

Guan Di and Tin Mountain: Chinese temples in Northeast Tasmania

The Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (QVMAG) in Launceston, Tasmania, houses a surprising collection. In a specially built room in the Art Gallery building is a Temple containing items from six Chinese temples from Tasmania's northeast region.

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Guan Di Temple – ongoing exhibition
Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery
Launceston, Tasmania
<http://www.qvmag.tas.gov.au/>

DURING THE 19TH CENTURY, increasing unrest within China with the destabilisation of the Qing led to waves of overseas migration, with the American and Australian Gold Rushes providing a great impetus. Chinese people were rare in Tasmania¹ until the Australian Gold Rush started to attract Chinese miners to the goldfields on the mainland. This led to a small number of Chinese miners arriving in Tasmania in the 1860s to search for gold. However, it was tin rather than gold that eventually led to a genuine influx of miners, both European and Chinese. America had its 'Gold Mountain', mainland Australia its 'New Gold Mountain', and similarly, Tasmania became popular for its 'Tin Mountain'. By 1891 the Chinese population in Tasmania – mostly young men – was almost 1000, which although appearing small by modern standards, represented a significant proportion of the entire population of Tasmania's North East, as this region was difficult country with limited road and track access, and was extremely sparsely populated.

In Tasmania, unusually, the Chinese were largely accepted by Europeans. The levels of antagonism experienced by Chinese miners on the Australian mainland were far less in evidence in Tasmania, although there was some conflict. Some leaders, such as Maa Mon Chinn (马振 / 馬振 / Ma Zhen) of Weldborough and Chin Kaw (陈高 / 陳高 / Chen Gao) of Launceston, became highly respected members of the community. For the most part this lack of antipathy in Tasmania was less a sign of tolerance and more likely a reflection of the fact that the tin fields of the North East were extremely marginal mining areas, and many of the claims worked by the Chinese were not considered a good economic proposition by European prospectors. It was the Chinese system of community organisation and support that enabled them to make profits from these claims, where European miners working entirely independently would have found this difficult.

Virtually all of the miners who came to Tasmania were recruited from Guangdong Province (广东 / 廣東) in south-eastern China. They travelled on a 'credit-ticket' system run by a Chinese creditor who already lived in Australia. Their similarity of geographical origin gave them a greater sense of group identity, and meant that communication in one's local dialect was still possible. The few women who migrated came as wives of the more influential and educated community leaders. The lack of Chinese women in the community led to many miners marrying or co-habiting with European women, and this probably led to many Chinese immigrants remaining in the colony even after the decline of small-scale alluvial

mining. The Chinese population gradually reduced as this type of mining was displaced by larger-scale industrial operations; in addition, in 1887 the government introduced immigration restrictions. By 1921, 234 Chinese people remained in Tasmania. Most had left mining to run small businesses such as market gardens, laundries or general stores. Descendants of these pioneers can still be found in Tasmania and other States.

On arrival Chinese groups would set up portable shrines. These would serve as centres for religious observance, but once made more permanent, would become the base for community activities and administration. Europeans called these temples 'Joss Houses'. There were six known temples in Tasmania's northeast; they were at Weldborough, Garibaldi, Branxholm, Moorina, Gladstone, and Lefroy. All were in tin-mining areas, although Lefroy began as a gold-mining settlement. The temples were small wooden buildings, whose humble external appearances belied the wealth accumulated within.

All known Tasmanian temples were built during the 1880s, and all were dedicated to Guan Di. Guan Di worship appears to have been almost universal amongst Australian overseas Chinese. The majority of immigrants were poor, illiterate manual labourers, and Guan Di worship was extremely popular in southern China amongst labourers. Guan Di as a deity also offered a number of other advantages to immigrant Chinese. As well as being a highly regarded 'Emperor' figure within the Taoist/Buddhist pantheon, with the ability to cast out demons, Guan Di has the key attribute of fostering brotherhood. This had great appeal in communities separated from their homes by both distance and cultural practices.

The 'Joss House', or Guan Di Temple (关帝庙 / 關帝廟 Guan Di Miao) at QVMAG holds the contents of a number of temples from north-eastern Tasmanian mining towns. As the Chinese



Above left:
A figure from one of two sets of Chinese Opera figurines in the temple collection.
Photo: John Leeming

Above right: The front and main altars of the temple, with the large main shrine.
Photo: John Leeming

Below: Chinese and Europeans on 'Tin Pot Row', Garibaldi, Tasmania, 1914. Garibaldi was one of the major Chinese mining towns, and had its own temple. Photo: QVMAG Collection QVM:1983:P:1619

population gradually declined and many smaller towns were abandoned, the temples closed and key items from each were brought together, eventually ending up in Weldborough. When the Weldborough temple closed in 1934, the custodian transferred custody to the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, as a working temple for the Launceston Chinese community.

The temple collection is a fascinating snapshot into the importance of religion as a social glue for the Chinese of Tin Mountain. Despite the buildings being simple weatherboard constructions, their contents reflect considerable expenditures. The inscriptions on many of the items in this temple tell us that they were donated by individuals, surname lodges, lodges of the Hong Men (洪门 / 洪門) or district associations. Chinese on the Tasmanian tin fields would use membership of groups such as 'surname lodges' for support in hard conditions, and to provide some measure of social cohesion and sense of belonging in a strange and difficult new place. Some were part of brotherhoods or secret societies such as the Hong Men, which began in the mid-1600s in China as a revolutionary group. In Southeast Asia, they developed into the 'Triad' criminal organisation. In Australia Hong Men became more of a benevolent association, eventually forming Chinese Masonic lodges.

The items in the current temple collection mostly date from the 1880s. Items were given to these temples by those who had 'received benefits and favour' from the gods, and wished to reciprocate through the bestowing of high-value material. Items range from carved and painted plaques to incense pots and candles, textile banners, large decorative floats of golden palaces, small shrines and ceremonial weapons. The collection also includes two significant sets of Chinese opera figurines, which probably relate to the visit of a Chinese Opera company to the north of Tasmania in 1891. Some items also show evidence of local manufacture, such as a gong frame made from a bicycle rim, and a western rocking horse used to represent Guan Di's mount, Red Hare.

QVMAG's temple collection is a rare survivor of a fascinating period in Tasmania's history, and an insight into Chinese religious practices in Australia in the 1880s.

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References

- 1 Nine Chinese carpenters were brought to the colony as skilled labourers in 1830. They were probably the first Chinese people in Northern Tasmania. However, few other Chinese immigrants appear before the 1860s, and these early immigrants are not representative of the later influx of Chinese miners.