

Hobnobbing Terrestrials and Celestials: Public Representations and Community Negotiations for Chinese Australians¹

Dr Tseen Khoo, National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University, Vic.

The Chinese presence in Australian history has been frequently recorded and often deployed in the service of a range of nation-building projects. These, of course, varied in form and emphasis through the years. Colonial administrative denotations of the Chinese as “economically valuable and . . . no lower than [the] French or Germans” (Curthoys, “Men of All Nations” 112) jostled with popular anti-Chinese diatribes of the time against these “pig-tailed moonfaced barbarians” (qtd. in Curthoys, “Men of All Nations” 111). In contemporary postcolonial Australian society, with its decades-long multicultural agenda, the focus on narratives from Chinese communities and individuals are often motivated by the desire to demonstrate the reality of our national diversity and to render more complex the constant process of forming national identities. In delineating the historical “uneasiness” of Australia’s relationship with its Chinese immigrants, Ann Curthoys focuses on the interactions between European and Chinese goldminers, stating:

These Chinese men perch at the edge of our historical consciousness, figures of fun and shame, a marker of our colonial origins and the colonial vestiges in our present culture. They truly were a harbinger, not of an invasion of millions of people as some feared, but of later dilemmas for policy makers and for citizens, dilemmas about immigration policy and citizenship, and of modern Australia’s ambivalence about a place we call Asia. (103-104)

I hope it will be considered only slightly facetious if I say that, to descendants of these Chinese goldminers and for other immigrants of Chinese descent who are now part of Australian society, ‘these Chinese men’ occupy a somewhat different symbolic space.

The title of my presentation “Hobnobbing Celestials and Terrestrials” derives from a quotation from an 1870 issue of the *Town and Country Journal* that reads: “terrestrials and celestials appear to hob-nob together with that degree of intimacy which naturally comes of long acquaintance”

¹ This paper was presented to the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 June – 2 July 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

(qtd. in Curthoys 118). My paper examines the politics involved in the push for Chinese community consultation, access, and representation in mainstream and regional museums. In particular, I will be looking at Chinese-Australian heritage exhibits and the ways in which competing priorities in representation are negotiated by the groups involved.

In Keith Windschuttle's now notorious piece in *Quadrant* on "how not to run a museum," he argues that those in minority groups "were not *causally* effective [in national histories]: they were the objects rather than the agents of history; they were on the receiving end of major historic events, not their instigators" (16). While it is easy to recruit Windschuttle in the interests of shock value, his perspective on the marginalised, and indeed separate, nature of ethnic historical narratives is a prevalent one that affects the production of cultural community stories.

It is no longer the case that Chinese-Australian histories are simply excluded from museums and other heritage sites. If anything, there has been a contemporary explosion of modes of representation and reclamation projects for these elided stories and perspectives. There are now Chinese community focused sites in many Australian states.

In Victoria, these include the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo, the Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre in Ararat, and the Chinese Australian Museum in Melbourne. Queensland has the Atherton Chinatown and Hou Wang Temple and there's the forthcoming Chinese Museum of Queensland in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane. There are also many sites that were previously temples or clan houses that have now been refurbished and reinvented as heritage centres. Having said that, there are also quite a few sites that continue to function as originally established, with contemporary structural additions, such as the See Yup Temple in South Melbourne.

The number of online sites is also significant. Among other, more static sites, I to detail two major, ongoing repositories and projects:

1. **Golden Threads** is a project, including a touring exhibition, that focuses specifically on histories of the Chinese in New South Wales from 1850-1950. The exhibition has been touring since 2001 and is currently booked at a range of national venues until 2005. The online presence offers a version of the exhibition, scholarly notes, assessments about the process of mounting the exhibition, and a number of photographs. The emphasis for this

site is on the regional histories of Chinese communities, with a function to search for information from various districts.

2. Second is the **Chinese History of Australian Federation (CHAF)** site which is a joint initiative of La Trobe University, the Museum of Chinese Australian History, and East China Normal University. Its brief is broader than Golden Threads, as it purports to “[celebrate] the contribution of Australia’s Chinese communities to the early founding and subsequent development of Australia” (CHAF website). The site houses significant archival information including translated Chinese-language documents, many databases and bibliographies, a Chinese-Australian photo-library, digitised issues of the newspaper *Tung Wah*, and listings of various libraries’ specialist holdings of Chinese Australian history.

As with the physical sites of museums, the size and comprehensiveness of these websites vary according to their budgets and the energies of those involved in their management. Their advantage of storing data electronically and the attendant increase in accessibility and searchability make them much more ‘useful’ in terms of sharing scarce and vulnerable resources; as well, the sites serve as points of contact and collaboration for institutional, communal, and academic groups. The Golden Threads site, for example, encourages visitors to contribute their own stories for possible inclusion on the site.

