Melbourne Chinatown as an Iconic Enclave

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Chinatowns as iconic enclaves exist in several Australian cities. Among them, Melbourne Chinatown is the oldest, which dates back to the gold rush in the 1850s. Early Chinese migrants settled along the Little Bourke Street on the outskirts of the city, which served as a staging post on their journey to goldfields. Lodging houses were established providing cheap accommodation for sojourners. Gambling houses, opium shops, and brothels also emerged, resulting in the notorious reputation of this ethnic precinct. It was common for the general public to stigmatize this area as a fearful slum. This paper examines the transformation process of the Melbourne Chinatown from a ghetto in the past period of segregation to a well-received popular tourist destination nowadays. The distinctive characteristics and rich heritage of the urban fabric are regarded as a symbol of difference and a valuable asset to multicultural Australia.

Keywords: Melbourne Chinatown; Iconic enclave; Ethnic precinct; Urban heritage

Introduction

Among various Chinatowns in Australia, Melbourne Chinatown is the oldest. It emerged during the legacy of gold rush years of the 1850s. The discovery of gold in Victoria was officially announced by the Gold Discovery Committee on Melbourne Morning Herald on 16 July 1851 (Annear 1999, p.9). After two years, Chinese gold seekers began to arrive at Melbourne in considerable numbers. In early 1855, the number of Chinese passed 10,000 and increased to 17,000 by June of the same year (Serle 1963, p.323). The Chinese population was estimated to reach a peak of 45,000 in 1859, representing nearly 8.5% of the total population of 530,262 in Victoria (Young 1868, p.21; Serle
Little Bourke Street was a lower rental area on the outskirts of the city within walking distance from the Turning Basin of the Yarra River where Chinese immigrants disembarked, so it served as a temporary staging post for Chinese on their journey to goldfields. Once a Chinese settled in this street, others preferred to live in close proximity to one another for social bonding within the overall western environment. Compared to their European counterparts, it was difficult for Chinese immigrants to integrate into mainstream society due to language barriers and cultural differences, resulting in an ethnic enclave there. Lodging houses offering low rents and shops providing essential commodities emerged for Chinese gold seekers. According to The Age newspaper in 1863, there were “fifteen board and lodging-house proprietors” along the Little Bourke Street (The Age 10 April 1863, p.7), providing short-term accommodation for transient Chinese sojourners. A majority of them were Cantonese (coming from the so-called “Sze-Yap” or the four districts: Toishan, Sunwui, Hoiping and Yangping) in the southern province of Guangdong in China (Jupp 2001, p.197). The physical appearance, customs, and mode of living of Chinese contributed to the unique character of the precinct, resulting in a “Sze Yap Town” in Melbourne (Huck 1967, p.16). “One-half of Little Bourke Street” was even considered as “not Melbourne but China” (The Argus 9 March 1868, p.5).

Apart from being labelled as a Sze Yap Town, the Little Bourke Street area was an iconic enclave in the early days under stigmatization. As claimed by The Argus newspaper in 1868 regarding such a
Chinese quarter in Melbourne, “most of the places were used as lodging houses and as resorts for thieves.” (The Argus 9 March 1868, p.6). Crimes, such as murder and brawling, were occurring there (The Age 13 August 1857, p.5; The Argus 22 June 1858, p.6). Douglas Gane described the Little Bourke Street area as the “Chinatown” of Melbourne and “a hotbed of crime and vice of the most revolting description.” (Gane 1886, p.66). Hume Nisbet further emphasized its distinctiveness with notorious reputation by stating that it is “a world apart from the city of Melbourne” having “every little hole and corner laden with its own burden of depravity and crime.” (Nisbet 1889, pp.77, 80).

