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Bendigo's Loss – Chinese Secret Society's gain? This is an edited version of Carol Holsworth's talk to the November Meeting of the Bendigo Historical Society.

Should the only building ever built by the Chinese fronting Bridge St Chinatown have been conserved for its historical connections with the Chinese on the Bendigo goldfields? More importantly did the Chinese community want a secret society part of their history remembered?

The Gee Hing/Yee Hing societies, off shoots of the Hung Men secret society were well known to Bendigo Advertiser's readers. By the 1900's there had been numerous articles about their involvement in gambling and opium, their secret activities resulting in court cases, and assaulted victims admitted to the Bendigo Hospital. Some members in protecting the triad were sent to gaol for perjury, at least one man committed suicide the day before having to appear as a witness in a court case, and others disappeared from Bendigo. Few spoke or wrote about the interesting historical connections Chinese Secret Societies had across Australia and with nations around the Pacific rim.

Arson attacks on Chinese camps and shops in Victoria seemed to occur frequently in the 1880's. On the 23rd of September 1887 the Ironbark Camp near White Hills received similar vandalism with over 60 small buildings lost. There was much debate in Council about helping the Chinese rebuild, to provide housing elsewhere, or allowing the homeless Chinese to scatter themselves around town which was even worse as far as the locals were concerned. In the end the Chinese decided on some rebuilding at the Ironbark Camp but the important businesses moved into Lower Bridge Street into existing buildings built by Europeans in the 1850's with only one new one built.

Only one wooden building was ever allowed to be built on a triangular piece of vacant crown land between Bridge St and Cemetery Lane on the realigned east embankment of the Bendigo creek. Note that it was not built of bricks. This might have been because Council wouldn't allow such a permanent structure on crown land, or because the Chinese wanted the building to blend in with the 1850's buildings on the West side of Bridge St. More likely the Hung Men triad knew their future now lay in Melbourne. The big advantages of this new building in central Bendigo was to access the gas for the opium alcoves, and for fancy lighting in the rear large room designed for gambling, as well as access to piped water.

The building occupied almost the total depth of the lot to the creek edge. It appeared from Bridge Street to be a single storey building. It had an unusual carved half circle on the top fascia, two circular peep hole windows facing the road and a rectangular glass window to allow air and light to penetrate into the roof space. The two front doors disguised its real backroom usages. There was a close fence around the property except on the creek side. At some stage a small hut was built directly south of this building, which at some time was a butcher shop and later the caretaker's house.

On the north side there were 3 small windows and only one on the south side, all above visual height. It seemed as if the owners didn't want anyone to look inside. There was only one brick chimney which served a fireplace in the one rear room. In the early 1950's Leon Waddington can remember visiting the building as a preschooler when it housed quite a few elderly Chinese men. He came often with his father to deliver groceries and he can remember the men all sitting around a long table smoking in the large back room. Some had water pipes and others the traditional long tobacco pipes. In the far back corner were inner stairs which he used to enjoy running up to the second floor where through the thick smoke he could look down on the men below.

From the back view it was obviously two stories high with two separate entrances, one into the ground floor. Stairs outside lead up to a second door opening directly into the upper dormitory. Chinese members who gathered

for New Year festivals, Easter Fair processions, gangs of men enroute to land clearing along the Riverina and attendees of funerals could sleep here. Unemployed and sick members were entitled to lodging for short periods. The important point was there were two rear entrances and that the police and the Chinese understood that *'the back of a building might be the front of another'*. Court records show quite clearly that gambling was taking place in rear rooms on both sides of Bridge St. The Yee Hing's supreme leader Lee Yan Sam had lived in Bendigo for considerable years. By 1911 he had built the Victorian membership up to 3000, out of a total male Chinese population of 5,600. So more than one half of all businesses, major Chinese finances and most workers were under the control of this secret society.

