

Nineteenth Century Chinese Temples in Australia: History, Religion and Heritagisation

Carole M. CUSACK

Carole M. Cusack is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney. In the 2024–2025 academic year she is a Visiting Fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School. Her books include *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Ashgate 2010), *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Cambridge Scholars 2011) and (with Katharine Buljan) *Anime, Religion, and Spirituality: Profane and Sacred Worlds in Contemporary Japan* (Equinox 2015). She also edits *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* (PDC, USA), and *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia* (Daejin University, Korea).



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Correspondence to

Carole M. CUSACK

University of Sydney, Australia

carole.cusack@sydney.edu.au

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1940-3913>



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Abstract

In the nineteenth century, Chinese gold prospectors built between 100 and 200 joss houses (temples) in Australia, from Darwin in the north to Weldborough, Tasmania, in the south. In 1988, nine were still standing, though some were in poor repair. In the nineteenth century, non-Christian places of worship were unpopular and missionaries sought to convert the 'heathen Chinese'. In the twentieth century, the major threat to their survival was declining congregations (as non-White migrants were prohibited from entering Australia under the White Australia Policy). From the 1960s onwards, some surviving temples were restored. Yet they remain vulnerable to racism (Sze Yup Temple in Sydney was set on fire by an arsonist in 2008), neglect (in 2024 old electrical wiring caused a fire at the See Yup Temple in Melbourne), and modern development (in the 1960s the Castlemaine, Victoria temple was demolished). This article examines the material history of the Chinese in Australia, noting the White preference for a 'heritage' presentation (as at the goldfields theme park Sovereign Hill near Ballarat, Victoria, where the joss house is a reproduction, or at Launceston Museum, where the dismantled Weldborough temple was erected as an exhibit) rather than actual knowledge of the history, archaeology, and lived religion of historic Chinese settlers in Australia.

Keywords: Australia; Chinese immigrants; joss house; temple; Gold Rush; racism; Federation

Introduction

The first contacts between China and Australia are unknown, although it is possible that Chinese *junks* may have sailed into Australian waters in the late fifteenth century, while some scholars argue for a much earlier date, during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–264 CE). The British colony of New South Wales was founded in 1788, and in the early nineteenth century a few free Chinese merchants settled there. Thus, Mak Sai Ying arrived in 1818, acquired land at Parramatta, and married Sarah Thompson, with whom he ran an inn, The Lion (Fitzgerald 1997, 11–17). Chinese indentured farmhands arrived from 1848, and male temporary migrants multiplied after the first goldfield opened in 1851. The White Christian colony did not welcome the Chinese miners: their large numbers, alien appearance, and non-Christian culture were deemed “undesirable” by colonial officials and prominent citizens, including churchmen (Fitzgerald 1997, 22–23). The Chinese were treated with suspicion and prejudice by Whites: they were almost all single men (fuelling concern they would prey upon White women); sent most of the wealth they generated home to China, which they periodically visited; and were such capable workers that “they could earn a living off [gold]fields abandoned by the whites as unprofitable ... [earning] the undying enmity of the diggers” (Birmingham 1999, 91). Their alien status was reinforced by the large number of temples erected by the Chinese across the island continent (Penny 2005). More than fifty were built in Victoria alone, and archaeologists and historians believe that there were upwards of two hundred joss houses erected between 1851 and 1901, when the colonies of Australia federated as a nation (Singer 1988).

The Chinese population of Australia peaked around 1880, when approximately 40,000 Chinese were resident, which was 1.7% of the population. The Chinese “originated mainly from the Siyi (Four Counties) and the Zhongsan localities in Guangdong” (Chan 2005, 634).¹ At the time, China was wracked by floods, famines, and the Tai Ping Rebellion (1851–1864), which increased the appeal of gold mining abroad. Australian colonial governments passed laws to restrict Chinese activities, and White workers went on strike, protesting their presence in the labour market; in the 1878 strike by Australian Steamship Navigation Company (ASN) workers, xenophobia was “a catalyst for an anti-Chinese movement, which opposed not only specially imported cheap Chinese labour, but also spontaneous Chinese immigration” (Curthoys 1978, 48). Abuse and racist stereotypes abounded; John Birmingham observes that anti-Chinese protestors were told millions of “flat-faced, flat-footed heathen Chinese” were a threat to Whites (Birmingham 1999, 93); and Ann Curthoys notes Angus Cameron, a Member of Parliament, “expressed horror at the over-crowded dwellings and immorality of Sydney’s Chinese” and held the Chinese responsible for outbreaks of various illnesses (Curthoys 1978, 53). By 1888 laws restricting the activities of Chinese workers tightened. In 1891 the Royal Commission on Chinese Gambling and Immorality was set up. After Federation in 1901 the government passed the Immigration Restriction Act, an overtly racist law

which was not fully repealed till the early 1970s, which aimed to keep Australia White and Christian (Poon 1995, 53–54). This legislation, with a raft of other laws, constituted the White Australia Policy (Yuan 2001 [1988]).

