

# LEARNING FROM GOLDEN THREADS

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past four years the Golden Threads Project has worked with local museums, historical societies and community members across the state to identify some of the stories, sites, objects, collections and places which reveal the rich and varied contribution made to the history of regional New South Wales by Chinese-Australians.

Initially conceived and funded by the Museums Committee of the NSW Ministry for the Arts the Project has worked in collaboration with the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, and Australian Museums On Line (AMOL), and has received funding and/or in-kind support from Visions of Australia, the NSW Heritage Office, the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee, the New England Regional Art Museum, and the University of New England.

This story provides an overview of the processes and products involved, and of lessons learnt in the course of the Project.

### Golden Threads products and activities:

Golden Threads fieldwork and research has resulted in a variety of products and activities. These include:

- an exhibition which is being toured by the New England Regional Art Museum with funding from Visions of Australia and the NSW Ministry of the Arts



Images of the travelling exhibition which is touring venues in regional New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, as well as the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney and the Migration Museum in Adelaide during 2001 to 2004.

- this website (<http://amol.org.au/goldenthreads>) designed and hosted by Australian-Museums-On-Line (AMOL)
- assistance to Tingha community members and Guyra Shire Council to realise the acquisition and establishment of the Wing Hing Long store as a museum with funding from the NSW Heritage Office



Front view of the Wing Hing Long store, Tingha, and of the residence at the back of the store, 1997. (Golden Threads Photograph)

- assistance to local museums in various parts of regional NSW to identify, document, conserve and display objects in their collections relating to the Chinese contribution to their localities (Browse the 'Explore' section of the Golden Threads website for examples), and to seek funding
- locating privately held collections and finding them a public repository or museum
- recording oral history interviews with community members



Janis Wilton interviewing Les Daniels, Deniliquin, July 1998.



Janis Wilton interviewing Merv Shung, Narandera, July 1998.

- developing a computer database which links localities, people, sites, and objects to the stories about the Chinese presence which give them further meaning
- providing papers, articles, talks and workshops about the Project, and about the rich and diverse history and heritage of the Chinese presence in regional NSW

## LESSONS

The following are among the main lessons learnt and reinforced in the course of the Project.

- **the need to respect the varied experiences and skills of different communities, organisations and individuals**

The sharing of stories, information and ideas on which Golden Threads depends entailed the acceptance that there is a variety of experiences and expertise, all of which are of equal value. In this context, it is important to respect, for example:

- the years of experience and knowledge vested in local museum and historical society members,
- the insights shared by Chinese-Australians,
- the significance of the stories associated with object labels even when objects were incorrectly identified,
- the expertise in conservation and other museum practices available among staff from the larger cultural institutions and museums,
- the existing expertise in regional areas and among community groups.

By accepting the importance of this principle, the Golden Threads team by and large avoided exacerbating perceived and often real tensions between 'professionals' and 'amateurs', between 'experts' and 'community members', and between the city and the bush. The Project profile was arguably further enhanced by the regional base of the Project Coordinators. Too often, projects for communities in regional and rural NSW are implemented and controlled from Sydney when relevant expertise and experience is available in regional areas.

- **the need to keep participants informed about what is happening to their stories and other material shared with the Project**

Vital to the effectiveness of the Golden Threads Project is the provision of copies of material collected and the dissemination of information about products and activities to all participating groups and community members. For Golden Threads this entails, for example:

- providing bound printouts of relevant entries in the Golden Threads database to participating museums, societies and individuals

- informing participants of exhibitions, seminars and other activities
- responding to requests for research information uncovered in the course of the Project.
- providing updated printouts following the receipt of further material and information which is frequently forthcoming once participants receive their first bundle of material.

Unfortunately, time and resources have made it extremely difficult to keep up to date with the dissemination of information and printouts. In future projects using this model, it is essential to have in place sufficient resources, time and an appropriate mechanism for ensuring regular feedback.

