

OBJECTS AND THEIR STORIES

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In the early 1980s, amidst a myriad of memories about growing up Chinese in the tin mining town of Emmaville in northern New South Wales, Ernest Sue Fong recalled that one of his roles was to serve tea to the elderly men who frequented his father's general store. At the centre of his account was a teapot. It was a teapot with a story to tell about immigrant cultural practices. I was fascinated and I listened as the stories poured forth. I learned about the lonely single Chinese men who had stayed in the district after most of their countrymen had returned home. I heard about the Chinese goods which they came to the store to buy. I imagined the banquet of roast pig and rice laid out on gravestones in the cemetery to honour the dead during the festival of Qingming (Ching Ming). Entranced by the detailed memories of Chinese customs surviving in the Australian bush, I forgot to ask about the teapot - and about the many other objects - around which the memories were formed. Over a decade later this omission, fortunately, came back to haunt me.



Joyce and Ernest Sue Fong, 1986.



Teapot and basket used by Fong family of Inverell and Tingha, 1930s. (Wing Hing Long Museum, Tingha)

In 1997 I became part of the Golden Threads team which was given the task and privilege to work with local communities across New South Wales to research their objects, memories and other records of the Chinese presence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was a task which involved visiting local museums and sites, identifying objects, surveying varieties of documents and recording the memories and knowledge of local residents including descendants of Chinese settlers. The stories that emerged provide insight into many aspects of the Chinese contribution to regional New South Wales. They introduce the different owners and keepers of the objects and their stories, the importance of retaining the often conflicting and sometimes misinformed tales about particular objects, and the ways in which the histories of objects are a reflection of the history of the Chinese in regional New South Wales.

Traditional owners

The traditional owners of the stories associated with the Chinese contribution to regional New South Wales are the descendants of those Chinese immigrants who either settled in New South Wales themselves or ensured that at least some of their children settled there. For these owners the stories consist of their own remembered experiences as

well as the accounts passed down within families. The stories are filtered through the experiences of migrating, living and working in an alien and often racist environment. They are also filtered through cultural lenses that emphasise, for example, respect for elders, silence about negative experiences, family honour over individual needs and achievements, and the importance of avoiding behaviour that could attract criticism from the host society. In this context, there are silences about remembering racism, about polygamous marriages, about illegal immigration, and about exploitation of Chinese by Chinese. There is also an emphasis on upward socioeconomic mobility, on establishing good relations with European neighbours and business associates, and on showcasing family and community achievements.¹

In the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, the emergence and promotion of cultural diversity as a positive feature of Australian society provided a further filter. This filter sanctions pride in Chinese (and any other non-English-speaking background) heritage, and encourages Australians to research, explore, present and speak out about their links to different cultural traditions. This has helped encourage Chinese-Australians to share their stories, and it has opened the research door for many Australians who, until fairly recently, were unaware of their Chinese ancestry.²

New keepers and tellers

In regional New South Wales some of the main new keepers and tellers of the Chinese presence in particular localities, are local museums and local and family historical societies. They had their origins in a burst of activity in the 1960s and 1970s when local community members sought to collect anything and everything related to the history of their particular locality. The purpose was, at least partly, to applaud their European predecessors who could be credited as pioneer settlers and as those responsible for the development of the district.³ To this end, the museums they created and the local histories they sponsored tend to gloss over the presence of ethnic minorities (as well as the contributions from Aboriginal Australians), and tend to tap into the 'white Australia' tradition. Despite this, in the sweep of material brought into local collections, there were objects, documents, photographs and other evidence of the Chinese presence. Sometimes well documented, sometimes labelled enigmatically, sometimes mislabelled, and sometimes conveying stereotyped if not racist messages, these items and the memories and stories accompanying them sit as latent reminders of both the Chinese presence and of the ways in which that presence is remembered by the local community. These items are also reminders of an ethos in which collecting for the sake of collecting tended to overpower concerns to reference or document material or to determine how or why a particular acquisition should be added to a collection.⁴

In the later decades of the twentieth century, new museum practices have influenced some local museums and historical societies to document and display specific objects and their stories, and to include more overtly the contributions from ethnic and other minorities.

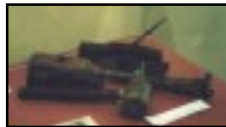
Different perspectives, richer histories

By acknowledging the different keepers of stories and objects relating to the Chinese presence, and by recognising the different perspectives and traditions from which they come, it is possible to appreciate the layers of meaning which attach to various tellings of the Chinese contribution. None should be discarded. All should be questioned. The following tour through a small number of local museums provides a taste of the deeper perspectives and richer histories available if the various layers of stories, mis-stories, information and lack of information are all included.



