community. Chinese New Year was celebrated by different people on different weekends and they didn’t want their lions to cross paths. So when the dragon came along, I said ‘We’re either going to do it on this weekend or your weekend,’ and they said that they couldn’t do that. And I said, ‘Well, can’t we just do it all together and forget about all the politics of it all? We’ll organise for the street to be closed off,’ we’d never organised for the street to be closed off before, ‘and we’ll just have one festival together.’ And that was the first unified Chinese New Year festival.

DW: Amongst those groups, were there those who dissented and said, ‘No, we still want to maintain our own separate celebration?’

MW: No, we got them together. The lions have routes to go: they go down one street and up one street and we just had to make sure that they were kept apart on the day, that they never crossed paths. And that still happens to this day. Now they’re working in cooperation with each other, but they don’t like crossing paths with each other. There is a certain hierarchy: one lion has to bow to the other lion and when the dragon comes along they both have to bow to the dragon because it’s a higher being. That’s how it works. There’s internal politics and a level of community posturing that gets maintained. The Chinese Museum has to maintain a bipartisan sort of position so that we’re not favouring one side or the other. We’re the most widely accepted organisation throughout the community because of our position. As a community museum, we’ve got to make sure that we keep everybody happy, or, more so that we don’t put anybody offside.

DW: I noticed on level two of the Museum that there’s a great focus on all the different geographic and political groups that make up the Chinese community in Australia.

MW: You can argue that it’s a bit political in the fact that there’s China and then there’s Hong Kong and there’s Taiwan. If you were strictly political you’d say, well, ‘Why is Taiwan and Hong Kong separate from China when it’s part of China?’ But at the time, those people came from Hong Kong and at the time, those people came from Taiwan, so, you know, there’s history. Hong Kong, for instance, was separate but now it’s part of China. At an earlier time, when a person came from Hong Kong it was a British colony. So there’s a little bit of politics but people can see over that to what we’re trying to do. That exhibition’s very important to include because of the 700,000 Chinese people in Australia, only 50,000 originate prior to the 1950s. So if we’re to talk about ‘the Chinese community’ we can’t preclude the 650,000 that came after 1950. The rest of museum is about the pre-1950 era beginning with the goldrushes. It was very important to include that exhibition so that we could be inclusive; to tell a more current history. When

the Museum opened in 1985, half those people weren’t here.

DW: The very notion of heritage has expanded greatly over the past 25 or 30 years. How has the Museum tried to keep pace with that?

MW: Well Chinatown’s a case in point where the buildings go back to the 1860s. When we talk about Chinatown we talk about the community of Chinatown and the history of Chinatown not being the buildings, but the people. And that’s what is quite unique about Chinatown, it has a continuous history of Chinese occupation and the buildings are really the skeletal remains of the community. When we do a school tour down the street, we regard the history as the community who live there, not the buildings. It’s pretty boring when you say ‘This building was built by Sir John Smith and was built in 1842’. You’re just talking about bricks and mortar. It’s interesting information, but it’s not really the heart and soul of the building.

Really the living history is just as important as the built form. So we always try to interpret an object by introducing the people who owned it, its function and its purpose. Without that there is no meaning to it. The interpretation is really important, as are the people behind it. So that’s part of our collection policy. We get objects that are often donated but they must have some provenance in Chinese-Australian history. If we get a dragon robe that has provenance in that a Chinese person brought it out to Australia, then we’ll take it on and make it part of the collection. But if we were given a dragon robe donated by a collector who just bought it last year, well, you think, ‘Should this be part of our collection or not?’ when it doesn’t have the right provenance to be part of our collection. It just happens to be a Chinese garment. Then there’s a question mark over whether we should take it in. So, yes, it’s not just about the object but the background to that object that’s important.

DW: During the time the museum’s been open, have you been able to develop a strategy to gauge how successful an exhibition or a program’s going to be before it opens?

MW: No! (laughs) We have two main streams of activity. Our charter says that we research and promote Chinese-Australian history, or the people of Chinese descent who live in Australia and the culture from which they come from. So when you say ‘and the culture from which they come from’, you can actually put on an exhibition of Chinese culture per se, regardless of whether it has a relationship with Chinese-Australian history. We have three streams of exhibitions. One is Chinese-Australian exhibitions, the other one is Chinese cultural exhibitions, and then we have another theme that is contemporary exhibitions that engage Chinese-Australians today or even just Australians who want to interpret Chinese-Australian relations. It’s more quality than quantity. Success can be from the quality of an exhibition or it can be from the amount of audience we get, or the type of audience that comes through the door – there’s a number of levels.