Melbourne Chinatown became a centre for sinister and illegal activities. Gambling houses, opium shops, and brothels proliferated to serve the lonely addicted Chinese. Alexander Sutherland offered a vivid description about the gambling environment at that time:

...in a room scarcely bearable for fetid breaths, a silent crowd is gathered round the gambling table, whereat sit two men clad in blue blouses and solemnly pushing and pulling heaps of coin with a sort of rake, now this way and now that, as the fortunes of the game happen to go. The crowd, four or five deep, put forward their skinny hands, from time to time, and pass their coins to be staked, but with rarely a word spoken; they watch with stolid looks while the ceremonial of the gaming takes place, then you hear a sound as of deeper breathing all round, and the cash is promptly pushed to this side and that, and is silently gathered up. It is hard for the outsider to appreciate the interest of
this melancholy business, but there they linger all through the evening hours, and far on into the night, beneath the flaring gas or the flickering oil lamp (Sutherland 1888, pp.557-558)

As the gambling houses were illegal in nature, they were guarded by sentinels. Despite security measures, they were under vigilant surveillance and raided by the police occasionally as reported in The Argus. Gambling appliances were seized and Chinese gamblers were captured for examination at the City Police Court. (The Argus 18 May 1857, pp.5 & 23 October 1865, p.6).

Another characteristic establishment in Melbourne Chinatown was the opium shop. The famous journalist, Marcus Clarke gave a detailed account of what he observed in an opium shop:

> There were some, twelve or fifteen persons in the place when we entered, and the peculiar acrid smell of the burning opium was almost unendurable for the first few moments...The scene in the house we visited was of the usual kind. Couches, or rather benches covered with straw matting, are placed in little alcoves. On each bench reclines a brown and withered figure, whose unstrung muscles, leaden eyes, and corpselike visage, proclaim him a slave to the influence of the drug... All the men we saw in the establishment were old and hardened smokers, and they were lying in full enjoyment of their brief respite from pain (The Argus 9 March 1868, pp.5-6; Hergenhan 1972, pp.119-122).

In Little Bourke Street, there were manufacturers of crude opium. Some lodging houses also provided accommodation for opium smokers. Apart from being used for alleviating pain in medical practice, opium was substantially consumed by the Chinese in Victoria (The Age 10 April 1863, p.7). Based on the Report on the Condition of the Chinese Population in Victoria in 1868, the proportion of Chinese opium smokers in some goldfields, such as Ballarat and Ararat, could reach up to 90% (Young 1868, p.29).
Some opium shops were linked to dens of infamy and immorality. Since Chinese gold seekers were almost adult males, a severe imbalance of the sexes existed (Cannon 1993, p.54). As commented by Rev. W. Young, the abnormal condition of the great mass of Chinese adult males without wives or families led to great immorality (Young 1868, p.25). Abandoned European women could be found in brothels attracting Chinese customers as described below:

...as soon as a girl gets rather faded in one house she goes to a house of lower grade and down and down...and then she goes down amongst the Chinamen, then to the hospital and then into the grave. The support of the Chinese could stave off the last two stages in this downward spiral (Davison, Dunstan & McConville 1985, p.66).

In association with gambling, opium smoking, and sexual immorality, Little Bourke Street was often portrayed as a hideous spot and a sink of iniquity in Melbourne (Gane 1886, p.66). Chinese, occupying an isolated position within Australian society, were commonly regarded as “immoral, avaricious, and devious” (Melbourne City Council 1985, p.11). Their common intention was to stay temporarily, seek their fortunes, and send their savings back to their families in China. Within one year between July 1856 and June 1857, a total of nearly 117,000 ozs of gold were exported from Melbourne to China (William 1967, p.19). As such, they were criticized by William Howitt as “a very worthless class of immigrants” (Howitt 1858, p.200). In parallel to the increase of Chinese
population, general resentment against them increased. They were negatively depicted as a “very undesirable race” (The Age 16 June 1857, p.4) and “a cloud of human locusts” (The Empire 26 February 1861, p.5).