Entrance to Albury Regional Museum.

The Albury Regional Museum on the border between New South Wales and Victoria, has on display a number of objects relating to the Chinese presence in the locality. They include a mah jong set, carpenter's tools, a signboard (in Chinese and English) for the local branch of the Chinese Masonic Society, a trunk of possessions belonging to a 'Wong Wan Suk', and a photograph of the Chinese members of the local Presbyterian Church at the turn of the century.



Mah jong set, carpenters' tools, Chinese Masonic Society sign, trunk belonging to 'Wong Bung Chung', photograph of Chinese members of the local Presbyterian Church. (Albury Regional Museum)

These objects are part of a permanent exhibition which recognises that Albury was one of the crossing points for Chinese who moved between the goldfields in Victoria and those in New South Wales, and that into the twentieth century there were Chinese stores and market gardens servicing the community and there was a Chinese quarter in the town.⁵ Most of the objects, however, are unprovenanced. They were collected in the days when documenting the histories of objects, their owners and uses, was not seen as important. With limited resources, Museum staff are trying to research and document the stories. However, many of the connections have been lost and it is likely that most of the objects will remain without specific stories. They mark the Chinese

contribution, but in accord with a history in which for a long time Chinese immigrants figured mainly as unnamed or misnamed individuals, sometimes threatening, certainly foreign, the individuals and the specific stories which attach to the objects may remain out of reach.

Across the state, there are a variety of objects in local collections which similarly mark the Chinese presence but whose specific stories and previous owners are lost. The generic labelling links the Chinese presence in a locality to, for example, Chinese food or the Chinese market gardeners who during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided services across the state. It does not link them to particular individuals or market gardens, tell stories about their use, or provide information about their manufacture and/or importation into Australia.



Celadon glazed bowls possibly used by Chinese market gardeners in Inverell. (Inverell Pioneer Village).



Watering can used by Chinese market gardeners in Grenfell. (Grenfell Museum)



Yoke on display as part of an exhibition about Chinese labour in the Deniliquin district. (Peppin Heritage Centre, Deniliquin)

There are also objects which have specific stories attached to them. Details about the owners, local memories and usage bring the objects alive, connect them to individuals and open the door for further research.



This basket at the Parkside Cottage Museum in Narrandera has the following label: 'Basket given to Edie Flood on her 13th birthday 1912 by King Fan, best remembered Chinaman in Narrandera (donated by Edith Davis nee Flood).'

King Fan worked as a market gardener on the river flats in Narrandera from around the turn of the century until the early 1930s. His presence and contribution are recorded in local histories, shared memories, and a gravemarker in the local cemetery.



This 1905 calendar for On Sing and Company Clarinda Street, Parkes is held in the Parkes Museum collection. The catalogue entry notes that the donor's grandmother worked at On Sing and Company in the early part of the 20th century and identifies the donor. The Museum also holds a photograph of the interior of the store. Rate books, street directories, local newspaper advertisements and local memories should lead

to further details and stories. The calendar can also be placed in the context of similar calendars for other Chinese-Australian stores in the early twentieth century housed in local museums.⁶ They offer images of English women and sometimes English royalty to advertise businesses with distinctly Chinese names. Here are Chinese stores servicing a European clientele in regional New South Wales.⁷

There are mislabelled objects. A soy sauce jar is identified as a 'ming' vase, water and tobacco pipes as opium pipes, and an opium tin as a burial box 'for money for the second life'. This mislabelling captures, in particular, the ways in which Chinese residents were seen as exotic and as indulging in different – if not threatening – habits like opium smoking and distinctive burial practices.



Soy sauce jar (Bland Museum, West Wyalong)



Opium tin. (Private collection)

Other labels overtly comment on the long history of the treatment of Chinese in Australia as people who did not really belong. They emphasise difference and evoke stereotypes drawing partly on racist imaginings. There are, for example, a number of 'coolie' hats. Hats of this style were worn by Chinese workers. They were functional. They were, however, clearly different to the headdress worn by European counterparts and have entered into local memories as symbols of difference. As one museum label notes: 'such headdress was habitually worn by the Chinese whose distinctive dress attracted much amused comment from Europeans.' The 'coolie' hats are usually not provenanced. From their appearance, some are post World War II examples rather than dating from the earlier part of the century when Chinese market gardeners were at work across the state, and some are not related to the Chinese presence at all. However, their shape and style are evocative of images of Chinese market gardeners and miners at work.



