

# GOLD

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**PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS  
AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND  
VOL. 33**

Edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad

Published in Melbourne, Australia, by SAHANZ, 2016

ISBN: 978-0-7340-5265-0

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

**David Beynon** "Big Gold Mountain Redux." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 33, Gold*, edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad, 46-53. Melbourne: SAHANZ, 2016.

## **BIG GOLD MOUNTAIN REDUX**

*The institutional underpinnings of Australian architectural history have so far treated the long-term Asian influence on its architectural development as a marginal phenomenon. However Chinese settlements were integral to nineteenth-century goldmining towns and associated with the founding of Ararat and the establishment of Daoist/Buddhist temples from South Melbourne to the Atherton Tablelands. This association led to Australia being referred to as Dai Gum San (Big Gold Mountain). More recently, after the long interregnum of the Immigration Restriction Act, Chinese-Australian cultural-architectural engagement has been revived, as more dispersed forms of fortune are again sought on Australian shores.*

*This paper draws upon current institutional thinking about the blurring of the boundaries between traditional and modern, Eastern and Western. It further develops a discourse that provokes ongoing questions about Australia's architectural identity in a world where, on the one hand, China's power and influence is steadily growing in economic, political and cultural terms, while on the other, the Chinese diaspora has developed its own local characteristics. This involves reconsideration of the increasingly integral role of Chinese settlers in the development of Australian architecture, as they apply to both the physical changes and flows of people that have resulted from processes of globalisation, but also to the flows of capital and influence that have been formed as a result.*

### Not so Marginal: Chinese Settlers in Colonial Australia

The Chinese (from China) were the most prominent non-European settlers to colonial Australia. Gold was of course the primary reason for the large influx of Chinese to nineteenth-century Australia, many arriving after the California gold rush. Therefore as California was termed 'Gold Mountain,' the newly enticing sites of Australia were termed 'New Gold Mountain' or rather, as news travelled across the world, and reflecting upon their greater extent and potential wealth to be gained, 'Big Gold Mountain.' Australia was more generally considered to be a place where riches were everywhere to be gained. Apart from gold mines, there were also tin mines, and (for more astute settlers), the business of supplying of prospectors and miners with services and provisions. Soon the population of Chinese prospectors grew to around 50,000 by 1859.<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth-century Australia became the location for significant Chinese settlements thanks to the Victorian and New South Wales gold rushes. Bendigo and Ballarat developed extensive Chinese districts; Chinese miners largely established the town of Ararat. Further north, a majority of miners in the Palmer River goldfields and nearby port of Cooktown in north Queensland were Chinese.<sup>2</sup> The tin mining boom in Tasmania's northeast also brought a wave of Chinese migration.

Despite their numbers, the prevailing view of Chinese presence in nineteenth-century Australia is that they were peripheral to the development of the nation. Chinese were perceived to arrive in great numbers after gold had been discovered in each location, setting up their camps separately to Westerners and sifting over ground already mined, then disappearing with little legacy of their presence. More recently, however, this prevailing view has been questioned on several grounds. Undoubtedly the Chinese were marginalised and their settlements were largely separated from the dominant white townships. But historians have been increasingly researching a number of Chinese individuals who took more substantial civic roles in nineteenth-century Australia, and through these individual histories developed a more nuanced picture of relationships between Chinese settlers, Europeans and the colonial authorities. Figures such as James Acroy, who effectively straddled European and Chinese communities on the Castlemaine goldfields, have recently been drawn from nineteenth-century records.<sup>3</sup> Other aspects of early Chinese-Australian history have also been recalled to challenge presumptions of essential marginality. Recent studies have shed light on the existence of a nineteenth century Chinese Australian Rules Football League centred on Ballarat, and the manner in which the St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne was established in part by funds raised from a Chinese vs. 'Hindoos' Australian Rules Football match in 1899.<sup>4</sup> A Chinese bushranger, Sam Pu, is currently the subject of Chinese-financed feature film production.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, several writers have noted the pioneering contributions of Chinese settlers to Australian nation building, particularly in northern parts of the country. Research into Chinese land clearing, cultivation and settlement in north Queensland, Darwin and northwest Western Australia substantiate evidence that Chinese were instrumental in the opening up of these regions to colonial, and later national, authorities. There are several accounts by northern Territory and Queensland Chinese settlers stating how they saw themselves as having a claim to Australian land, on the basis of their labours in clearing and cultivating such land, particularly so in the Northern Territory where Chinese were the majority of the population in the 1880s.<sup>6</sup> While such notions of land-claiming do, of course, forget the ancient claims to that same land by indigenous people, they demonstrate that at least some Chinese saw themselves in the same pioneering image as European settlers (whose identities were also divided between the land they had just settled and their places of origin).