We recently had a contemporary exhibition by a number of artists in collaboration with RMIT. They were postgraduate artists from RMIT and they had an exhibition of a similar type last year in Shanghai about China-Australian dialogue and the relationship between Chinese and Australian culture. That was very successful. We had lots of people there: young people and others who were interested in the relationship between China and Australia. A lot of them took the historical aspects of Chinatown as a part of how they interpreted that relationship.
That was a very diverse exhibition, but the type of people who come to it were not the same type of people who may have come to a Chinese painting exhibition that would attract the general Chinese community. This was another group of people from another circle. We try to make the Museum’s exhibitions quite diverse so that we can attract all different kinds of audiences. It keeps the Museum alive and kicking.

**DW:** You’ve trained as an artist in addition to your work in business. What do you see as the relationship between heritage and the arts?

**MW:** Of the artists whose work was in the exhibition I just mentioned, I would say 60 per cent of them were Chinese, some of them were Chinese-Australians and some were Australians, but their common ability was to provide an interpretation – and quite a creative interpretation – of the relationship between China and Australia. So the arts actually provided a way of engaging people in an enquiring way. Whereas sometimes heritage doesn’t ask the question, it states the answer: heritage says ‘This was built in blah’ and ‘People came here’, whereas arts are a more creative way of looking at heritage. That’s what’s quite refreshing when you get an exhibition looking at cultural heritage that’s also an art exhibition. They’re all personal views and interpretations of the same thing, whereas in heritage people debate about it and bring about a position. I find when you look at arts interpreting heritage, it’s actually a little bit more engaging than heritage itself being put through an exhibition.

**DW:** Thousands of school children visit the Museum each year. What understanding of Chinese-Australian heritage do you hope they leave with?

**MW:** We have a lot of primary school kids through the Museum. For a lot of them it’s the first time they’ve ever been into Chinatown and into an environment that’s not totally Australian. They may have been to the local Chinese restaurant, but it’s never been presented to them in an educational sense. We’ve been running the program for about fifteen years and we find that students leave with a great impression. I’ve met people who are now 25 and they say ‘I remember when I came to the Chinese Museum when I was ten!’ It seems to impress kids.

The program’s quite successful because it is very engaging. When you go up to the Melbourne Museum it’s a very pristine place. You walk in there and it’s almost like a hospital, but the Chinese Museum it’s a bit like an old style Museum in that it’s a bit musty and dusty, a bit theatrical. I like the idea of it being intimate. There are smaller spaces to explore, but when you go into the big museums you can get overwhelmed by space. In those smaller spaces, especially in the basement, we wanted to create an environment where people feel like they’re immersed in that environment [an route to the goldfields]. The overall feeling of being in that space is what we’re trying to create and that overwhelming feeling then impresses on people’s psyche.

**DW:** Are there other cultural institutions in Melbourne or elsewhere that the Museum has used as a model in developing programs and exhibitions?

**MW:** We haven’t done a great deal of benchmarking or modelling against other museums. We see the Immigration Museum as one of the museums that we look up to. We have a bit of a problem in that we’d like more professional people working in the Chinese Museum. A lot of our staff have grown out of the community and are volunteers – we have a lot of volunteers. We would like to have more input from professional people. A lot of our planning is a little bit ad hoc because we don’t have a lot of financial resources to bring in blockbusters or organise exhibitions, so we’re very opportunistic in the way exhibitions come to us. An exhibition may come to us three months in advance and we’ll say, ‘Oh well we’ll take that because we’ve got a hole here and you know that’d be good’. And a lot of it’s to do with not having a budget. If this exhibition’s coming along and it’s going to be provided to us at no cost, we’ll say ‘Yeah, let’s do it’. Our exhibition program’s a little bit ad hoc because we don’t have an exhibitions budget and we just sort of have to run the program by the seat of our pants. The other way we get funding is through sponsorship and it is hard to get sponsorship for exhibitions.

**DW:** And the other Chinese institutions in Bendigo and Ararat?

**MW:** We try to cooperate with Bendigo and Ararat. In fact we’ve started a program called China Cultural Gateway and we have an arrangement with the Ministry for Culture in China. They’re sending us two exhibitions a year from China – which are travelling exhibitions – and we want to be regarded as a gateway to the other centres’ exhibitions in Ararat and Bendigo. We want to be proactive in distributing the Chinese Museum’s exhibitions to other museums. We want to be on the proactive end of it rather than just sit here and watch each other. Over 25 years we haven’t had a lot of activity together and we want to try to link the museums together in a more productive way.

**DW:** Melbourne is well served by a wide variety of museums and galleries. How closely does the Chinese Museum work with those institutions, especially in the area of cultural tourism?

**MW:** We would like to do a lot more. I think there are a couple of museums that are very compatible with us: the Koori Heritage Trust and the Immigration Museum – museums that relate to communities. Now we’ve got a couple of other museums springing up in the Hellenic Museum and the Museo Italiano in Lygon Street, Carlton, that’s just opened with the help of the Cultural Precinct Enhancement Grant that we all got last year. A few years ago we tried to start up a marketing group with the Koori Heritage Trust and the Immigration Museum. Although we all wanted to do it, we just didn’t have enough resources to keep the whole thing going. There is also a cultural tourism industry group that I helped to start many years ago.