This hat is well provenanced. The hat is among objects passed down within the Campbell family. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they owned a vineyard in Wahgunyah which employed Chinese labourers. (Private collection)

There are also references to opium use as a feature of the Chinese presence in Australia. Sometimes, the references reinforce attitudes which saw opium smoking as an illegal activity which enticed Chinese residents to break the law. In one museum, for example, jars traditionally used for pickling and storing vegetables, are accompanied by the comment that 'these jars, intended to carry preserved ginger, were sometimes used to smuggle opium'.

It is tempting to disregard and perhaps criticise the misinformation and the apparent lack of care in labelling and documenting. This, however, ignores the significance of the messages. These objects, their labels and their inclusion in local museum collections symbolise the pervasiveness of the idea of the Chinese as outsiders, as people who were not really known as individuals but who were, somewhat contradictorily, regarded as an integral and important part of the development of a district. Such sentiments are also captured in local history commentaries and recorded memories. For example, while acknowledging the importance of Chinese market gardeners in supplying fresh vegetables, the acknowledgement locates the Chinese as people who did not really belong or who were, at the very least, quaint and exotic members of the community. They are given generic names like 'John' (for 'John Chinaman'), they are associated with hoarding wealth, they are seen as frightening and with strange customs. These are sentiments of the times reflecting attitudes which, today, may make us feel uncomfortable but which, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a part of daily discourse. They are fond memories.

I remember 'John' from my childhood. He used to deliver goods to the Ware home... He would bring the horse and cart up to the side of the house ... On the way out he would give us boys a peach or an apricot .⁸

Bar Lum, he was an old Chinese prospector. I've got his old prospecting dish and can just make out where his hut was. He died about 1935. The story is that he had 580 sovereigns and buried them somewhere.⁹

Used to be a great go when we were kids to go to one of the Chinese funerals. They used to go out there and they used to put tucker [food], and paper and God knows what out there around the place, you know. The kids'd all wait until they got away and there would be spirits and God knows what. They had a big sort of a brick incinerator thing...¹⁰

I remember old Jimmy, an old neighbour of ours, a Chinaman, had his garden there and he'd load his cart overnight, before daylight in the

morning walked his horse to go round all the farms, round the sawmills, round the road gangs, round the shearing sheds, and round the villages. 'Cause in those days there was no transport like we've got today, and vegetables were very hard to get, and people didn't have water to grow much vegetables, and these Chinamen they'd provide us with veg. They were our main supplier of vegetables. ... they were a great asset to the district. The ones that had the shops in towns, they were good business people, very keen in their prices, and, you know, we felt that the Chinese did a lot for this district.¹¹

These are memories about strangers, people met in the street or for services provided, people who were exotic, who didn't really belong but who, especially as their numbers decreased, could be tolerated and whose services and skills were appreciated. Their food and habits were different, strange - sometimes good to taste, rarely something to be understood. In this context, the mixture of mislabelling, provenanced stories, and folklore are reminders of the ambivalent place of the Chinese in Australian society.

This, for want of a better description, 'white Australia' view of the Chinese presence is flanked by another view: that provided particularly by Chinese-Australians and the descendants of Chinese immigrants. This view is also represented in local museums and the local stories flowing around them.



Oxley Museum, Wellington

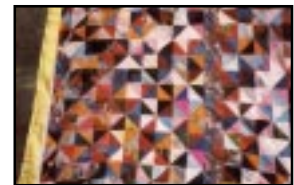
In the Oxley Museum in Wellington, for example, there is now a room devoted to the Chinese presence in the district. It includes clothing, store goods and records, photographs, herbal medicines, and Chinese tea, dating mainly from the 1930s or earlier.



Shoes owned by Alice Ling, early 1930s.
(Oxley Museum, Wellington).



Fong Lee & Co account book, early 1930s.
(Oxley Museum, Wellington).