Three Temples in Victoria: Nam Pon Soon Society, Sam Yup Temple, and Bendigo (Emu Point) Joss House

Upon arrival in Australia, Chinese migrants clustered together to form supportive groups that compensated for their lack of English and alien appearance, two traits that engendered White hostility. In Melbourne Little Bourke Street became a substantial Chinese community, which acted as a conduit to the Victorian goldfields, and also as a trading post for merchants. Two mutual assistance bodies, the Sam Yup Society (later renamed the Num Pon Soon Society) and the See Yup Society, were established in the 1850s. These organisations reflected the Cantonese background of the miners and merchants. Hing-wah Chau explains that:

Sam Yup (or Num Pon Soon) and See Yup are places in Guangdong, in which Sam Yup [Three Districts] are the former counties of Nanhai, Panyu, and Shunde; whereas See Yup (sometimes spelled Sze Yap and variants) refers to the four former counties: Kaiping, Enping, Taishan, and Xinhui [Four Districts]. District associations played an important role among early Chinese migrants and organized regular events in their clubhouses on Little Bourke Street, such as the Num Pon Soon Society Building (Chau 2016, 111).

These societies were the owners of the two temples that were constructed in Melbourne to service both religious and social needs of the Chinese, the Num Pon Soon building on Little Bourke Street, and the See Yup Kuan Ti Temple (四邑關帝廟) in Emerald Hill (South Melbourne), Victoria (Couchman 2019).

The Num Pon Soon Society headquarters on Little Bourke Street is an elegant and elaborate building which was designed by John George Knight (1824–1892) and Peter Kerr (1820–1912). The architecture firm Knight and Ker also built Parliament House, Melbourne (1856–1892), indicating the wealth and standing of certain Num Pon Soon members. Lowe Kong Meng (1831–1888), a Malaysian Chinese businessman who spoke English and was one of the richest men in Victoria, arrived in Melbourne in 1853, was promptly elected President of the Sam Yup Society in 1854, and had a decisive input into the building’s design (Chau 2016, 112). The building was a harmonisation of Western and Chinese architectural details. When it opened in 1861, it was called the “Chinese Exchange,” and was a place of business that also served as a lodging house for new migrants. It incorporated an ancestral shrine, which is now the oldest continuous place of worship of Chinese deities in Australia.



Figure 1. Num Pon Soon Building, Little Bourke Street, Melbourne. Wikimedia Commons

The second Chinese “joss house” (from the Portuguese *deos*, meaning ‘god’, but in the case of Chinese temples referring to the White belief that the Chinese were ‘idol worshippers’),² the See Yup Temple in Emerald Hill, was originally built of timber in 1856 (De Jong and Beynon 2012). An observer noted of this building:

The building, which may be called the only pagan place of worship in Victoria, is situated some distance beyond the Orphan Asylum at Emerald Hill, and is a wooden edifice some 60 or 70 feet long by about 85 in width. It has two stories, the lower one being . . . the one devoted to religious ceremonies. The upper story is surrounded by a gallery and lighted from the roof. This is evidently a sort of joss house or assembly hall. The whole interior is painted and ornamented in the Chinese style and hung round with banners (cited in Chau 2016, 114).

This wooden temple was destroyed by fire and a new, brick-built structure was opened in 1866. The existing temple was built in four stages. Six trustees provided the land for the temple, the most important of whom was Louis Ah Mouy (1826–1918), a skilled builder from Guangdong by way of Singapore, who founded the See Yup Society in Melbourne in 1854 (Yong 2006 [1969]). The architect of the 1866 building was George Wharton; a second red brick memorial hall was erected in 1901. The strength of the community is shown by the need for a third, sandstone memorial hall which was opened in 2004. Sophie Couchman adds that “In 2002, a Kuanyin Pavilion designed by Cheung Sui Fung, an RMIT graduate and senior member of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, was constructed in the courtyard outside one of the main buildings” (Couchman 2019, 52). This configuration of buildings can be viewed today, although there was a serious fire at the See Yup Temple in February 2024 during the Lunar New Year celebrations, which was likely caused by electrical faults due to old wiring (Crowe and Macmillan 2024). The interior of the central, oldest building was badly damaged by this fire.



Figure 2. See Yup Temple, South Melbourne. Wikimedia Commons.