- **the need to ensure that cultural organisations cooperate and avoid overlap in the services and advice offered, and in the participation requested**

In the current climate in which there is a requirement for government funded cultural organisations to, among many other things, have active programmes in relation to cultural diversity and regional New South Wales, there is the danger of overlap and, indeed, of tension. In the course of the Golden Threads Project, for example, there was potential conflict and confusion when a city based cultural organisation not only made use of groundwork and material initiated by Golden Threads (which was encouraged) but started to retrace steps and use material under its own name. This meant potential confusion among community members in regional NSW participating in the Project. It is essential to establish boundaries and to work cooperatively.

- **the need to be innovative and flexible in the use of time and in-kind support**

Golden Threads was a new initiative on the part of the NSW Ministry for the Arts. It was largely uncharted territory to work with museums across regional New South Wales and to develop methods and approaches for coordinating, collating, accessing, presenting and sharing the variety of material and insights acquired relating to the Chinese presence. The extent of the Project could only be realised through the in-kind support of the various partner organisations, the employment of specialists as the need arose, the adaptation to changing circumstances, and a generally flexible approach to the deployment of resources. Some of the effective approaches in this regard include:

- the provision of infrastructure support by both the University of New England and the New England Regional Art Museum

- the acceptance by both the University of New England and the New England Regional Art Museum that research and other aspects of the Golden Threads Project fell within the job descriptions of the Project Coordinators (who are employees of the institutions), even if much of the work was accomplished outside working hours.
- the provision of in-kind assistance (conservation advice and field visits, Sydney venues, curatorial and cataloguing assistance, exhibition development, programming of the interactive) from the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney
- the provision of in-kind assistance from Australian Museums On Line (AMOL) in the design, programming and hosting of the Project website and of the interactive which is touring with the travelling exhibition
- the willingness of participating museums, organisations and individuals to share existing research and knowledge and, on many occasions, to pursue and share further research
- the employment of locally based museum personnel to conduct initial field-work and research in specific region
- the employment and participation of a researcher fluent in Chinese (Cantonese) and English, and well informed about Cantonese cultural practices
- the application for further funding as new aspects of the Project evolved (eg. the inclusion of a computer interactive with the travelling exhibition in order to introduce the website to visitors to the travelling exhibition)
- **the benefits of a custom made computer database designed to link objects, localities, sites, people and stories**

Early in the Project it was recognised that tracking objects and themes across a large number of museum collections required some means of making sense of the material. It was also recognised that a simple cataloguing of the objects would risk continuing to convey a disembodied sense of the Chinese presence. What was needed was a means to ensure that even those objects whose provenance was unsure could assist to tell the story of the Chinese contribution to a particular locality. To this end, material was collected on the history of the Chinese in each locality with a particular emphasis on identifying specific sites and individuals. A Filemaker Pro database was created which links the objects in the museum and private collections to various stories about sites, people, places and customs. This database provides the core of the 'Explore' section of the Golden Threads website, and makes possible the retrieval and comparison of information for a variety of purposes including, for example, providing participating museums

and individuals with printouts of the information about their localities, and for developing the travelling and online exhibitions.

- **the benefits of acknowledging and linking the variety of ways and forms in which our diverse cultural heritage is saved, represented and presented**

Golden Threads has highlighted the importance of some of the different forms in which our diverse cultural heritage can be experienced. It is there in objects in museum and private collections, stories told within families, oral history interviews about individuals' experiences, the traces and structures of buildings, the contours and vistas of landscapes, local folklore, photographs and memorabilia, local newspapers, historical documents, and poetry, novels and paintings. The challenge is to initiate innovative and ethical means to link these varieties of forms and to present the stories they tell to the widest possible audience.

Golden Threads has, to date, used a travelling exhibition, website, computer interactive, journal and magazine articles, education resources, one-off bound collections of material, and talks, seminars and workshops as ways of presenting some of the findings from the Project.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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