We talk about a lot of culture in Melbourne in a tourism sense, but we just don’t see the end result. When you talk about cultural tourism in Melbourne, people are engaged in cultural tourism but there’s no big push for it. Tourism’s all about marketing and promotion and there’s no big allocation to it. Tourism Victoria and the City of Melbourne do very little cultural tourism [promotion]. The City puts culture and heritage under the heading of ‘Arts’. When you look at the council’s arts policy, heritage hardly gets a mention at all in the whole of Melbourne. If you look at the City of Melbourne’s grant scheme, heritage appears in one line. There’s not one other place where heritage appears. Community is obviously related to heritage, but the City of Melbourne’s arts policy, or cultural policy, is all related to arts. There’s no heritage, except as it relates to the Town Hall or the North Melbourne [Town] Hall. They’ve got their own collection and part of their funding goes towards their own collection. There’s no other heritage. You think of one other
heritage thing that’s sponsored by the City of Melbourne. There’s none. Everything that’s funded by the City of Melbourne first of all has to be within the City of Melbourne’s boundaries, which is fine, but unfortunately there’s no heritage focus for their cultural policy. Heritage Victoria, on the other hand, recognises Victoria’s cultural heritage. I’m disappointed every time the City brings out its next five year plan. I have written in to them to make my complaint, but I think we should lobby them!

**DW:** In what direction would you like to see research in Chinese-Australian heritage take in the next few years?

**MW:** I want to position the Chinese Museum as a national museum because at the moment Chinese-Australian history is seen as regional or local. At present you get the local Bendigo Association promoting the Bendigo Museum and you’ll get the Atherton Tablelands group promoting their museum but there’s no links made between all the different groups and Chinese-Australian history, particularly [regarding] the goldrush and thereafter. There was a lot of interrelated activity that took place between all the different groups. One location didn’t exist without the other location and a lot depended on each other. Think of all the people who got off the ship in Melbourne and then went to Ballarat or Bendigo. I want to develop a study of Chinese-Australian history by location and the relationships that developed between people in those places, so it becomes more like a network or an historical landscape. There’s a whole landscape of Chinese-Australian history out there which could be a source of cultural tourism. You might go to Hamilton and then travel to the next city and see along the way that there’s a relationship between one and the other. You could actually travel around Australia with a kind of Chinese-Australian heritage hat on.

**DW:** In the form of podcast tours that people could take in their car?

**MW:** Yes and travel around. We created a tourism site that’s got a similar thing to a Google map. You just follow it around and pick all the locations and you can plot all the history on that longer route so that you’ve got a relationship to Chinese-Australian history wherever you go. It may not be that time-specific because something may have happened in one town a few years later than in another, but you’d have an overlay of Chinese-Australian history. That’s what I’d like to see happen.

**DW:** What role would family history have in that – in developing a more location based history of the Chinese in Australia?

**MW:** Well my great-grandfather was in Wahgunyah, near Corowa on the Victorian-New South Wales border, then we came down to Melbourne. Dr Sophie Couchman developed the ‘Chinese-Australian Historical Images in Australia’ online database with the Museum and it has a strong focus on family history. What we wanted to do was to create two levels of [the] site so that one could find the families that lived in a particular location and then drill further down to the actual family history using pictures. It’s a multilayered, three-dimensional approach to Chinese-Australian history. I don’t want it to be just about landmarks, it has to be about communities and people. The landmarks are just the left-overs of the community.

I also wanted to mention the Chinese diaspora, I think it’s changing a lot as a term. We talk about the Chinese diaspora as people who have left China and travelled to different places around the world. When you go to the exhibition on level 2, you see that some Chinese people left China to go to Singapore before they came to Australia and they became Singaporean Chinese-Australians or, in the case of those who went to Timor-Leste, East Timorese Chinese-Australians. They assume all these identities. So interestingly enough the Chinese community has this layering that for some reason doesn’t quite happen to others. I don’t know whether it’s because our identity is quite separate as Chinese in look or culture, but you don’t get people still calling themselves Irish Dutch-Australians, they just become Australians.

So I’m just wondering in the future what diaspora of any type will mean because we all travel around so much. I think in fifty years time no one will have a home country. They’ll have a different identity. They won’t necessarily be so nationalistic and so a Chinese-Australian museum may not be relevant any more. Or a Jewish museum may not be relevant any more. It might be something of the past that old fogies are interested in but others might say: ‘We’re people of the world now so what are you worried about whether we’re Chinese or Jewish or whatever?’ We may identify ourselves in other ways. So there are different ways of being identified now compared to the ways people have done so in the past. Cultures is quite diverse and now people of differing identities are closely enmeshed with each other. There’ll sort of be a different world culture, so except for the Amazonians who still haven’t come out of the jungle it’ll be quite different in terms of identity and culture and multiculturalism and all those words will mean quite different things in years to come.