Of more than fifty Chinese temples erected by Cantonese speaking migrants from Guangdong in Victoria during the nineteenth century, only one goldfields joss house survives intact (National Trust of Victoria 1972). This is Bendigo Joss House Temple, formerly called the Emu Point Joss House. The second census of Victoria was conducted in 1857, and there were 25,000 Chinese in the state; working conditions were difficult, and as Whites sought to disadvantage the Chinese their numbers fell, with 12,000 still living in Victoria in 1881 (Lovejoy 2011). Valerie Lovejoy has noted that the Joss House sits in an area rich in evidence of Chinese settlement: “Chinese market gardens with still visible fruit trees lie on the Bendigo Creek opposite the temple, and recently archaeologists excavated a brick-making kiln adjoining the garden, a rare example of a Chinese constructed kiln outside China” (Lovejoy 2011, 7). The *feng shui* of the site on which it stands matched principles in operation in China. Derham Groves notes that:

to attract as much “*qi*” (the breath of nature) as possible, the joss house faces south, it is decorated with auspicious figures and symbols, and its plan is shaped like the Chinese character “*shan*” (mountain), which symbolizes a place of worship. On the other hand, to repel any “*sha qi*” (noxious vapour), there is a cross-wall a short distance inside the front doors of the temple, none of the side doors lined up with each other, and the north facade is blank (Groves 1994, 242).

Bendigo’s temple is the sole survivor of six attested Chinese places of worship at Emu Point in 1868. It is unique as it remains *in situ* in a rural area and is an active place of religion; when it closed for several months in 2022 due to National Trust staff being subjected to abuse and anti-social behaviour by unnamed aggressors, members of the Chinese community in the nearby city of Bendigo were open in expressing their grief at the closure. Dennis O’Hoy, AM stated that “It represents the history of the Chinese people in Bendigo. It’s desolate inside—it’s lost its meaning, it’s lost its spirituality” (Schubert 2022). The site re-opened shortly after O’Hoy, a prominent community leader, made this appeal via the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and is now receiving

tourists and congregation members regularly.



Figure 3. Bendigo Joss House Temple (exterior). Photograph by Author.



Figure 4. Bendigo Joss House Temple (main temple interior, altar to Kwan Gung [Guan Di]). Photograph by Author.

Across Australia, joss houses were lost to fire, became derelict, or were demolished in the name of progress. Chinese heritage in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century was unvalued, and the White Australia Policy reduced the size of ethnic communities that could care for sites, and made many Chinese Australians concerned to assimilate and not appear too different. This was a driver of conversion to Christianity for some individuals and families (O'Brien 2014), and for the use of less ostentatious home altars and shrines in business premises for others. The survival of the Bendigo Joss House Temple was due to certain influential people's protection. Paul Macgregor singles out:

Sir John Jensen, Assistant Secretary for the Department of Supply, who ordered its preservation when the Emu Point area became an ordnance factory, Professor Brian Lewis and others of the National Trust of Victoria, who recognised the need to restore the joss house; Cr Alec Craig, Chairman of the newly formed local branch of the National Trust, who invited Dennis O'Hoy to undertake the

planning and restoration works; the Bendigo Chinese Association who supported the joss house's renewal; John Ball and Ron Lee who sourced furnishings and temple artefacts from Hong Kong; and now The Bendigo Trust, the current stewards (Macgregor 2015, 119).

Many other Chinese temples of equal architectural and historical distinction were destroyed because they lacked such defenders; in Victoria the Castlemaine Joss House was demolished to make way for a new development as late as the 1960s, a decade when heritagisation was actively occurring elsewhere (Brine 1997). Historical archaeologists have identified many significant remains of the Chinese occupation of the countryside, but these are generally less impressive than the temples. For example, there are Chinese sections in many nineteenth century cemeteries; at the cemetery at Campbell's Creek (near Castlemaine) the graves were separated by the creek, which ritually functioned as the Yangtze River in China in the orientation of the burials (Hunter 2010). Memories of older Chinese Australians about the distant past that they learned about from their grandparents or great-grandparents have been collected by oral ethnographers and historians, and poignant practises have been uncovered. For example, Kate Bagnall interviewed Wilma Conroy of Indigo, north-eastern Victoria, a former gold town with a sizeable Chinese community that now shows no overt evidence of that history. Conroy told Bagnall of visits to her grandparents' grave in Chiltern cemetery: "Wilma Conroy maintains a tradition taught to her by her Anglo-Chinese grandmother – taking an offering to share with the spirits of her ancestors. Rather than the more usual meal of rice, pork, fruit and wine, Jessie Shing taught her granddaughter to take biscuits – sometimes fancy creams and sometimes just plain ones – to sprinkle on the headstones" (Bagnall 2013, 22).

The Sze Yup and Yui Ming Temples of Sydney

Sydney has two Cantonese Chinese joss houses that rival Melbourne's in charm and history, if not in grandeur or antiquity. Yui Ming Temple is first recorded in 1870, when the Yui Ming Hung Fook Tong (now the Yui Ming Society) tallied its members in Alexandria and in rural New South Wales. The market garden settlement of Alexandria was one of two distinct 'Chinatowns' in Sydney. Ann Stephen notes all members have "common origins, from one or other of two districts, Gaoyao/ Gouyiu and Gaoming/ Gouming, in the province of Guangdong (formerly known as Canton)" (Stephen 1997, 10). Retreat Street, "a nothing little lane of Alexandria," is redolent of the hiddenness of Chinese life in Sydney; Melita Rogowsky notes that the temple is a repository "of the memories, the secrets, and the legacy of early Chinese settlement in this area. This temple and the terraces which adjoin it, are the only remaining structural evidence of the history of the Chinese in a district that was arguably home to one of the largest concentrations of urban Chinese in Sydney (and Australia)" (Rogowsky 2004, 97). The

wooden first temple became dilapidated, and the Chinese rebuilt it in brick in 1904. Amanda Jean analyses the architecture of the Yui Ming Temple as two blocks, one higher, with a sunken courtyard between the wings. The joss house may have been exotic to a White Christian in 1900, but recent scholars note that Chinese builders drew upon early twentieth-century cottage architecture, so the “eaves of the ‘roof lantern’ are similar to the ventilated eaves of tropical Australian Federation buildings” (Jean 1997, 32).



