

The Dragon city

Visit the city of Bendigo and explore the rich cultural legacy of the Chinese migrants from the gold-rush era.

Bendigo has a vibrant Chinese community dating back to the 1850s when migrants from Canton Province were lured by the prospect of gold. The news of the goldfields spread to Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, where Bendigo became known as 'Dai Gum San', meaning Big Gold Mountain.

Russell Jack tells me he is 'an ABC', an Australian-born Chinese; his mother and grandmother were born in Bendigo and his father migrated from Toi Shan in southern China in 1899. One of nine children, Russell was 'number four son' and remembers his father telling him: "Young man, when you grow up, I want you to look after the local Chinese here in Bendigo."

Now a member of Bendigo's Chinese Association and director of Bendigo's award-winning Golden Dragon Museum, Russell is custodian of a world-class collection that includes eight processional dragons (two Imperial), embroidered costumes, intricately carved furniture, rare artefacts and a collection of Chinese coins dating back to 221BC.

The Chinese community and Chinese Association are an integral part of life in Bendigo and have a long tradition of community fundraising. In 1871 the Chinese Community was invited to take part in Bendigo's inaugural Easter Fair, now Australia's longest-running cultural festival, and to raise funds for the Bendigo Hospital and Benevolent Asylum.

"The community decided that if they were

going to raise money, they should do it on a grand scale," says Russell, "so they imposed a levy on every Chinese person in the area and raised £750 to import costumes woven with silk; gold bullion, and other processional regalia. "The items were transported in 100 camphor wood boxes and form the basis of today's priceless collection.

The museum's five-clawed Imperial dragons are a story in themselves – most dragons were destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution – and have been instrumental in weaving together Chinese and Australian cultural traditions. Loong, the world's oldest surviving Imperial dragon, made his debut at Bendigo's Easter Fair in 1892. A handsome creature fashioned from papier-mâché, bamboo, silk, rabbit fur, mirrors and kingfisher feathers, Loong is 45 metres long. His other claim to fame is that he took part in Melbourne's Federation Parade in 1901 and marched again in 2001 to celebrate the Australian Centenary of Federation.

In 1970, Loong was becoming tired and worn and so was replaced by Sun Loong (new dragon), who was built by a dragon maker in Hong Kong. Measuring 103 metres long, Sun Loong is the world's longest Imperial dragon; 90,000 mirrors, 40,000 beads and 6,000 scales cover his magnificent body. It takes 57 people to carry him and the honour of bearing his head falls to Russell. "The head alone weighs 29 kilograms. When it was first made, the roof of the dragon maker's house had to be removed to get it out," he laughs.

Outside the museum's temple with its hand-carved marble statue of Kuan Yin, the Goddess



DID YOU KNOW?

Bendigo is known as the number one Dragon City outside China. In ancient days, the dragon was considered the most sacred animal and was the emblem of the Emperor. As a divine mythical creature, the dragon can ward off evil spirits and is considered the ultimate good luck symbol.

In 1858 there were 33,600 Chinese diggers in Victoria, almost 4,000 of them in Bendigo.



Previous page: Chinese gardens in Bendigo. Clockwise from top: Chinese gardens; Chinese Joss House; Sun Loong; Bendigo Town Hall. All images courtesy of Tourism Victoria.

pavilion (a popular choice for weddings) and a raised mountain area.

In 1858 there were 33,600 Chinese diggers in Victoria, almost 4,000 of them in Bendigo. Dennis O'Hoy, a former academic at La Trobe University and founding Director of the Bendigo Trust, is one of the few remaining direct descendents of the first settlers. He masterminded the restoration of Bendigo's only surviving Chinese building, the Joss House at Emu Point. "My grandfather arrived in Bendigo in 1860 and opened the first store just behind the Joss House," says Dennis.

The best way to reach the Joss House Temple (the word 'joss' comes from the Portuguese word 'dios' meaning 'god') is by taking the delightful Vintage Tram from the Central Deborah Gold Mine or from the city's Alexandra Fountain.

Emu Point was the site of one of the largest Chinese settlements and there were several Joss Houses here, but only two were made of brick and only one has survived. With an Entrance Chamber guarded by lions and a lucky jade plant, the layout of the temple's three rooms reflects feng shui beliefs that evil spirits never travel in straight lines. A 'spirit step' leads into the main temple dedicated to Kwan Gung, a general in the army from 221-266AD. Deified as a God of War, he was a wise judge, protector and provider

of wealth and prosperity; just what the new settlers needed.

In 2005, a Chinese brick kiln was discovered close to the Joss House on the site of a former market garden. Once the alluvial soils around Bendigo Creek had been dug over for gold, many Chinese established market gardens and cooked up delicious meals in their camps. Their culinary legacy lives on today in Bendigo's many excellent Chinese restaurants. Toi Shan, set up in 1892, was the first café to provide Chinese food with table service. Now situated in Mitchell Street, the business has changed hands only three times and is incredibly popular with the locals. **EN**

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259 High Street, Bendigo, VIC 3550

of Mercy, is a pomelo tree also known as the tree of life. A week before the Easter Fair, Sun Loong is blessed and a leaf from the tree placed in his mouth to give him strength. Unlike most Chinese communities, Easter rather than Chinese New Year is the big event in Bendigo and everyone wants to be part of it. "The Australians want to be Chinese and we all get together; it's the greatest example of assimilation I know," says Russell.

The museum's Yi Yuan (Garden of Joy) was a joint project with the city of Baoding in China and is based on the Imperial Palace in Beijing. At the entrance is a reflection wall and a tiled dragon mural painted by students from Melbourne's La Trobe University. The gardens are an oasis of peace with a fish pond; hand-carved marble balustrades embellished with lotus flowers denoting past, present and future; a painted



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