The momentum of Chinese historical and heritage projects, then, has clearly been on the increase, assisted in recent years by caches of funding for community collaborative projects such as that provided by the Centenary of Federation funding. Along with what I have called Chinese community focused sites, after Moira Simpson’s use of these terms in *Making Representations*, there are also significant exhibits of Chinese-Australian heritage in mainstream and regional museums, as well as increasing numbers of special projects that are focused on Asian-Australian heritage.

For most of their short history, ethnic museums have occupied a particularly poignant public space as “nostalgic memorials to the past” (Simpson 81). Simpson provides a sympathetic critique of the sometimes limited functions for traditional ethnic museums, many of which are mired in historical recounting or cultural showcasing, and dominated by “artifacts which demonstrate movable cultural property” (82) such as knowledge and skills. These factors lead,

Simpson argues, to an emphasis on folk arts and cultural objects that can work to dislocate the community from its immediate society. Of the Ukrainian National Museum in Chicago, she writes: “The overall feeling is of gloomy melancholy, a nostalgic yearning for the past, a culture isolated from the passage of time, an environment tainted with a pervasive layer of psychological, if not real, dust” (82). Many of these organisations function also as hubs of traditional skills and language maintenance, with classes aimed at younger generations within the community, ones that are often a generation or more removed from the migration experience.

Coupled with elements of this nostalgia, many migrant or ethnic museums focus, in the main, on celebratory and contributory forms of history. While racism against their communities may have once been downplayed or elided, Chinese Australian sites are now more likely to include discussion of this issue. My initial impressions, however, are that racism is most often treated as yet another example of hardship overcome; something that faced early Chinese immigrants and later groups of arrivals but an element that is ultimately transitory and a condition of the newly migrated. This ‘three cheers’ form of history is still the most prominent type found in Chinese Australian historical narratives in museums and heritage centres. There are several compelling reasons for this tendency, including fears of being seen to be pathologising and prioritising race. Jen Kwok, in his work on racialised social memory, puts it this way: “Chinese Australian history, when stemming from within or for the community, seeks to be remembered in particular ways because it is pressured by external social constraints: perhaps augmented by internalized self-rejection, political co-optation, social conformism and cultural mimicry” (“Reclaiming Racism” 30). These migrant Chinese dynamics have been ‘short-handed’ by the term Model Minority to indicate these communities’ propensity for political and social self-policing in the hopes of being perceived as ‘good citizens’. These patterns of community regulation and motivation are not unique to Chinese communities, of course, and Marsha Rosengarten’s critique of Sydney’s Jewish Museum brings similar issues to the fore. Rosengarten ties Jewish representation in the museum’s narratives to the notion of the ‘good Australian’ and discusses what she sees as the ‘whitewashing’ of Jewish identity in the museum. Her use of ‘whitewashing’ denotes “purity, transparency and cleanliness”; “it is the normative” (92). This appeal to the normativity of Jewish peoples in Australian society is something that Rosengarten declares a failure, partly because of the elision of the historical and ongoing anti-Semitism in society. For Chinese groups, attempts to stitch their racialised bodies into the fabric of Australian nationalist narratives is a problematic but common approach.

With the stated emphasis in museum mission statements on community participation and access, the involvement of Chinese groups in museum events often means delicate negotiations about how and what is represented in displays and communicated in project outcomes. For many groups, it is the first time they are asked to present a cohesive ‘story’ of their community and its culture, and this process of what Ann McGrath terms “fresh stakeholders entering the display economy” (2) alters the long-standing dynamic of curatorial dominance in presenting Other histories. McGrath notes, however, that these new forms of ‘community narrative ownership’ can themselves give rise to “new sets of omissions” (2). This is confirmed by Kwok’s observations above and is a sentiment also echoed by Janis Wilton in her work on the Golden Threads website, and Margaret Anderson when she was working with the Social History Museum in South Australia. Anderson points to the ease with which communities respond to certain modes of representation:

The material culture of cultural contribution . . . comes fairly readily to hand. Community groups feel quite comfortable with donations of national costumes or traditional crafts to museums. The success stories of the migration process readily donate their photographs and memorabilia. (“Collecting” 109)

Anderson wrote this in 1987 but the dynamic for many communities of telling only good stories remains the same.