Figure 5. Yui Ming Temple, Alexandria (Sydney). Wikimedia Commons.

The temple has many Daoist features, but as Chinese religion was non-exclusive there are other religious elements, including Buddhist, Confucian, and folk iconography, which are common to most forms of Chinese religion:

[a] plaque inside the temple reveals that the three main deities honoured here are Cai Shen, Hong Sheng, and Guan Di. As Hong Sheng/ Hung Sheng was the local deity, it is most probable that the better-known deities were added when the present temple was built. The choice of a particular god to worship is influenced by the worshipper’s own needs and beliefs (Chee and Tse 1997, 52).

The most popular deity in all nineteenth century Australian Chinese temples is Guān Gōng (Lord Guan) or Guān Dì (Emperor Guan).³ Cai Shen, another popular god, is a deity of wealth; and Hong Sheng is a rain deity (who is sometimes called the ‘god of the southern seas’), a specific protector who was petitioned by Alexandria vegetable gardeners for sufficient rainfall to grow plentiful crops. Benjamin Penny has argued that Hong Sheng is a more important deity than generally realised, with records dating to the Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE) (Penny 2008, 61). There are texts that mention Buddha and Guan Yin (the goddess of mercy, a Chinese version of the Indian *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara) in the temple. Another deity who is not present at Alexandria is Tian Hou, the goddess of the seas; she appears in many other temples. It is clear that she would be popular in a community separated from its homeland by lengthy sea voyages. The Yui Ming Society also built ten terraced houses, as housing for new arrivals and the elderly (Stephen 1997, 13). This calls to mind the accommodation provided in the Num Pon Soon building in Little Bourke Street, Melbourne for new arrivals on their way to

mine gold.

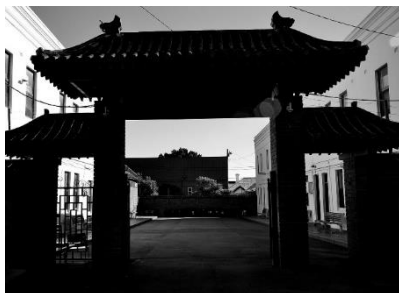


Figure 6. Entrance to the Yui Ming Temple, Alexandria (Sydney). Wikimedia Commons.

The Sze Yup Temple serves the association of the Four Districts, as in Melbourne, and is located in the inner western suburb of Glebe. It was first built in 1898; Johnny May Sing and Kung Fen bought the land the previous year. The first structure was wooden and temporary. The current joss house, which also shows evidence of Australian local building styles (it resembles a row of Federation workers' cottages) dates to 1904 (Cusack and Prior 2010). The Chinese in Glebe interacted more with the broader White community of Sydney, and the temple opening featured in the *Sunday Mail* as “a good show” at which “roast pig galore” was served to large gathering (Fitzgerald 1997, 107). The temple is dedicated to Guān Gōng (Guan Di), the popular god of war and business, and also to Choy Bak Sing, “a god of good fortune wisdom and wealth”(Chan 1989, 7). The temple provided social support and religious services, as did the Victorian temples discussed above and the slightly older Yui Ming Temple in Alexandria. Kip Fong, one of the custodians of the Glebe temple, says that “only the men folk were here. They were coming here...to make a fortune hopefully, and the go back home...they had to help each other—so the temple was a...cultural meeting place and also a mutual assistance place”(Chan 1989, 6).



Figure 7. Entrance to the Sze Yup temple, Glebe (Sydney). Photograph by Author.

Federation made the lives of Chinese Australians extremely difficult. Those who had made fortunes and a majority of single men returned to China. Those who were

successful in bringing their wives to Australia, and those men who had married while in Australia, often remained with their families. In Sydney the Chinese were persistently accused of spreading bubonic plague (which was constant from 1900 to 1907) (Rogowsky, 2004: 104), and also leprosy (Markus 1979, 201–202). Under the White Australia Policy, Australia permitted only economic migrants to enter the country, and these could only remain temporarily (Inglis 1972, 269). The Chinese population was just under thirty thousand in 1901 but had fallen to less than ten thousand in 1947 (Chan 2005, 636). Those who stayed wore Western clothes and led secretive lives. The Yui Ming and Sze Yup Temples fell into decrepitude in the mid-twentieth century, as younger Chinese Australians assimilated more with the majority White culture and devoted less time to traditional Chinese culture. Charmaine Chan records that a fire in 1953 closed the Sze Yup temple, and the re-opening ceremony on 27 March 1955 was attended by approximately 700 people. It included a dramatic firework display and Lion Dance, an unfamiliar phenomenon at the time. The lion was loaned to the Sze Yup congregation by the Yui Ming Temple association in a gesture of goodwill (Chan 1989, 7).