This begs the question of why, if the Chinese were such pioneers, haven't they been more widely recognised as such? Perhaps it is the geographical southeastern-centric bias of Australian history that has contributed to the idea that the Chinese were not instrumental in the development of the nation, mixed with a degree of prejudice and deterministic marginalisation.

### Beyond the Temple: Traces of Colonial Chinese Settlements

While some Chinese religious buildings have become well-known, several temples are now being recognised as local landmarks (e.g. the See Yup Temple in South Melbourne, the Joss House Temple in Bendigo, the Sze Yup Temple in Glebe, the Houwang Temple in Atherton, the Chun Wah Temple in Darwin). While Chinatowns in Melbourne and Sydney developed recognisable identities within these cities, remarkably little remains of the architecture of Australia's 50,000 nineteenth-century Chinese settlers. There are some grainy photographs and occasional accounts by Western observers and few remaining accounts from Chinese settlers themselves. Yet, on Ballarat's goldfields in the 1850s there were almost 10,000 Chinese inhabitants who had their own residential and commercial quarter of the city.

[. . .] the adjacent camp was a little bit of old Canton. One narrow street ran through the centre, and from it twisted devious lanes that we often had to navigate sideways. . . . In Main road the houses were of a better class, small shops in fact, where greasy boiled fowl and roast pork were displayed, and where jabbering crowds hung over the fan-tan and pak-a-pu tables. Behind these were the murky recesses of the opium dens, and worse. In a way the Golden Point camp was quite respectable compared with the Main road camp, in the centre of which was the old Red Lion Hotel, where the Asiatics got their little gin-pots filled. The Red Lion now stands alone.<sup>7</sup>

South Australian Parliamentary papers reveal Chinese architectural contributions have been noted, particularly in the early history of Darwin:

Messes. J. Allen & Co. have erected a neat store in Chinatown and a really handsome residence for Mr. Allen, who is a Chinaman. Sun Wah Loong has erected on the esplanade a very nice row of three stores, with rooms for residence in each; in fact the old style of Chinese stores is obsolete, and now they are erecting stores of a superior class.<sup>8</sup>

Towns all over nineteenth-century Australia had 'Chinatowns;' streets, areas, districts or entire towns of Chinese settlement. In Cooktown there was a Chinese population of 2500 and according to contemporary accounts:

[...] one came suddenly into what might have been Canton or Hong Kong. This is Chinatown, a town within a town, an exotic world all of its own, a series of narrow, covered alleys like a great bazaar. Chinatown blazed with the colours of lanterns and banners and goods laid out [...].<sup>9</sup>

However by the early twentieth century almost nothing remained of the Chinese settlements at Ballarat, Cooktown. In Darwin, the Su Wah Chin building is the only surviving structure from its once extensive Chinatown other than its periodically rebuilt Chinese temple. Similarly, in many other centres that used to have substantial Chinese populations (such as Atherton and Croydon in Queensland) there remains remarkably little trace of their presence.

Partially this can be related to the terminal decline in populations as Chinese vacated these towns. And since there were generally steep population declines in many areas when gold ran out, the buildings the Chinese left behind were often abandoned rather than appropriated by other settlers. However, the paucity of records can be traced to Chinese marginalisation in social and historical narratives of Australia and the fact that much of their architectural production, like other aspects of Chinese culture, seemed irrevocably other to Australia's developing self-identity. Their roots were self-evidently outside Australia's predominantly British-centric central narrative. Consequently, Chinatowns and their associated temples, businesses and residences have always been seen as marginal to the Australian architectural narrative. This has remained despite – notably in relation to the north Queensland towns mentioned above, but also in relation to Victorian settlements such as Ararat – the instrumental role that Chinese settlers played in the establishment of several Australian towns.