Amid the potential threat of Chinese immigration, the Victorian government passed a restriction act in June 1855 by imposing a £10 head tax and limiting the number of Chinese passengers in any vessel to one for every ten tons of registered tonnage (Willard 1967, p.21; Cannon 1993, p.56). However, this failed to halt the influx of Chinese gold seekers as they simply landed in South Australia and walked overland to goldfields. In 1857, the government further added a residence tax of £4 per person (Willard 1967, p.28). Facing the anti-Chinese sentiment, the Chinese community leader, Louis Ah Mouy published the pamphlet, The Chinese Question Analyzed with A Full Statement of Facts to address relevant allegations (Ah Mouy 1857). He actively fought discrimination against the Chinese in Australia and co-authored the pamphlet, The Chinese Question in Australia, 1878-79 with the other two Chinese leaders, Lowe Kong Meng and Cheok Hong Cheong (Kong Meng, Cheong & Ah Mouy 1879).

Furniture Production and Fruit Wholesale Centre

With the decline of gold mining in Victoria in the 1860s, Melbourne Chinatown was gradually transformed from a lodging place for transient gold seekers to a furniture production hub. Chinese furniture makers were renowned for their high quality workmanship and competitive pricing. They commonly lived and worked in the Chinatown (Davison, Dunstan & McConville 1985, p.65). In 1891, there were 525 Chinese furniture makers in Victoria and such number was increased to 620 in 1901, accounting for 10 percentage of all Chinese working in Victoria (Jupp 2001, p.200).

Besides furniture production, Chinese fruit wholesalers boomed in Little Bourke Street. Through an international trading network, Chinese merchants actively participated in the fruit wholesale market, which did not merely serve the Chinese community, but the general public (Melbourne City Council, 1985, p.11). Queensland was the dominant exporter of bananas and Chinese farmers there provided a cheap and assured supply of bananas to Victoria. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Little Bourke Street was even a focal point of the banana wholesaling industry in Melbourne until the Queen Victoria Market was expanded as a wholesaling market in the 1930s (Couchman 1995).
Against the severe competition from their Chinese counterparts, Australian furniture makers urged the government to protect their own interests. The Factories and Shops Act was enacted by the Victorian Parliament in 1896. Under this Act, furniture was required to be stamped with the details of the manufacturer for encouraging customers to buy Australian products (Markus 1974, p.2). Following the White Australia Policy in favour of European migrants, the Commonwealth Parliament...
passed the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901 requiring applicants to pass the dictation test (Char, 1932; Yarwood, 1964). This was an effective way to keep away unwanted Chinese immigrants. Chinese residents were not allowed to bring their wives and children to Australia for family union. Under legal restrictions, it was difficult for young Chinese workers to pass the language test and aged workers to be replaced after retirement. Mechanization also led to the decline of Chinese handcrafted furniture. Similar to the protective measures for the furniture production industry, the Banana Industry Protection Act was enacted by the Queensland Parliament in 1921, requiring all banana farmers and their workers to pass the language test. This was effective to exclude Chinese from this industry (Blake 1975, p.73).

Under the White Australia Policy and the Great Depression in the 1930s, Melbourne Chinatown was shrunk to a handful of shops. (Melbourne City Council, 1985, p.12). The number of Chinese population in Victoria was significantly reduced from around 25,000 in 1861 to a mere 2,000 in 1933 (Chou 1995, p.59).

Cafes and Restaurants

Lodging houses, furniture makers, and fruit wholesalers previously existed in Little Bourke Street were gradually diminished. The former residential, manufacturing, and wholesaling functions of Melbourne Chinatown were replaced by cafes and restaurants, reflecting the popularity of Chinese cuisine among western customers (Blake 1975, p.85). In 1920, eighteen Chinese cafes and restaurants were listed in trade directories (Nichol 2008, p.10). Since the majority of Chinese immigrants came from Southern China, so the distinctive Cantonese cooking style was prevalent. Among them, the Chung Wah Cafe was a representative example. Located in a four-storey detached building at Heffernan Lane, it was an important landmark in this precinct. The building was erected in 1891. It was first occupied by the Wing Ching Cafe (1892-1900), then the Quon Che On Cafe (1900-1915) before the Chung Wah Cafe, which was continued to operate until the 1970s. The successful Chung Wah Cafe was frequented by westerners, including intellectuals and students, helping them “to wean...from European cuisine” as commented by the historian, Weston Bate (Gerner 2008).