In 1979 a restoration of the Glebe joss house began – there had been damage from vandalism and a leaking roof, and some members wished to sell the Sze Yup Temple, but a fundraising drive from 1977 changed the mood to a more positive attitude for the future of the building – and New South Wales Heritage Council placed a heritage preservation order on it in 1985 (Chan 1989). The Yui Ming Temple was also fully restored in the late twentieth century, and both temples are now “open to the public” functioning as “important historical landmark[s] for tourists and schoolchildren” (Shum 1988, 210). The White Australia Policy was dismantled in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and immigration from the mid-1970s, spurred by conflicts in Vietnam and Cambodia, changed Sydney’s ethnic and religious mix. Yet the Chinese in Sydney still have enemies; in January 2008 the Sze Yup Temple was set on fire by an arsonist, and while police were “unwilling to say if it might have been an ethnically-motivated attack just ahead of the Chinese New Year” (Welch 2008), this is the most likely interpretation, as racism and pro-White sentiment have been on the rise in Australia since the early 2000s (Hage 2002).⁴



Figure 8. Central shrine of the Sze Yup temple, Glebe (Sydney). Wikimedia Commons.

The Joss Houses of Queensland: Breakfast Creek (Brisbane) and Atherton

Two remarkable nineteenth century Chinese joss houses survive in Queensland; the Holy Triad Temple (Temple of the Three Sacred Officials) at Breakfast Creek (modern Albion, a suburb of Brisbane) and the Hou Wang Miao (Temple of Hou Wang) in rural Atherton, far north Queensland. In the 1880s, Brisbane experienced a construction boom and Chinese labourers flocked there to work. A ‘Chinatown’ was established at Frog’s Hollow, in what is now the Brisbane central business district, but tensions ran high among men from five clans with histories of hostile relations (Ealing-Godbold 2024). In this small city, two organisations serving the Three Districts and the Four Districts was not feasible. As has been seen in Melbourne and Sydney, a wealthy Chinese businessman in good standing with the White community, Sum Chick Tong (1849–1902), was a motivating force in getting the temple approved and built. Four other businessmen, Way Hop, George Shue, Wam Yo, and Tong Wah, completed the representation of each of the five clans (Chinese Museum of Queensland 2024). Mark Singer notes the auspiciousness of the site:

[t]he Brisbane temple with its auspicious water views of the Brisbane River, and its sheltered location beneath surrounding hills, had promised a very favourable future until surrounding factories were built earlier [in the twentieth] century. The decline of the temple thereafter was directly attributable to the loss of good *Feng Shui* (Fisher 1988, 99).

Sum Chick Tong’s building firm, Kwong Nam Tai and Company, imported materials for the construction of the roof, and he reputedly played a significant role at the opening ceremony in 1886. However, there were anti-Chinese riots in Brisbane in 1888, after which Sum Chick Tong lost his business and was reduced to working as a grocer. The hostile White community and the legal impact of Federation caused the Chinese community in Brisbane to shrink. Christina Ealing-Godbold notes that by the 1930s the Holy Triad Temple was viewed as a “quaint” relic from an earlier age, and in 1948 there was not a single worshipper remaining (Ealing Godbold 2024).



Figure 9. Holy Triad Temple in 1886, Breakfast Creek (Brisbane). Wikimedia Commons

Government processes of heritage conservation were mobilised to save the Breakfast Creek Temple in 1964; it had been derelict for sixteen years and a community organization, the Chinese Club, was invited to consider the building's future. A specific Chinese Temple Society was founded immediately to raise funds, and the restoration began in 1965, with the restored temple (complete with some original furnishings that had been identified and reacquired) opening in 1966. A caretaker's residence was erected and the first caretaker, Mrs Dorothy Chick Tong, and Englishwoman, was Sum Chick Tong's daughter-in-law, the second wife of his son George Chick Tong (1886–1968) (Ealing-Godbold 2024). She was caretaker for twenty years from 1968 when her husband died to 1988, when the Bicentenary of White settlement in Australia was celebrated and Brisbane was the host city of World Expo 88. In the 1970s, a new Buddhist shrine was built to extend the temple's physical dimensions and popularity with recent Chinese migrants, mostly from Vietnam.



Figure 10. Holy Triad Temple, Albion (Brisbane). Wikimedia Commons.