One of the few Chinese places to be clearly recorded that was not a temple was John Aloo's Ballarat restaurant, portrayed in S.T. Gill's evocative watercolour images of its interior and exterior.<sup>10</sup> Gill's images of Aloo's establishment, probably the first Chinese-run restaurant in Ballarat (and perhaps in Australia), suggest its place within mainstream Australian society of the time (apparently the restaurant served roast dinners to a predominantly Caucasian clientele). Similarly, as Loy-Wilson has recently outlined, Chinese shopkeepers and restaurateurs became critical to the commerce of many towns across the country in the nineteenth century, and this continued through the period of the White Australia policy to today.<sup>11</sup> Early Chinese settlers established farms, businesses, consortia in Australia, and

they committed to the success of these enterprises. From the early days of Chinese laundries and market gardens, to the ongoing presence of Chinese-run stores, farms and restaurants, Chinese presence in Australia had had both a physical and a monetary basis that continued through the White Australia period. Yet such remaining Chinese settlers were numerically few. The advent of immigration, residency and occupation restrictions, and the almost exclusively male makeup of the settler population, led to a steep decline in the Chinese-Australian population after Federation in 1901.

### **Chinese-Australians: Parallels between then and now**

It is interesting to contrast ethnic-Chinese immigration in the nineteenth century to that of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as it is only recently, after the interregnum of the White Australia policy, that the Chinese population of Australia has again gained significant numbers. So beyond a few remarkably resilient connections that can be traced to gold rush times, particularly in the Victorian city of Bendigo, what parallels can be made between the Chinese sojourners and settlers of the nineteenth century and those of today?

Before discussing these parallels, certain key differences might be outlined. Most nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants were from southern China, a majority being Cantonese from the Guangzhou delta. But recent Chinese settlers have come from other parts of China, or from Chinese diasporic populations in other Asian countries (Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, East Timor). Many have arrived as students, or as business migrants, and their settlement in Australia is both a mark of their economic power, and of the precarious political and social position of Chinese populations in many Southeast Asian countries. Coming from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and situations that, while perhaps precarious, are relatively privileged, recent Chinese settlers have not generally concentrated in areas of cheap housing or industrial employment. They are often proficient in English and hold recognised professional or technical qualifications. For instance, while spread throughout Melbourne's metropolitan area, China-born immigrants are predominantly settled in the city's eastern and southeastern suburbs. Hong Kong-born Australians, and Malaysian-born Australians (who are primarily of Chinese ethnic origin) are particularly concentrated in the comparatively wealthy parts of the eastern suburbs.<sup>12</sup> Beyond this, with the opening up of the Peoples Republic of China, there are increasing numbers of immigrants from China itself, as well as increasing overseas investment by Chinese corporations.

The investment in Australian mining by several of these contemporary Chinese corporations make for the most obvious parallels with the nineteenth century situation – with the Chinese corporate aspect being the obvious difference. Entrepreneurial figures such as Jerry Ren, whose Australian Oil and Gas Company recently acquired exploration rights to large areas of the Northern Territory;<sup>13</sup> Hanking Holdings Ltd, who owns the Yilgarn Goldfields in Western Australia;<sup>14</sup> as well as Chinese investors: Baosteel in iron ore mines,<sup>15</sup> Guangdong Rising Asset Management in copper mines, Yancoal's coal mining interests, China Merchant's winning bid for Newcastle's port infrastructure, have all changed Australia's economic landscape in recent years.<sup>16</sup> Beyond this, there has been recent Chinese interest in Australian agriculture through the acquisition of Australian agricultural enterprises and Australian land. There has been recent growth in Chinese investment in Australian property, construction, building and architecture. On a more personal level, an interesting parallel could be drawn between Quong Tart, a prominent Chinese-Australian businessman of the early twentieth century who liked to greet European visitors in traditional Chinese robes and the present-day property tycoon Sam Guo, who favours Chinese monastic attire when hosting parties in his \$12M Sydney mansion.<sup>17</sup>

### **Echoes of Earlier Discourses in the Twenty-First Century**

Not all of these comparisons reflect well on our supposedly more multicultural and enlightened contemporary society. Some of the discourses around the Chinese in twenty-first century Australia echo those of the nineteenth century; worries about divided loyalties, about monies moving offshore, about 'locals' being usurped by people who work harder and tolerate lower pay and living standards. While antagonism towards Australians of Chinese ethnic origin has receded over the last thirty years (redirected towards more recent migrants), there remains a degree of suspicion and misinformation about Chinese involvement in Australian property and construction. Despite the economic benefits of a building boom in the wake of faltering mining revenues, Chinese investment in Australian real estate has not been

seen in entirely positive terms. Accusations that Chinese money has made homes less affordable for Australians whether through greater wealth,<sup>18</sup> unfairly favourable loan conditions,<sup>19</sup> or funds tainted by crime and corruption,<sup>20</sup> have proliferated.