In 1912 Sydney became the Headquarters of the Commonwealth Yee Hing Society. Bendigo and Melbourne Grand Masters went to the opening ceremony where the new English title **"Chinese Masonic Society"** was proposed, to assume the goodwill associated with European Freemasons. Over the following years the Chinese name was changed frequently due to political changes in China but the English Masonic name was retained. On the 14th Sept 1913 a well publicized reunion of old Bendigo Yee Hing members was held at the Ironbark Joss house, their spiritual center. The Bendigo Advertiser still referred to them as the Yee Hings and *'Those present were in a festive mood and the proceedings were enlivened by a liberal display of fireworks.'* By the late 1910's there were still close to about 300 Chinese residents in Bendigo but not all were comfortable or willing to be associated with the Hung Men Bridge St rooms even though the society's name had been further modernised in Chinese to Chee Kung Tong which translated as 'Exert Public Benefit Lodge'. Some felt the need for a separate hall possible for the younger generation who had never been members of the Hung men, were moderate gamblers and did not smoke opium. In February 1915 the Bendigo Chinese Association officially opened their renovated meeting room in a two storey brick building, the former Holdsworth pharmacy, opposite the Chinese Masonic headquarters on Bridge Street. The new sign above their doors was **'Chung Wah Gong Hui'** which translates as 'Meeting Place for Chinese' Most modern young Bendigo Chinese were now pleased to meet as members of the Bendigo Chinese Association in these rooms. There are stained glass windows showing the Manchu flags in a very European style with the Fleur de Lys but the older generation stuck to their wooden Masonic building keeping to their triad signs and secret affairs across the road in Bridge Street.

In 1916 the Commonwealth Chee Kung Tong announced that their Australian activities would now be open to the public and suddenly the existence of many past hidden Hung Men branches around Australia became known and for the first time the names of their office bearers were reported in Chinese newspapers circulating within Australia. In 1919 the World Chinese Masonic Society in San Francisco decreed all groups around the Pacific rim had to change their Chinese name to **'Chee Kung Tong'** a benefit Masonic lodge. This decree possibly shows many were reluctant to trade their Hung Men associations.

In the 1970 photo the two outside front doors appear dark as they were painted red. Above the left door is the name board with the 3 characters Chee Kung Tong. The very faded English words on the small panel below the board identified the building in English as the home of the Bendigo Chinese Masonic Society. Willie Toy's small Herbalist sign was on the right. He was a strong Masonic member of both the Bendigo and Echuca communities. He died in the Bendigo Hospital in December 1962. 8 years later no one had bothered to remove his small white sign.

By 1961 The Bendigo and Echuca Chinese Masonic communities had collapsed. They erected at considerable cost two identical memorials to their members buried in the Echuca and White Hills cemeteries. English wording was

used and the Freemasonary traditional symbol; they had no right to use these. The Hung Men, not the Chee Kung Tong are noted in the Chinese characters. Clearly the Bendigo Chinese did not wish to spend their money on the preservation of their then derelict Joss house or fading Masonic building to which many memories, facts, myths and fables were associated with. The main changes to Chinatown -Bridge Street occurred in the early 1960's when Council wished to acquire the 9 Chinese buildings Nos 262 to 278 on the west side of Bridge St for a Council car park next to a new Mobil Petrol Station. Other than the O'Hoy family and the Chinese Association buildings, most of the others were uninhabited. Long detailed negotiations took place, over non payment of rates, identification of land titles, valuations, compulsory acquisitions, with letters to and from council and lawyers. Finally the Town clerk wrote in 1963 that the *'demolition of the Bridge Street properties would certainly break a link with past memories of the Chinese community, the Council had decided that some suitable memorial would be erected to remind future generations of the past played by the Chinese.'*

But there was no suggestion to do something with the Chinese Masonic building. The Bendigo Chinese had not resented the loss of the old shops on Bridge Street and they certainly didn't want to be remembered by this one remaining wooden Hung Men building. Following the removal of the small Chinatown buildings the Bendigo Chinese and Caucasian community showed little interest in preserving what remained of Bendigo's **old** Chinese culture. No one was prepared to document the Hung Men. Most Chinese residents knew about the secret societies and did not want this part recovered or recognised.

The council for the next 6 years sought ideas on removing or improving this sole remaining eyesore. The Melbourne Chinese Masonic claimed no interest in 1966. No one seems to have suggested that this Masonic building should have been moved to the Joss House site so that both spiritual and social buildings of the Hung Men could be kept together. While John Ball was in Hong Kong in the late 1960's he was commissioned by the Loong 100 committee to find a man to build a new dragon for Bendigo. The old Masonic building in Bridge St had one final purpose as it was used to house for the last time the many extra Chinese volunteers needed in the **1970 Easter** procession to carry both the new and old dragons. James Lerk can remember seeing and smelling the bedding left on the old upper floor. So it wasn't until the **30th of April,** straight after that procession the patient Council after years of concern took possession of the Masonic building.

On the 24th of August 1971 the **Council** voted to dismantle the building. The Tender was advertised a couple of months later but no action actually took place. Possibly all the tenders were too expensive. In January 1972 Mick Morley of Eaglehawk wrote a letter to the Editor titled **"Future of Chinese Hall'.** He had formerly worked at the Central Deborah mine and now rejoiced to see what a wonderful tourist attraction it had become and wished to see something similar for the Old Masonic Hall. Actually Morley knew more about the interior of the Chinese building as he had over the years got to know the caretaker well and the contents of the building. He had been for a while a buyer of used goods and travelled around Bendigo in a large cart drawn by a Clydesdale horse and sold antiques to his clients in Melbourne. I understand amongst other things Tom Morley bought some of the rosewood chairs from the Chinese back room for $2 each. Frank Cusack also bought one.