The Chinese arrived in Charters Towers, far north Queensland, in 1867 and began panning for gold on the Cape River. Cape River was part of the Palmer River goldfield, which was the largest alluvial goldfield in Australia. Chinese miners made a significant contribution economically and socially to the region: Heather Burke and Gordon Grimwade note that in 1883, “that half or more of the populations of the Cairns, Port Douglas, Innisfail and Atherton regions were of Chinese descent” (Burke and Grimwade 2013, 121). These towns were not large; the north of Queensland remains a thinly populated area. The prominence of the Chinese workmen in the late nineteenth century meant that there were many joss houses in far north Queensland. Yet the only surviving nineteenth century Chinese structure is the Hou Wang Miao in Atherton. As with other states, the majority of the miners originated in Guangdong, and were from either the Three Districts (Sam Yup) or the Four Districts (Sze Yup). Burke and Grimwade cite Hum Lee's research indicating that 390 Chinese residents were a critical mass required for a community and temple in Australian mining towns. They calculate north Queensland

had nine such towns:

Cooktown (where two or three temples were built in the late nineteenth century), the Palmer (one temple, c. 1878), Etheridge/Georgetown (which had at least two temples, one constructed in 1891 and another in 1905), Port Douglas (c. 1880s), Cairns (two separate temples, one erected in 1886 and the other c. 1898), Croydon (one temple built in 1897 and its replacement in 1903), Thornborough (1898), Innisfail (one temple in the late 1800s and its replacement c. 1940)⁵ and Atherton (1903) ... Only Hou Wang Miao in Atherton (1903), and Lit Sing Gung, the second temple built in Innisfail (c. 1940), survive today (Burke and Grimwade 2013, 124).

Grimwade argues that ancestor veneration and familial connections were crucial functions of the goldfield temples. He approvingly cites Evelyn Lip's research, that all traditional Chinese temples have five key elements: "1) the platform; 2) the beam frame structure; 3) brackets (*duo gong*); 4) roof form; and 5) decorative motifs" (Grimwade 2003, 51). Arguably, the *feng shui* of the landscape is as important as these structural qualities. Derham Groves has observed that all the surviving Australian joss houses face water: "Atherton faces Piebald Creek, Breakfast Creek faces the Brisbane River, Alexandria faces Sheas Creek, Glebe faces Rozelle Bay, North Bendigo faces Bendigo Creek, and South Melbourne faces Albert Park Lake (South Park Lagoon)" (Groves 2011, 66). He argues topography, orientation, and architectural form were basic requirements of the Chinese seeking to build an effective shrine for their gods, and that many sites lost their positive *feng shui* in the twentieth century when other buildings were erected that blocked views of water (Groves 2011).

The Atherton Hou Wang Miao is an outstanding building, and its survival is remarkable (though Gordon Grimwade likens it to a farm shed). He argues that it dates from 1903, but it is generally accepted to be one of the surviving nineteenth century joss houses (usually numbered at nine). At this point, I have discussed the Num Pon Soon and See Yup buildings in Melbourne, the Bendigo Joss House Temple, the Yui Ming and Sze Yup temples in Sydney, the Albion Temple of the Three Triads in Brisbane, and the Atherton Hou Wang Miao. The two not yet broached are the joss house in Darwin (which is a special case), and the Weldborough temple in Tasmania, now in the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston (Pybus 2012). Unlike the temples discussed so far, which began as wooden structures and were replaced by more durable brick, the Atherton joss house is built of corrugated iron. Its congregation diminished by the 1930s, and in 1979 it was derelict, when the National Trust "acquired both the temple and the adjacent, abandoned, Chinatown site by donation from the owners, the Fong On family" (Grimwade and Carter 2000, 37). Hou Wang (a bodyguard of the last Sung Emperor) is an unusual dedicatee and of four known temples, Atherton is the only one outside China. There have also been conflicts between state heritage organisations and the local community in management of the site (Grimwade and Carter 2000).



Figure 11. Hou Wang Miao, Atherton. Wikimedia Commons.

Darwin and Tasmania: The Fringes of Australian Settlement and the Fate of Joss Houses

The township of Darwin was founded only in 1869, over eighty years after the first European settlement on Sydney Harbour (Giese 1995). The Chung Wah temple on Wood Street, Darwin was first erected in 1887, a date attested by the bell that was cast for the Chinese community upon the opening of the site. This temple was built using elements from other Chinese communities. For example, the stone temple guardian lions were originally part of the Brocks Creek Temple, near Pine Creek, Northern Territory (Northern Territory Government 2024). Brocks Creek was a sizeable Chinatown; when Australian soldiers attacked and damaged the temple, the lions were moved to Darwin (Chung Wah Society 2024). This temple is an outlier in the list of surviving nineteenth century temples, because it was destroyed in 1974 when Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin on Christmas Day 1974. Eighty per cent of Darwin's buildings were flattened, and the Chinese community were amazed when spokesman Ernie Chin found the temple's "old gods upright and barely scathed" (Roussos and Purtili 2014). He was inspired to call on fellow Chinese to help: "I said to everybody, 'We have to go in there and pick up all those gods'... They looked at me like I was crazy. I said, 'We've got to do this because we've lost our properties but we're still alive. So we've got to do this'. The survivors set the gods under the shelter of an awning" (Roussos and Purtili 2014). The Darwin temple currently dates from 1977, but the rebuild was based closely on the nineteenth century temple and the continuity is acknowledged as valid, given the drastic circumstances of Cyclone Tracy.