More specifically, there are sometimes contested connections between mining and prosperity for both Australia and China. Nineteenth-century antagonism about Chinese sifting over gold tailings already abandoned by European miners in Bendigo and Palmer River can be compared to grumblings over Chinese citizens on 457 visas working in northern Australia's iron ore and bauxite mines. Disputes about nineteenth-century Chinese settlements in Victoria and land clearance in north Queensland can be compared to twenty-first century worries regarding Chinese acquisition of agricultural or mining land inland (as well as apartments in Australian cities).

### **Is there a Contemporary Chinese-Australian Architecture?**

At first glance it might be regarded that the Chinese investors of today, like the Chinese miners of Ballarat's yesterday, are largely sojourners, present for a time but isolated with little cultural or social influence. Certainly, there was in the nineteenth century an overwhelming sense of otherness when white colonists considered their Chinese counterparts – an attitude that extended to their unfamiliar architecture:

Slightly detached from the camp were two josshouses, with their tinsel, coloured paper, incense sticks, and the fearful old joss himself squatted in the semi-darkness. At Chinese New Year they used to chase the devil out of the camp – Oriental devil, of course. No 'white devil' would need to be chased out of that camp; he would have to be chased into it.<sup>21</sup>

In a contemporary context, though it might seem that there are few obvious differences between the architecture invested in by contemporary Chinese interests in Australia and those produced by other means, the persistence of a sense of otherness in contemporary reportage suggests a persistence of attitudes towards those other to Australia's putatively 'white' identity. However this suggestion disregards the fact that in twenty-first century Australia, people identified as Chinese occupy a series of positions, from economic investors and students to an increasing population of Chinese-Australians. A recent news report is illustrative of this point:

Speaking on Sky News, Trade Minister Steve Ciobo told Australians concerned about overseas investment in the residential property market that some Chinese buyers were not foreign nationals, but rather Chinese born-Australians or immigrants. 'There are so many examples where I have been told stories where people say: "You know what, I saw Chinese buying real estate here in Australia,"' he said. 'But you know what? They're Chinese-Australian. I think sometimes people make the mistake of seeing anyone who doesn't look Caucasian and saying: "That's a foreign buyer."<sup>22</sup>

Here two particular characteristics can be noted. Firstly there is the strength of Chinese diasporic identity, despite the fact the many immigrants and investors of Chinese ethnic origin are individually from Southeast Asia. And secondly there is the economic importance of their place of cultural origin. Chinese Australians are distinct from such groups as Italians and Greeks in that they provide links to economies – not just China but also Singapore, Malaysia and other Southeast Asian nations – that are critical for Australia's future.<sup>23</sup> Beyond traditional Chinatowns, recent settlers of Chinese ethnic origin have formed the contemporary commercial character of several Australian suburbs: Box Hill and Glen Waverley in Melbourne, Burwood and Hurstville in Sydney. Adding to the 111 early Chinese temple sites (dating from 1845 to 1930),<sup>24</sup> are such recent constructions such as the massive Nan Tien temple in Berkeley near Wollongong, the Heavenly Queen Temple on the banks of Melbourne's Maribyrnong River and the Nan Hai Pu Tuo Temple in Adelaide's Sellick's Hill.

Yet beyond these landmarks, as with nineteenth-century Australia, the architectural impact of present-day Chinese settlement in Australia is difficult to gauge. The character of Chinese-Australians' residential architecture is difficult to distinguish from that of other locals. Beyond temples, parallels between nineteenth-century Chinese settlement and investment in Australia and its twenty-first century counterpart can be made in relation to a similarly significant number of people as settlers and investors and a similarly apparent absence of an architectural legacy commensurate with these numbers. Both this and Chinese acquisitions of Australian architectural practice, such as that of Peddle Thorp

and Walker (PTW), purchased in 2013 by China Construction Design International,<sup>25</sup> suggest increasing cultural as well as economic regionalisation. So perhaps it is time to move towards acknowledging the contributions of others (not only Chinese) as inherent to Australian identity; to re-evaluate their architectural production within a continent/ country/ nation where flows of immigration have been an overwhelming factor in creating its constructed environments in both colonial and post-colonial contexts, making them more integral to Australian national space.