Quilt made by Alice Ling (Sing Yin Ean) from fabric samples from the Fong Lee store, 1920s.
(Oxley Museum, Wellington)

The collection comes primarily from the Fong Lee store that operated in the town from around 1880 to 1934, from members of the Ling family who owned the store, and the Ah Yook family who owned and worked market gardens in the district. The collection is

enriched by the stories shared by members of the families and by other Chinese-Australians still living in the district. The objects come alive as the process of pickling vegetables is explained or the daily routines of working the market gardens are described. The stories are then linked to the sites in the town - the stores, market gardens, the Chinese section of the cemetery.¹² Importantly, the collection has come to the museum through the involvement of Wellington born and raised Chinese-Australian, Carole Gass. Her parents and grandparents were market gardeners in the town. She is a member of the local historical society, and a member of the local community.



Pickling jars used by Ruby Ah Yook in Wellington. (Oxley Museum, Wellington). Carole Gass recalls: *...my grandmother's stoneware pickling jars. [She would pickle] everything from eggs to cabbages, Chinese turnip... She had lids, round lids. She stuck a piece of hessian and bricks on top ...She used to dry them [the vegetables]... and [then] rub salt into them, and ..she used to put them in ...and...put a brick on them to get all the juice out. [It would stay like that] for weeks...forever. She'd just leave them there. She always knew when they were ready. She'd just take the brick off and she'd have a squeeze or a taste of one and say 'it's ready'. And she'd get them all out then.'*



Land of the Beardies History House, Glen Innes.

In Land of the Beardies History House in Glen Innes there is a significant collection of carpenters' tools and a workbench. These were used by Chinese carpenters who worked from the Kwong Sing store which was established in Glen Innes in 1889 and which in 2001 is still owned and managed by descendants of Kwan Hong Kee (Percy Young), one of the early owner/managers of the store. The carpenters' tools and workbench were donated by Percy

Young's descendants. They came with stories about the work done by the carpenters and with information about furniture produced by them.



Percy Young (Kwan Hong Kee) seated centre front with his sons and nephews, Glen Innes, about 1910. (Private collection)



Carpenters' workbench from the Kwong Sing store, early 20th century. (Land of the Beardies History House, Glen Innes)



Tools used by Chinese carpenters, Kwong Sing store, early 20th century. (Land of the Beardies History House, Glen Innes)

The carpenters' tools also provide a focus for memories of the itinerant Chinese carpenters who worked in regional areas. As Derrick Yee who grew up in the nearby New England town of Bundarra where his parents (his mother was Percy Young's daughter)

owned the Kwong Sing store there recalled:

... a lot of the incidental furniture [at home], say the kitchen table and even the chairs ... were made by old Chinese carpenters who used to travel around. ... they'd travel across and they'd camp in the back sheds. ... They were very good carpenters. And they made some furniture but they made a lot shelves for the shop...¹³

The willingness of Chinese-Australians to share business and personal objects and their memories with local museums is providing some detail and textured stories which might otherwise be lost. It adds a different perspective, a view shaped by growing up as a Chinese-Australian during the twentieth century.

The different perspectives and stories offered by traditional and new keepers of our Chinese heritage are complementary. They tell different parts of the history of the Chinese presence in regional New South Wales. They document attitudes towards the Chinese, appreciation of the Chinese contribution, and insights into work practices, customs and beliefs of Chinese-Australians. The complementary nature of these different perspectives is well illustrated in the Wing Hing Long Museum in Tingha in northern New South Wales.



Wing Hing Long store, Tingha, 1998.

In the late nineteenth century Tingha was at the heart of a tin mining boom which attracted significant numbers of Chinese. The Wing Hing Long store dates from this period. It was established by Chinese immigrants and remained in Chinese-Australian ownership until 1998 when, with the assistance of state government funds and the local council, it transferred into a community managed and run museum.

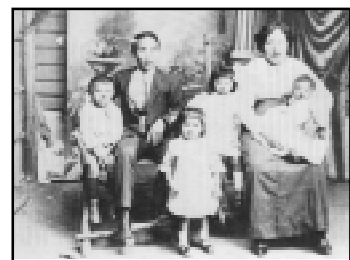
The building and its fabric have undergone few alterations since the 1930s. The contents - store goods and records, and family history material - coupled with the building provide the focus for accounts of the rise and decline of this tin mining district, the role of Chinese owned general stores in country towns, and the contribution of Chinese residents to the locality.¹⁴



View of the grocery section of the Wing Hing Long store, 1998.



Sylko display box, Wing Hing Long collection.



Jack Joe Lowe, Fong Quain Lowe and their children, Tingha, about 1918. Members of the Lowe family owned and managed the Wing Hing Long store from 1918 to 1998.