Figure 12. Wood Street Temple (Chung Wah Society), Darwin. Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 13. Lit Sing Gung Temple of All Religions (1940), Innisfail. Wikimedia Commons.

The final nineteenth century Chinese joss house surviving in Australia is that which was formerly located at Weldborough in Tasmania. This is where the question of the disappearance of the faith community becomes acute, given that the Weldborough temple dedicated to Guan Di is now located in the Victoria Museum in Launceston, Tasmania. In a museum it has ceased to be an effective place of worship and has become part of heritage, the historical record that is presented to Australians and international visitors as relics of an exotic, and increasingly distant, past (Brine 1997). In northern Tasmania tin mining attracted Chinese labourers from Guangdong and the mining boom from approximately 1880 to 1890 saw the township of Weldborough being home to 700 Chinese men, some of whom had non-Chinese wives. Cassandra Pybus describes a majority of the men as “lonely bachelors” and their working life as managed by:

[the] clan leader in Weldborough, Maa Mon Chinn...one of the first miners to come to the Blue Tier, arriving in Tasmania with his father and brother in the 1860s when he was just a youth. Twenty years later he had prospered and held several mining leases in the region, as well as running a gambling den and all-purpose store in Weldborough. He dealt directly with Tom Sing in Launceston, who handled all the buying and selling of ore, the interpreting and negotiations with officialdom, in addition to the importation of goods from Hong Kong. Tom Sing was also the middleman who made it possible for miners to remit much of their earnings to the families left behind in China (Pybus 2012).

She notes that Weldborough’s Chinese community decreased due to the social and political conditions I have detailed above, and by 1930 only one Chinese man, Hee Jarm, remained to take care of the temple. As the years went by, he became concerned about the future of the joss house and arranged for it to be transferred to the Victoria Museum through the agency of the prominent Chinese citizen, James Chung-Gon, in 1934.

Initially, being in the museum did not prevent the Weldborough temple from being used as a place of worship as well as a museum exhibit. Pybus and her fellow Tasmanian writer Carmel Bird (née Janice Maureen Power, b. 1940) both recollect the joy of encountering this exotic cultural artifact on visits to the Victoria Museum with their

families as children:

Tucked away in the dusty, darkened inner sanctum of this place of curiosities, the 'joss house' became an enduring source of fascination and joy for generations of Tasmanians, who vividly remember approaching in darkness and then, as the display illuminated, entering into an inexplicably exotic world. The gilded red lacquerwork of the temple was hung with embroidered scrolls inscribed with the teachings of Confucius and decorated with... fierce red dragons, white cranes, crimson peonies, yellow chrysanthemums, and multi-coloured fish. Mounted on eight long cedar poles were eight flat boxes covered with the brilliant blue feathers of the kingfisher, while on a central altar were fourteen figurines in elaborate makeup and vivid embroidered silken robes, arranged around the central figure of Guan Di, who was seated on a throne, looking terribly fierce in his glossy green robes. Entering this gorgeous, but slightly shabby, shrine was an awesome pleasure that many Tasmanians never forgot (Pybus 2012).

Pybus's amusing essay about the Chinese in the Tasmanian imaginary drifts off into Hollywood celebrities and local gossip, but exhibits affection for and interest in, the long-gone Tasmanian Cantonese mining community. The Queen Victoria Museum website indicates that the temple is still a working place of worship and offers various interesting pieces of information about its history and fittings (Addison 2024). More political and incisive are the findings of Freya Su, David Beynon, and Van Krisadawat, who argue that the fate of the Weldborough temple, which "has been removed from its original location (and largely from its original purpose) indicat[ing] that the relationship between migration and settlement is a threshold between movement and fixity, ephemerality and permanence, residence and citizenship in the fullest sense" (Su, Beynon and Krisadawat 2023, 537) has greater significance for White Australia's unwelcoming attitude to all non-Whites, including Indigenous Australians.



Figure 14. Weldborough Joss House, Victoria Museum Launceston (Tasmania). Wikimedia Commons.

The status of the ninth and final continuing nineteenth century joss house in Australia as a permanent museum exhibit raises the fact that majoritarian White Australia still is

disinclined to give credit to non-White settlers, sojourners, and even citizens as contributing to the complex, multicultural Australia of the twenty-first century (Cusack and Prior 2010). This article has examined the survival, against the odds of historical abandonment, dilapidation, and prevalent racist attitudes of Chinese joss houses in Australia, noting the White preference for a “heritage” presentation, such as is found in the goldfields theme park Sovereign Hill near Ballarat, Victoria (where the temple is a reproduction), rather than actual knowledge of the history, archaeology, and lived religion of historic Chinese settlers (Evans 1991).



