

A RENEWED CULTURAL POLICY
COMMUNITY CONSULTATION SUBMISSION FROM
NATIONAL CHINESE MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA LTD
(T/A GOLDEN DRAGON MUSEUM)

a) INTRODUCTION:

The Board of the National Chinese Museum of Australia Ltd welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Government's community consultations as it develops a renewed cultural policy. The Board congratulates and applauds the new Government both for this initiative and the speed with which it has been implemented in the Government's first term of office.

A well informed, carefully considered and researched and then fulsomely funded policy will support Australia's present arts and culture sector and encourage its sustainable growth and development. A policy should provide both clarity and transparency around Government priorities and in turn funding decisions.

This submission focuses on four of the five identified pillars: *A place for every story: reflecting the diversity of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture; The centrality of the artist: supporting the artist as worker and celebrating their role as the creators of culture; Strong institutions: providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts and culture; and, Reaching the audience: ensuring our stories reach the right people at home and abroad.*

b) CONTEXT:

The Golden Dragon Museum opened in 1991 but its history goes back more than 100 years earlier, to the Victoria Gold Rush of the 1850s and the arrival of the Chinese. The Chinese joined others, mainly young men, from the continent's burgeoning settlements and around the globe. Huge amounts of gold were discovered in Bendigo and across the Victorian gold fields and at one stage some 30% of the Sandhurst population (as Bendigo was then known as) was Chinese. The treatment of the Chinese by the other miners and broader community was generally poor at best. 'The other' as an object of fear sadly is a long-standing human trait.

Officialdom treated the Chinese just as badly with targeted taxes and laws being made to make their life on the gold fields even harder than it already was. Sadly, even when the gold ran out and many of the Chinese miners left, for those who remained their treatment did not markedly improve. There is a direct line from the gold fields and the treatment of especially the Chinese by the newly federated states that formed Australia in 1901 and the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 and subsequent related Acts (the White Australia policy) through to their dismantling between 1949 and 1973.

However, the story of the Bendigo Chinese is a far more positive one than this beginning might suggest. In the 1870s the community in Sandhurst decided to raise money to build the town's first hospital. Significant community support was needed to help raise the funds and so the Chinese were asked if they would join the community's fundraising efforts. Interestingly they agreed to and so started the tradition of the Chinese and their dragons being a central feature of the Bendigo Easter Festival.

As a result, the Museum has a Collection of over 30,000 objects which is centered around three magnificent dragons, Loong – dating from 1901, the world's oldest extant Imperial Processional dragon and listed on Victoria's Heritage Register; Sun Loong – the world's second longest Imperial Processional Dragon; and Dai Gum Loong – the world's longest Imperial Processional dragon. The Collection also holds outstanding pieces of jade, textiles, woodwork, and metal work predominately from the St Alban Collection, as well as an internationally significant collection of Chinese currency dating from 221BCE and other pieces, documents and photographs with outstanding artistic and cultural significance all relating to the Chinese diaspora.

In a Significance Assessment of the Collection, undertaken by Dr Sophie Couchman in 2021 she wrote: *Similarly, there are individual items within the Chinese Australian social history collection that are significant in their own right, but the real strength of the collection is the deep insight it provides into the Bendigo Chinese community as a whole. No other single collection in Australia is able to provide the depth of insight into a Chinese community as large as Bendigo's, in the detail it does, over such an extended time period.*

A major redevelopment of the Museum which will see its facilities expanded and upgraded to best conserve, research, exhibit and store its priceless Collection is planned to be undertaken in the short term. The current buildings are very aged and no longer fit for purpose nor do they meet the expectations of contemporary visitors. A major redevelopment is needed to address several core issues of these failing buildings that are increasingly putting the Collection at risk of damage and loss. Once housed in an architecturally striking building with a new gallery to show temporary and touring exhibitions, better back of house facilities and greatly improved visitor facilities, the Museum will take the opportunity to transition and become the National Chinese Museum of Australia. The redevelopment will secure the Museum's place as one of regional Australia's preeminent cultural institutions, based in a city which already has a reputation for outstanding tourist attractions and record-breaking national and international exhibitions.