In **May 1968** the National Trust started a large work program to restore the joss house at the old Ironbark camp site. John Ball a Bendigo journalist and Sinophile went to Hong Kong to purchase on behalf of the National Trust a list of furnishing for Joss House which was to include *'Hand carved nameplate for central entrance to cover reference to Masonic temple'.* In February 1972 further Chinese concerns arose when the National Trust wanted to erect outside Signage, information sheets and a plague at the Joss house to read **'Chee Kong Tong -Chinese Masonic Temple**. Letters show that the Chinese Association wanted no mention in English of the words Hung Men. or Chee Kung Tong. You will be interested to learn that when Rupert Hamer, the Premier of Victoria in

April 1972 arrived to officially open the Joss house the plague had been changed to read **Bendigo Joss House'** which again shows the necessity that was felt by some to cover up past connections. There were two long wooded scrolls on each side of the main door and the characters on the top of each. On the main door of the Joss house today, the original 3 Character Name above the door is back. The two scrolls have changed places as it has been pointed out that the characters for Yee and Hing are cleverly the first top characters on each panel, and Chinese read from right to left characters. John Ball always had a much better understanding of the significance of the joss house building. A secret society knew how to hide itself in different arrangement of characters to disguise its message and show its powers

Today many older Chinese shudder on hearing about the Hung Men who called their meeting rooms Hung Mun Tong – or Hung Obedience Hall. Members had to strictly obey orders. These rules written on cloth were found discarded in the Bendigo Creek possibly from the abandoned Masonic building and later donated to the Golden Dragon Museum where they are on display today. Their 21 rules included punishments of 26 to over 100 beatings with no mercy for offenders, which also included anyone planning to murder a member. Rules protected organised crime and murdering non members.

Traditional straw sandals were worn by the new initiates at their swearing in ceremony. These sandals plus an iron prick used in the blood oath and handbook were brought to Bendigo in the 1970's by John Ball who obtained them from the British Hong Kong Police detective department. He donated them to the Bendigo Chinese Association to give a better understanding of the importance of the 2 Hung Men Bendigo buildings. Some members knowing the background of the Hung Men were horrified and refused to have anything to do with the objects. It is therefore not surprising that today the sandals can be found on display at the Joss House being ignored by the Golden Dragon Museum while the accompanied well worn Hung Men rule book has become a Bendigo historical artifact. 26 By late 1972 the Bendigo Trust's new Tourist promotion was already on the drawing boards, a Chinese village. With all these past historical connections the old Masonic building could not compete with a bright new feature. The Bendigo Advertiser promoted a $100 prize for the best Tourist promotion plan. David Horsfall won equal first prize with his plan that Bendigo should first preserve their many Historical buildings. Then at a later stage the restoration of the Chinese Masonic Building might be undertaken to house a temporary Chinese Museum.

Horsfall felt at it would complicate matters if Bendigo brought in a proposal for retaining a heritage Chinese Masonic building which would have to compete for the same grant money against the Bendigo Trust's new tourist project. He asked 'Could Bendigo sustain three Chinese tourist sites?

By April 1973 a sub-committee of almost 1/3rd Chinese association members the Bendigo Trust pushed for their new Chinese Tourist village called Dai Gum San. By June 1974 a 32 page booklet about Dai Gum San Bendigo's Big Gold mountain was published. A Statement used over and over in this booklet was *'Dai Gum San village will have the **best** aspects of Chinese beliefs, customs, culture and authentic history.'* The booklet mostly focused on the commercial aspect of the village with the suggestion of the *'added bonus of our local culture.'* A page was also headed **'What's in it for Bendigonians?'** *"Whichever way you look at it, the Big Gold Mountain Village will be as important to Bendigonians as the discovery of that yellow metal was in the 1850's. For us, the gold rush is on again.'* With the Tourist Chinese village being the major focus the Town Clerk Mr Watts in December 1974 reported that it was useless to board up the historical old Chinese Masonic Bridge St building. Unless some responsible organisation was prepared to accept **full responsibility** for its care and management he could see no alternative but to recommend the building be demolished which in fact did not occur till another year later on 25th November 1975 as the Dai Gum San ran into several problems Headlined on the front page of the Addie **'Down it goes'.** The Hung Men and Chinese had played their hand well. They had not been made to remove the building and the ratepayers paid the total costs. **D**emolition was not as easy as the City Engineer had anticipated as George