Figure 15. Joss House, Sovereign Hill Theme Park (Ballarat). Wikimedia Commons.

Tajao Fujikawa notes that the Chinese were the only non-European ethnic group of significance prior to Federation and constituted the second-largest ethnic group in Australia at that time; they are still the second largest ethnic group after White Europeans in the twenty-first century, and they are also the largest tourist group to visit the country (Fujikawa 2018). Fujikawa studied the five museums in Australia dedicated to Chinese history:

[the] five Chinese museums which we deal with here are the following: the Hou Wang Chinese Temple and Museum in Atherton, Queensland; the Museum and the Temple of the Chung Wah Society in Darwin, the Northern Territory; the Chinese Museum in Melbourne, Victoria; the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo, Victoria; [and] the Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre in Ararat, Victoria. All the museums exist within a Chinatown or were closely connected with a former Chinatown which dates back to the 19th century (Fujikawara 2018, 45).

Fujikawa argues that Chinese Museums cater often to a largely Chinese public and are ignored or categorised as alien and difficult to understand by contemporary Whites (Fujikawa 2018). Michael Evans’ work on the goldfields theme park of Sovereign Hill which opened in 1970, fits neatly with Fujikawa’s research, in that historic Ballarat had a ‘Chinatown’ and the inclusion of a joss house at the attraction made sense. Yet Evans’ research reveals that the temple, far from being an authentic Australian Chinese place of worship, was “based on an illustration on a postcard from Macau” (Evans 1991, 143). Considering that the surviving, and very fine, Bendigo Joss House Temple was a mere

hundred kilometres away, this neglect of historical evidence is disturbing. The important thing, it seems, in presenting the history of the Chinese in Australia to non-Chinese Australians is not to adhere to historical realities, but rather to employ a range of exotic but attractive clichés, which demand less of the audience than the presentation of often complex and contested facts (Evans 2018).

The museums in towns where there once were temples are interesting because they reveal a history of movement and change; Janis Wilton's work on the demolished temples of Emmaville and Tingha in the New England region of New South Wales reinforces Kate Bagnall's work on the maintenance of Chinese traditions among the descendants of the early Chinese settlers. Wilton's interviews with Ernest Sue Fong and his sister Bessie Chiu bring to life the long-gone temple in Tingha, which Bessie insisted was "the most beautiful joss house" (Wilton 2019, 27). Moreover, these poignant memories are reinforced by the collections of fittings from the Emmaville and Tingha temples that are now housed in local museums like the McCrossin's Mill Museum in nearby Uralla, New South Wales, a testament to the connections of these remote temples with Guangdong, given that many fittings and objects were manufactured in China.

Conclusion

From 1851 to 1871, the population of Australia grew from around 430,000 people to 1.7 million as migrants flocked to prospect for gold. The largest non-European ethnic group were Chinese, who often migrated as bonded labourers, and were discriminated against by the government, White Australians, and other miners on the goldfields. In the nineteenth century non-Christian places of worship were unpopular and missionaries sought to convert the "heathen Chinese" (O'Brien 2014). In the twenty-first century the surviving handful of temples built by Cantonese miners are tourist attractions. However, at sites where there is an absence of material remains, the painstaking work of oral historians and folklorists receives less attention (Bagnall 2013), despite the fact that it arguably reveals more about the actual lives of historical Chinese Australians than a visit to a temple (which is intentionally geared toward creating an impression of exoticism and colourful, alien rites). In the twenty-first century, these limited and scattered relics of an important migrant people merit serious reconsideration, and greater integration into Australian multicultural and multi-faith history.

Conflict of Interest

Carole M. Cusack has been on the Editor of *JDTREA* since July 2021, but has no role in the decision to publish this article. No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

- ¹ The Chinese transliterations of words in this article will appear as they are most commonly known by English speaking Australians and as such will shift between Mandarin and other dialects.
- ² The term 'joss house' is used as an alternative to 'temple' in this article because a majority of existing Cantonese speaking Chinese who use these temples have adopted that term (for example, the Emu Point structure is formally called the Bendigo Joss House Temple).
- ³ His name is also given as Kwan Ti and Kwan Gung, which is merely a different form of orthography.
- ⁴ The Sze Yup Temple is approximately twenty minutes' walk from the Studies in Religion department at the University of Sydney, and for decades my colleague Christopher Hartney and I (and in recent years, Ray Radford, too) have taken students to visit the quiet gardens where temple cats laze in the sun. Students respectfully tour the premises and burn hell money in the oven or light incense at the shrine if they wish to.
- ⁵ The Lit Sing Gung Temple of All Religions in Innisfail is not generally counted as a nineteenth century temple as the current structure dates from 1940, and the earlier joss house had been destroyed by a cyclone in 1918. The twenty-two years before the rebuild are deemed to have broken the continuity for scholars. Innisfail local residents nevertheless love and esteem their well-maintained and religiously active temple.

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