A challenging example of the complications of these negotiated processes is the *Sweet and Sour* exhibition that was held in the Northern Territory. The subtitle of the exhibition was “Experiences of Chinese Families in the Northern Territory,” and the project was initiated by the Darwin Chinese community. The exhibition aimed to show that “economically and socially, the Chinese have been integral to Darwin’s character and development through their activities in mining, market gardening, industry, commerce and culture” (Dewar and Buckley 12). Subsequent collaborators included the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory and the Darwin-based Chung Wah Society. *Sweet and Sour* opened in Darwin with great fanfare in October 1996. The \$72K for the exhibition came from the Australia Foundation under “[t]he Australian Experience 1995 funding” (Dewar and Buckley 13). Because of the exhibition’s success and the constructive collaborations formed between community and museum representatives, *Sweet and Sour* became the springboard for the development of Darwin’s Chinese Museum. Most recently, a recreated Chinatown precinct is mooted as providing a future economic and cultural boost. Fiona

Churchman declares that “[f]or a city that owes a lot to its Chinese community, Darwin is seriously lacking a Chinatown complex,” implying that the presence of such a development equals commemoration and validation of community contribution.

Those who participated in the *Sweet and Sour* and museum development projects are understandably enthusiastic about the level of community participation and sharing of heritage material that ensued. The work gave rise to several new sets of resources such as oral history archives, photographs, and personal documents. The community gained skills in oral history recording and archiving, grant application writing, and curating. Subsequent momentum from these activities have no doubt spurred further heritage initiatives in the Chinese-Australian community.

Critics of the exhibition include David Carment from Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University), who states that “it is a pity, even if understandable, that the creators of *Sweet and Sour* decided, or were directed, to approach their task from a sometimes uncritical perspective” (135). He goes on to describe the extent of racism in the Northern Territory, including nineteenth-century anti-Chinese movements and systemic government employment discrimination that continued into the 1930s. He also points to the “entirely unacknowledged” relationships between the Territory’s Chinese and indigenous groups. Glen Dimond, curator of the *Sweet and Sour* exhibition, responds at length to Carment’s criticisms, stating that she saw

his review as an opportunity to examine the vast differences between writing academic history *about* people for a largely academic audience and working as a facilitator *with* individuals or communities motivated enough to have their stories and their faces plastered on the walls of a public institution for thousands of strangers to peruse. (160)

Admitting that she felt “under pressure to tell happy stories,” Dimond makes clear that she believes curators and other museum workers who consult directly with indigenous or migrant groups “have special obligations to the people [they] work with and sometimes [they] have to . . . impose a certain amount of censorship on [their] exhibitions” (160). For Dimond, the community collaborators spelt out very clearly what they wanted the exhibition to achieve: “They wanted to take their rightful place as descendants of the Territory’s pioneers” (161). In writing *Beyond Chinatown*, a book that significantly influenced the *Sweet and Sour* exhibition, Diana Giese notes that “[t]he community’s licensed storytellers may close ranks against someone with another story

to tell, a discordant one” (13). These perspectives clarify the complications inherent in funneling differentiated stories into single frames of reference. This is a problem in all attempts to represent communities or groups but, in the case of Chinese Australians, where considered public representations are relatively scarce, each instance bears more weight. While Dimond’s concerns relating to community priorities shows respect for the stakeholders of particular projects, how does this kind of shielded narrativisation affect perceptions of Chinese Australian heritage in general? In Ann McGrath’s words, what are the consequences of representations that are more “functional than balanced” (2)? While the functionality of happy narratives do affirm community belonging and contribution for some, their value could also lie in their ability to reflect the forms of symbolic national affiliation that are seen as sources of social capital.

Another important postcolonial strategy for examining Chinese Australian historical narratives is reading for the gaps and silences in existing material collections. The ways in which early Chinese immigrants have arrived in Australia were not conducive to major collections of valuable artifacts in the traditional sense. Artifact collections are often populated by working-class clothing and furniture, cooking and work utensils and localised evidentiary items such as signage from Chinese shop-fronts and businesses. Most of the early Chinese migrants arrived with few material possessions, and if we consider the more current histories of Indo-Chinese refugees, the number of objects would be similarly low. In “Objects and Their Stories”, Janis Wilton details the complexity of working with artifacts that are often unprovenanced, a symptom of earlier curatorial practices. Wilton states:

[most of the objects] were collected in the days when documenting the histories of objects, their owners and uses, was not seen as important. . . . many of the connections have been lost and it is likely that most of the objects will remain without specific stories. (“Objects and Their Stories” 3)

