

A Temple in Our Museum

LEIGH MCKINNON, GOLDEN DRAGON MUSEUM

The Guan Yin temple is part of the Golden Dragon Museum's precinct and has a unique role in Bendigo's community. Here Leigh McKinnon explains its origins and the role it has today.



The Golden Dragon Museum's Guan Yin temple is a unique and active part of the working museum, both a destination for tourists and a genuine public place of worship which people visit regularly for spiritual reasons: to pray, to leave offerings, burn incense, or in one case in 2012, to adorn the statue of Guan Yin with a traditional cape, which she still wears to this day. In keeping with this dual function, entry to the temple is free, with public access available every day of the year during museum opening hours except for Christmas Day.

Guan Yin (Cantonese: Gun Yam), the divine being to whom the temple is dedicated, is a figure revered across China's religious spectrum, being regarded as an immortal by the Daoists and a bodhisattva (a being who forsakes their own final spiritual liberation in order to continue to help others) by Buddhists. Guan Yin's name itself refers to her status as a divine being of infinite compassion, being derived from a shortened form of a Chinese phrase meaning 'one who hears the cries of the world.' Although her current temple in Bendigo was built relatively recently, she has actually had a long historical presence in this city, being one of the deities revered by Cantonese immigrants



who came to Bendigo during the 1850s goldrush. It is not surprising that she would have been the object of devotion to many of these miners, who were far from home and often in need of her celebrated compassion in the often harsh conditions that life on the goldfields presented.

In 1859, a *Bendigo Advertiser* reporter touring the Ironbark Chinese camp described a "public joss house" with a statue and altar devoted to the "goddess Koon-Yem".¹ Where such public displays of devotion existed there would have also been private altars to the bodhisattva in homes and shops, unseen by most Bendigonians.

With the decay and demolition of the Chinese villages in Bendigo in the early twentieth century Guan Yin no longer had a public place of worship in the city. In 1996 her present temple in Bendigo was built as part of the Chinese Gardens development in the historic precinct surrounding the Golden Dragon Museum, which was constructed on the site of the old Bridge Street 'Chinatown'. Built by artisans from Baoding in Hebei Province, the Guan Yin temple was designed and constructed in accordance with traditional northern Chinese building styles and techniques. The temple is a building of a kind known as a Buddha

Below left: The Guan Yin Temple shortly after its completion in 1996. Photo courtesy of the Golden Dragon Museum.

Below right: The figure of Guan Yin with offerings in the Temple. Photo courtesy of the Golden Dragon Museum.

Hall, a one room, enclosed single story structure designed for worship and contemplation.

Guan Yin is a figure revered across a number of cultures and creeds, and so use of this temple has likewise spread beyond members of the Chinese community. Her birthday is traditionally celebrated every year on the nineteenth day of the second lunar month, and at the Guan Yin temple around that date members of the Bendigo Chinese Association performance teams put on a performance in her honour, with a monk from the Atisha Centre (in the Tibetan Buddhist Mahayana tradition) often officiating. During the year she also attracts more private and reflective acts of devotion.

Karen refugees from Burma began arriving in Bendigo in 2007, and since then their small community has grown to number in the hundreds. Many of these people belong to the Theravada Buddhist tradition of South Asia, and some Karen families who live near the Golden Dragon Museum have adopted our Guan Yin temple as their own, using it as a place of worship and giving some of their own time towards its upkeep.

There are also regular visitors from Vietnamese Buddhist communities in Melbourne, as well as those who have their own personal and individual reasons for using the temple as a place of worship. One example is a woman who lost a friend in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami – although herself a Christian she goes to the Guan Yin temple every year to light a candle in memory and as a tribute to her friend.

The Guan Yin temple is a building which, while contributing to the museum's mission to present and interpret Chinese culture, at the same time has an importance and appeal which transcends boundaries of culture and religion in the wider community, much like the bodhisattva herself.

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¹ Official Inspection of the Ironbark Chinese Encampment', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 26 March 1859.

The Golden Dragon Museum and the Guan Yin Temple are in 1 - 11 Bridge Street Bendigo and open daily. <http://www.goldendragonmuseum.org/>