The current keepers of the WIng Hing Long store and its stories are mainly local residents with no Chinese ancestry. Different custodians emphasise different aspects of the story. Some talk of the 'Chinee' food which became common in the town, and the quaintness and foreignness of some of the Chinese. They tap into a 'white Australia' tradition. Other custodians tell the stories from oral history interviews recorded with the last owner and her family and emphasise the significance of the Chinese presence. Others focus on the store as a symbol of the importance of tin mining in the district. Different emphases ricochet around the walls and the objects in the museum's collection.¹⁵

Conclusion

This brief visit to some of the objects and collections in local museums across regional New South Wales emphasises that the stories objects tell depend on the contexts in which they are located, and the backgrounds and connections of their keepers. The visits also demonstrate that objects and collections relating to the Chinese presence in regional NSW are products and reflections of different aspects of that history. It is a history which needs to be located within the histories of the specific localities concerned, within the history of Australian attitudes and policies towards non-European immigrants, and within the histories of Chinese immigrants themselves. There is racism but there is also reconciliation. There are surviving cultural traditions that firmly connect immigrants to their families and ancestral villages in China but there are equally cultural traditions that indicate an absorption and adaptation of lifestyles encountered in Australia. There are myths, folklore and language that link to Australian racist traditions but these same myths, folklore and language are used to acknowledge the significance of the Chinese contribution. The challenge is to acknowledge, incorporate and balance these different accounts and emphases, and to recognise that objects can tell a variety of stories.

Ernest Sue Fong's teapot is no longer a reminder of an omission. It has become a symbol of the rich possibilities in opening memories and museums to a variety of dialogues, sources and media. 'Yum cha, ah bak' - have some tea, wise old man, because there are many stories the teapot can reveal.

Endnotes

- ¹ For a discussion of some of these issues see Janis Wilton, 'Remembering racism', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 13, 1991, pp. 32-38.
- ² Janis Wilton, 'Identity, racism and multiculturalism: Chinese-Australian responses' in *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories, Volume III: Migration and Identity*, eds. Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 85-100. The formation of a Chinese-Australian Family History Group based in Sydney, and the growing number of seminars, papers, publications and workshops focusing Resources Page of the Golden Threads website: <http://amol.org.au/goldenthreads/>.

3 For accounts of the histories and contexts of local museums see, for example, Tom Griffiths,
Hunters and Collectors, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

4 For a sensitive appreciation of the impact of this era of museum creation see, for example, Linda
Young, 'Local museums – local issues', in *Australian Museums – Collecting and Presenting*, ed.
D.F.McMichael, Council of Australian Museums Association, Canberra, 1991, pp.304-306.

5 For examples, browse the entries for Albury in the 'Explore' section of the Golden Threads
website.

6 For examples, conduct a search for 'Calendars' in the Objects database on the 'Explore' section
of the Golden Threads website.

7 For an account of the nature of Chinese stores in northern New South Wales in the early
twentieth century see, Janis Wilton, 'Chinese stores in rural Australia' in *The Asian Department
Store*, ed. K. Macpherson, Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 1998, pp. 90-113

8 Janis Wilton, Interview with Syd Ware, Tamworth, 1 July 1983.

9 Janis Wilton, Notes from a conversation with Daryl Barnes, Inverell, 8 August 1997.

10 Janis Wilton, Interview with Les Daniels, Deniliquin, 11 July 1998.

11 Joe Eisenberg, Interview with Lister Holland, Young, 1998. Golden Threads Tape Recording CP9.

12 Browse the entries on Wellington in the 'Explore' section of the Golden Threads website.

13 Janis Wilton, Interview with Derrick Yee, Inverell, 1990.

14 Jinx Miles, Ken Brooks and Janis Wilton, "Conservation and Management Plan for Wing Hng
Long and Co Store, Tingha" (National Trust of Queensland prepared for the NSW Heritage Office,
2000), especially pp. 5-20. In 1999 Wing Hing Long was listed on the NSW State Heritage
Register. Go to <http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/shi/shi.htm> and enter Wing Hing Long in the
search field. See also Janis Wilton, 'Wing Hing Long; from store to museum' in the 'Stories'
section of the Golden Threads website.

15 Janis Wilton, 'The walls speak, don't they?: Heritage places and contested memories: a case
study', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 22, (2000), pp.16-23, and Karl Zhao,
Memories of a difficult past', *History* (Magazine of the Royal Australian Historical Society), 65
(March 2000), pp.10-11