During the Second World War in the 1940s, Chinese restaurant sector flourished, reaching over 300 numbers in the city and suburbs by 1945 (Nichol 2008, p.11). The Chinese cafe boom was mainly due to the increasing numbers of people working in war-related industries, particularly thousands of Australian and allied troops. They preferred to dine out instead of eating in their barracks. This provided a significant boost to the economy of the city away from the depression over the last decade.

The change of immigration policy also facilitated the ongoing development of Chinese restaurant sector. Restrictions on Chinese immigration were loosened in the mid-1930s, enabling Chinese cooks and cafe workers to enter Australia under a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test. This arrangement was vital to the industry as the Chinese population was declining (Nichol 2008, p.11). The Immigration Restriction Act 1901 was repealed by the Migration Act in 1958 and the dictation test was no longer required (Choi, 1975, p. 60). The long-standing White Australia Policy was even abolished by the Whitlam government after the victory of the Labour Party in 1972 (Anderson, 1990, p. 141), attracting a new wave of immigration. Due to the increase of population, Melbourne
Chinatown in the centre of the city was subject to considerable pressure from developers for redevelopment.

**Preservation and Revitalization**

In order to preserve the existing heritage and fine-grained urban fabric against extensive redevelopment, the Chinatown Historic Precinct Act 1984 was enacted. The Chinatown Historic Precinct Committee has also been formed to oversee the ongoing management, development, and promotion of the Chinatown (Melbourne City Council, 1985, p. 7). Under the Act, new development applications have to be reviewed by the Committee, which can also issue directions to owners for maintaining the external appearances of buildings to be consistent with the character of the precinct.

Besides preservation, the Victorian government initiated a revitalization scheme for Melbourne Chinatown in two stages. For the first stage of redevelopment in the mid-1970s, four Chinese arches were suspended across Little Bourke Street facing Swanston Street, Russell Street, and Exhibition Street to define the entrances of the precinct (Anderson, 1990, p. 143). The Melbourne City Council and the Victorian Tourism Commission further released the Chinatown Action Plan in 1985. The Action Plan provided a detailed proposal for paving pattern, light fittings, and street furniture for enhancing the characteristics of the place. Following the Plan, the four suspended arches were converted to free-standing gateways. A new gateway was also erected at the Cohen Place, which was transformed into an open plaza to cope with the opening of the Museum of Chinese Australian History. The museum serves as a cultural heart for presenting the local history and customs to visitors and tourists.
A Symbol of Difference

In 1989, the “National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia” was promulgated by the Commonwealth government. The aim is to “encourage different cultural groups to share their distinctive heritage with their fellow Australians” (Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1989, p.47). Apparently, Melbourne Chinatown is a symbol of difference and a valuable asset to multicultural Australia. Nowadays, it is a popular destination for tourists, local residents, and international students, offering a variety of cafes and restaurants, ranging from casual noodle bars, dumpling houses to gourmet restaurants. They are not only located along Little Bourke Street, but also scattered across adjoining intricate laneways (Chau, Dupre & Xu 2015).
Cultural activities and festivals are regularly organized to continue the dynamic traditions and enhance the street vitality. Among them, Chinese New Year celebration is the most high-profile annual event. Lion dance, dragon parade, and martial arts performance under the rhythm of pounding drums and chiming gongs, as well as the sound of firecrackers, all contribute to the unique identity of this precinct. The iconography of the distinctive streetscape and the liveliness of cultural events promote urban ethnic tourism.
Conclusions

Melbourne Chinatown has been an iconic enclave throughout history. Since the Victorian gold rush in the 1850s, it has been organically evolved. From being a temporary staging post for Chinese gold seekers to a fearful slum with notorious gambling houses, opium shops, and brothels, it has maintained its uniqueness in Melbourne. Under various restrictive policies, it has demonstrated its resilience and successfully transformed from a furniture production and fruit wholesale centre to a vibrant hub for cafes and restaurants. The value of its continual existence is not merely a way of historical preservation or a marketing strategy for city branding, but is in fact a genuine contribution to cultural pluralism in Australia against discrimination and segregation in the past as well as homogenized and globalized cityscape in the present.

Reference List