c) A RENEWED CULTURAL POLICY

A clear definition:

Discussions about 'What is art' are both timeless and probably pointless. However, a clear definition of what a renewed cultural policy should encompass – and perhaps even more importantly what it does not - is essential. No policy can be all things to all people. Brian Eno probably summed it up best when he said in the 2015 John Peel Lecture 'Art is everything you don't have to do.' The Board believes that it can be generally agreed that art is a part of or sub-set of culture and therefore this policy should be, as its heading suggests, one that addresses and engages with culture and not only art. However, should it embrace all the 'creative industries' and if so, what are they? In trying to define them, many definitions immediately expand their scope by referring to 'cultural and creative industries' or 'arts and creative industry.'

Whatever definition is adopted, the Board's view is that it needs to embrace arts and culture but not be so broad as to seek to cover all fields of human creative endeavor. But recognise the importance of future investigations into cross-ministerial policy that could capture the commercial creative enterprises effectively and opportunities for crossover with the cultural sector. Even so, the definition needs to be inclusive in view rather than exclusive in practice.

Collecting institutions:

Collecting institutions, museums, galleries, libraries, archives, and such like, have had an inconsistent and not entirely happy or productive relationship as regards funding with the various spheres of Government in Australia over the years. The national collecting institutions, their state counter parts and the small number of independent, not-for-profit collecting institutions have not always had clearly defined and consistent funding pathways. The exception to this broadly is art galleries and libraries that have fared better than others but attention needs to be paid to both equity and transparency across the sector when it comes to funding pathways, programs and other matters relating to their sustainability and viability.

Across the broader collecting institutions sector, including our national institutions as the tent pole but also out from that central group, there is an urgent need to address the depreciation of cultural assets and replenish and upgrade our cultural collecting agencies. The ecology of the sector is badly damaged and, in some areas, needs active and committed intervention to bring them back to their status of 'world class', which they proudly held previously for so many years. It is always true that it is easier to tear something down than it is to build it up, and much costlier to rebuild than it is to maintain. Collecting institutions generally, be they national or niche, with their outstanding collections that so well capture the larger Australian cultural story need to have urgent and significant upgrades funded to not merely bring them back

to what they once were, but to move them beyond and to a place where as a society we can all be proud, whether we are casual visitors, researchers, experts, curators, the deeply interested, young or old, whoever we are. Our collecting institutions must meet contemporary workplace standards and provide facilities and conditions that will ensure the safety, best storage, conservation, on-going research and world-class exhibiting and story telling that our collections so vitally require and deserve.

Excellence can happen anywhere:

Australia is a large country with a relatively small population which is largely centered around the South-East coast. Key decision makers and funders are centralised in the larger, more populous cities and there is a risk that they may imagine that only those things that happen locally to them represent excellence or are unique or special. Experience shows this is not the case.

At the same time, there can be various measures of success which can take many forms. It should not be assumed that the exhibitions or programs that attract the largest numbers of attendees are necessarily the most successful. The roles of public institutions include to challenge, engage, excite, and educate. In planning programs these should be pursued in a number of ways, to broaden audiences through an open and generous spirit. What one person sees as outstanding may be an anathema to someone else.

However, attendance figures will always be a key measure of success. There is no point being the best kept secret in town unless that suits the core purpose of the institution. For example, it is a research institution rather than one presenting public exhibitions and programs. Further, virtual visitation, through broadcasts, video presentations, webcasts, and the like, can generally never capture the magic of actually being there in person. Audiences need to be built up over time and require careful nurturing to ensure that the infrequent visitor becomes a regular one, and the unlikely ever to visit are sufficiently motivated and challenged to try something new, at least once.

There is probably no better community in Australia that attests to the many benefits of a dynamic, bold, engaging, and sustained arts and cultural sector than Greater Bendigo. The benefits – including economic, employment, tourist, community, and educational – that the success of our regional cultural institutions and tourist attractions have delivered over some two decades is clear evidence of their value and worth. Golden Dragon Museum is proud to be amongst this group of outstanding and progressive sector leaders.