I quote Wilton in full on this issue to indicate that the dearth of information about early Chinese Australian materials is one that is shared with other artifact collections of that period. Wilton does concede, however, that for Chinese artifacts this situation was exacerbated by “a history in which Chinese immigrants figured mainly as unnamed or misnamed individuals, sometimes threatening, certainly foreign” (4). These screens of misnaming, missing and overlooked information can be read as part of an accurate and instructive perspective on how Chinese groups were perceived in colonial and subsequent periods of Australian history. Wilton offers examples of how alien,

exotic practices are attributed to Chinese groups through the misnaming of everyday objects with an unsurprising emphasis on aspects such as opium use and heathen rituals (5). Heleanor Feltham argues for “the power of absence to make its own statement” (69) and, while this gesture may have effective resonance among certain groups, it does presume a level of knowledge about exhibits, cultural community groups, and their presented materials. How does one feel the power of absence unless one knows there has been an absence or a silence? I am talking here not about academic researchers and corrective narrative strategies but the casual leisure experiences of the museum-going public. The implicit meaning of silence and absence for each of these groups would be rather different.

The issues examined in this paper demonstrate that the problematising of Chinese Australian historical narratives and their opening up to critical inquiry are complex and at times contentious tasks. At public history sites and for heritage exhibitions, with their modern managerial emphasis on community access and consultation, resistance to narrative complication or exposure does not always come from the institution itself. The question of who ‘owns’ and controls these community stories is one that repeatedly besets the curatorial process. When pushing for ‘inclusion’, then, perhaps it is as pressing to consider the inclusion of evidence of conflict, ugly things, and the “material culture[s] of ordinary people” as this would compose a more “solid basis” for what Anderson calls “the froth and bubble of multiculturalism” (“Collecting” 110).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Margaret. “Collecting and Interpreting the Material Culture of Migration.” *Proceedings of the Council of Australian Museum Associations Conference (Perth, WA, 1986)*. Ed. Patricia Summerfield. Perth: History Department, Western Australian Museum, 1987. 107-111.
- Carment, David. “Review of *Sweet and Sour: Chinese Families in the Northern Territory* exhibition, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin.” *Australian Historical Studies* 108 (1997): 134-135.
- Chinese History of Australian Federation*. <http://www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au> Accessed 1 May 2004.

- Churchman, Fiona. "A New Lease of Life for Darwin's Chinatown." Story outline. *ABC Darwin*. 29 March 2004. <http://www.abc.net.au/darwin/stories/s1076429.htm> Accessed 15 May 2004.
- Curthoys, Ann. "'Men of All Nations, except Chinamen': Europeans and Chinese on the Goldfields of New South Wales." *Gold: Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects of Australia*. Ed. Iain McCalman, Alexander Cook and Andrew Reeves. Oakleigh, Vic: Cambridge UP, 2001. 103-123.
- Dewar, Mickey, and Christine Tarbett Buckley. "Sweet and Sour: Experiences of Chinese Families in the Northern Territory." *Museum National* Feb (1998): 12-14.
- Dimond, Glen. "Chinese Whispers: ABC Territory." *Unlocking Museums: 4th National Conference of Museums Australia Inc (Darwin, NT)*. Darwin: Museums Australia, NT Branch, 1997. 159-163.
- Feltham, Heleanor. "Colonising the Museum: 'Minority' Cultures and Public Spaces." *Identity, Icons and Artefacts: Proceedings of the Inaugural Museums Australia Conference (Fremantle, Nov 1994)*. Ed. Margaret Anderson, Ann Delroy and Deborah Tout-Smith. Perth: Museums Australia, 1996. 69-74.
- Giese, Diana. *Beyond Chinatown: Changing Perspectives of the Top End Chinese Experience*. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1995.
- Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional New South Wales*. <http://amol.org.au/goldenthreads> Accessed 1 May 2004.
- Kwok, Jen Tsen. "Reclaiming Racism: The Significance of the Brisbane Anti-Chinese Riot, 1888." Honours dissertation. U of Queensland, 2002.
- McGrath, Ann. "Review of *A Past Displayed: Public History, Public Memory and Cultural Resource Management in Australia's Northern Territory* by David Carment." *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 48.3 (2002): 417-418.
- Rosengarten, Marsha. "The Sydney Jewish Museum and the Exercise of Vigilance: Recouping Identity through Historical Narrative." *Public History Review* 7 (1998): 89-102.
- Simpson, Moira G. *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Wilton, Janis. "Objects and their Stories." *Golden Threads* site. <http://amol.org.au/goldenthreads/downloads/Objects.pdf> Accessed 14 May 2004.
- Windschuttle, Keith. "How Not to Run a Museum: People's History at the Postmodern Museum." *Quadrant* 379 (2001): 11-19.