Tong's building was found very sound although termites had got into the north wall. He had extensively nailed the outside weather boards and some of the inner heavier timbers had even been bolted together. The doors were saved by the Bendigo Trust and stored at the Deborah Gold Mine. It was a case of **'Out with the Old – In with the New'.** The Advertiser was jubilant with the removal of this Chinese eyesore as the very next day the Editorial was intriguingly titled **'Something to See'**. Surely it should have been **'Nothing to see'** or **'Something new to anticipate'.** They recommended that everyone should now be concentrating on the wonderful idea to place Bendigo on the world's tourist map with the Chinese theme park.

Most Chinese had their eyes on the commercial and immigration opportunities that would revive their business contact with their old clans and friends in Asia. **'Dai Gum San'** tourist park never got off the ground and money raised to promote the venture seemed to slip away as did the memories of the Hung Men.

For some 21 years the land where the Chinese Masonic Building had stood was left vacant. In 1996 the Garden plan from the Dai Gum San theme village was recreated by the Golden Dragon Museum on the old Masonic site. This small walled garden promotes China's culture and is a tourist promotion for China and does not represent any gardens or buildings that were ever part of Bendigo's history, let alone Victoria's. None of the Chinese houses or camps in Bendigo or Victoria was surrounded by walls let alone grey bricks. Instead of a historical building with fascinating stories about a strong secret Chinese society we are faced with a grey Chinese brick wall along Bridge street. **All this whitewashing has been to the Hung Men's benefit.** Bendigo's history is now being rewritten as if the Hung Men was purely a benefit society like the Chinese gardens.

The Bendigo Joss house, the religious home of the Hung Men has recently been revived, and repainted under the Bendigo Trust. This unique building with its Chee Kung Tong name board proudly displayed is on its original site that was allocated to it 150 years ago. The Joss house should be documented properly and heritage listed. It was a part of the significant Chinese Camp at Emu Point, the home of the Hung Men, Yee Hing and Gee Hing secret groups. It does have a connection to the Burke and Wills Expedition too. All those important Bendigonians rushing out to Barnadown to see the Burke and Wills expedition had to pass the Ironbark Chinese camp on their way north on St Kilians road. As they trotted past the White Hills Cemetery they would have been unaware that the funeral of a Hung Men member had recently taken place as the Chinese section way down by the sludge filled Bendigo Creek could not be seen from the cemetery gates. On returning from their heroes later that evening the Chinese camp seemed quite dim and quiet as if they were all asleep. Little did they realize the late night secret meetings were held in the Joss house where no windows existed. The local Hung Men group organised their colonial members activities and investments. These were co-ordinated with their fellow members around the whole Pacific rim for their future plans for the greatness of China.

Although we have lost the Bendigo Chinese Masonic building we need to preserve its history. Now we have to really focus on preserving the Joss House. That is all we have left to remember the Ironbark camp and the Hung men society. Special thanks must be given to past members of the Bendigo Historical Society and the Bendigo Branch of the National Trust for saving this Joss house in the 1960's and 70's and the dedicated members of the public who have over the past 50 years volunteered their time and energy to preserve the only remaining Hung Men building in country Victoria.