## Conclusion

A clear position on the possible nature of architecture within both a colonial and a postcolonial context has been articulated by Paul Gilroy in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, in which he frames Europe's present demographic characteristics squarely within the arc of its colonial history.<sup>26</sup> Gilroy places Europe's indebtedness to the colonial worlds of its former making as something that needs to be made explicit in the face of present xenophobic notions of European spaces as 'culturally bleached';

The empires were not simply out there – distant terminal points for trading activity where race consciousness could grow – in the torrid zones of the world at the other end of the colonial chain. Imperial mentalities were brought back home long before the immigrants arrived and altered economic, social and cultural relations in the core of Europe's colonial systems.<sup>27</sup>

The forgetting (or denial) of such aspects of colonial history have made migration central to debates about the future of European society, and this false centrality has made issues of diversity and multiculturalism so charged in the present.<sup>28</sup> Australia is, of course, a product of this colonial history. Apart from the fact that assertions of Australian cultural purity are based on the shaky elision (not to mention the widespread slaughter and persecution) of the indigenous population as integral to its own settler origins, the critical roles of the Chinese and other marginalised communities in establishing the Australian nation are also overlooked.

While colonial Australia's close identification with Britain coloured its views of others to that identity, there were important differences between the Australian colonial situation and nineteenth-century Britain. One key aspect was that Chinese miners arrived during the formative stages of Australian 'white' settlement and were active participants in the occupation of Australian land. The remains of their buildings and settlements (from illustrations of John Aloo's restaurant to the Chinatowns of Australian cities) provide ample evidence of this, pointing to a colonial history in which Chinese settlers were an integral part. Present-day involvement in architectural production by both Chinese-Australians and overseas Chinese investors might be redolent of this past (notably in the stylised architecture of recent Chinese temples). However a majority of the contemporary buildings attributable to Chinese-Australians or Chinese investment are embodiments of a globalised present. Their architectural image making has either been largely disconnected from any specific cultural identity, or has manifested itself in the peculiar aspirations of the global middle class (the proliferation of 'French Provincial-style' mansions in Australian suburbs has been attributed to Chinese investors).<sup>29</sup> More recently, in the wake of more nuanced evocations of 'Chineseness' amongst architects in China itself (the work of Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu of Amateur Architecture Studio being a prominent example) there has been the emergence of what might be described as cross-regionalist Chinese-Australian architecture. Examples include the Australian Centre on China In The World building at the Australian National University in Canberra by Mo Atelier Szeto Architects, and the recent exhibition of work by the Guangzhou/Sydney based firm International Architecture Platform Australia (IAPA).<sup>30</sup> All these examples suggest that perceptions of foreignness in relation to investments, design or inhabitation have more to do with Australia's continued inability to shift its sense of core identity towards its contemporary demographic reality than the obvious insertions of unfamiliar building types and styles.

As noted earlier in this paper, a movie is currently in the co-production between Chinese and Australian backers that aims to redress part of this issue, while creating controversy by its advance publicity for its 'revisionist' elaboration of the Chinese bushranger Sam Poo's life, eliding some of his alleged crimes (because that's never happened to accounts of Western bushrangers).<sup>31</sup> While the makers of the movie admitted they are rather loose with the facts of this character's life, the making of the film and its controversy indicate a number of conflicting attitudes. Firstly, the interest of contemporary Chinese-Australians to make a claim to the Australian mythos around bushranging indicates a desire to stake a claim at the heart of the nation's identity, to highlight the integral part that Chinese settlers had in its early development, not just in terms of numbers, but also in terms of Australian identity. If the Chinese were gold-

prospectors, bush-clearers, pioneering farmers *and* bushrangers, how could they not be as Australian as the British settlers of the time?

Consequently, if Chinese settlement in nineteenth century Australia can be accepted as integral to Australian identity – and its buildings and settlements fully incorporated into Australian history – perhaps Chinese contributions to the twenty-first century Australian built environment should similarly be accepted as local.

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