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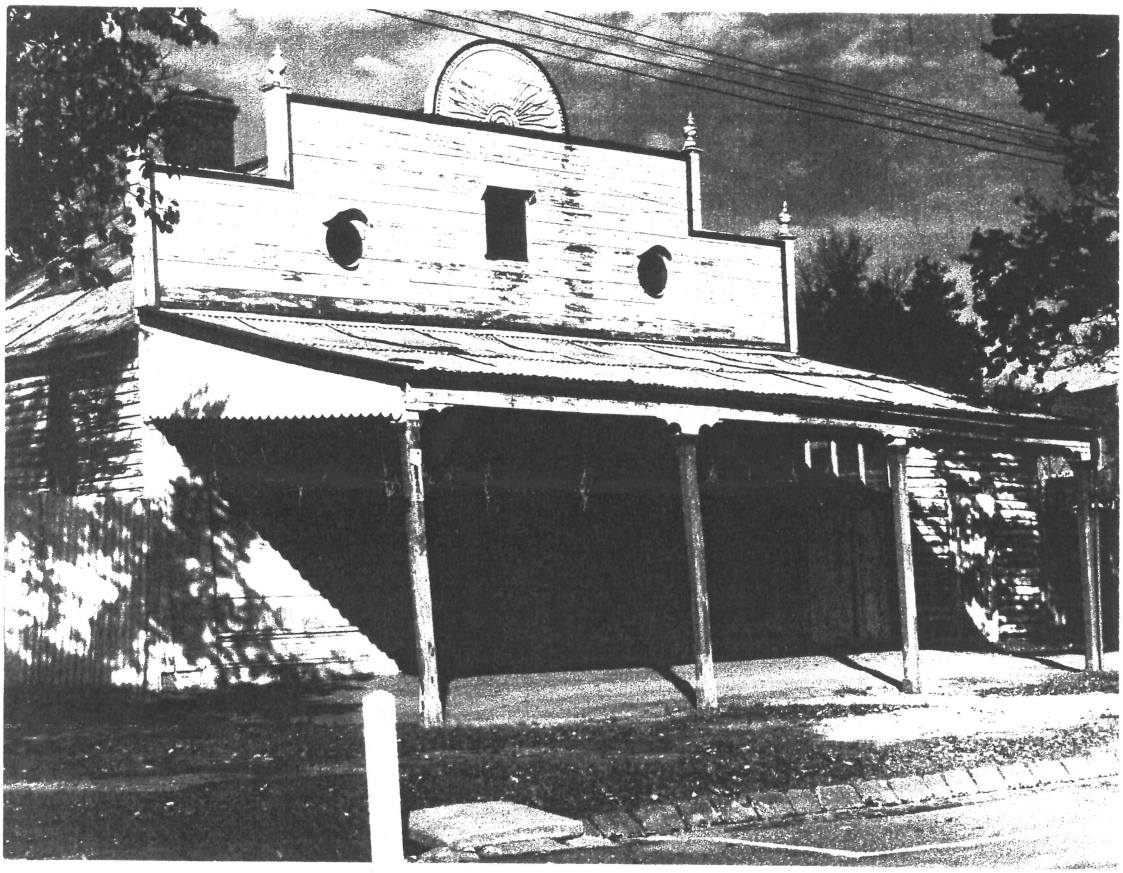
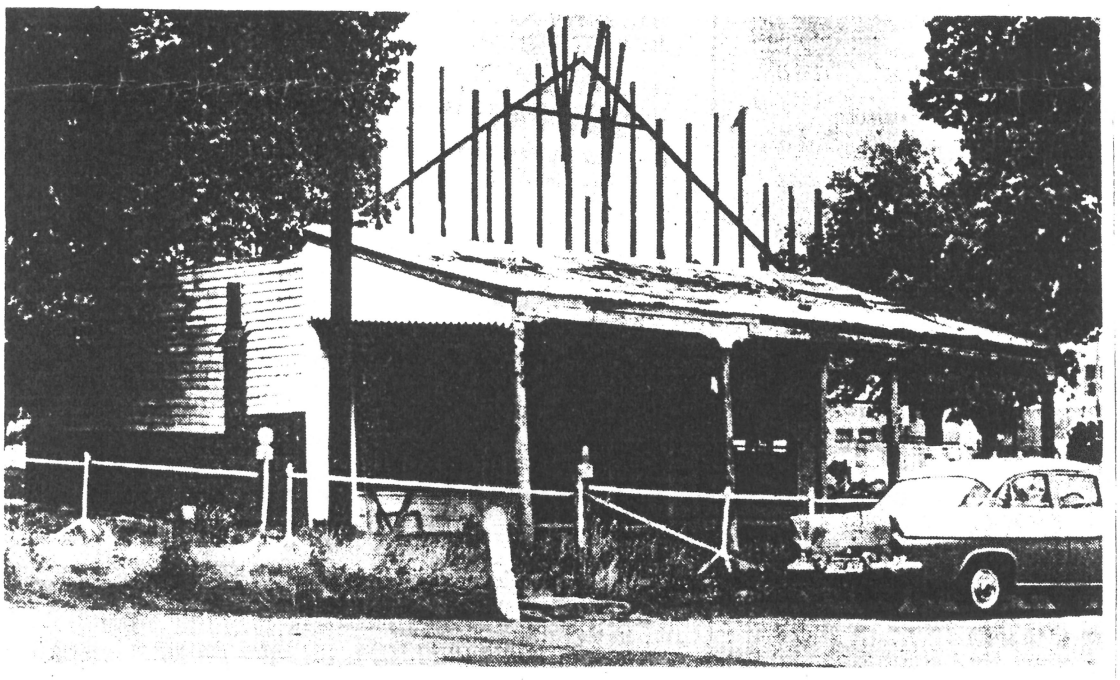


Image courtesy of Dennis O'Hoy "Chinese Masonic Temple Bridge Street"



Demolition of Chinese Masonic Temple in 1975.