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Melbourne’s Chinatown: Continuous Chinese Enclave For 168 Years In Australia

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PREFACE

Melbourne’s Chinatown was first registered on my mind when I, as a passionate lover of Chinatown archways, came across a journal article, by a group of scholars and experts from University of Melbourne, regarding the lacking in authenticity of its gateways. Then the Chinese community had the reported inaccuracies of archways corrected in a timely fashion.

The incident sounded so unusual to me because there was hardly, to the best of my knowledge, involvement of academic institutions with the in-depth evaluations of design and construction of any Chinatown arches around the world, and I also felt the actual happening of subsequent remedies by the Chinese community was equally uncommon. Meanwhile, from the information I gathered, my calculation was four arches of the same type along the short block of Little Bourke Street. Therefore, I believed that the intensity of gateways in this Chinatown also finds no competition from other Chinatowns. My desire of making a personal visit to view the greatness of those artwork had ramped up, ever since then.

Years later, my childhood fantasy about the legendary animal—dragon—led me to watch, with much enthusiasm, a program of the fabulous parade of Melbourne’s Millennium Dragon during the celebration of Chinese New Year. Riding on my keen interest, I went on searching many details about that spectacular 92-meter Dragon, so also realized that the dragon is currently housed, along with other two retired well decorated processional dragons once used for Chinese New Year parade, in the Dragon Gallery in Chinese Museum of Melbourne. Therefore, I figured that if I can have a site visit of Chinatown, I can catch two birds with one stone!

The above-stated two leads eventually impelled me to pursue a trip to this town—Melbourne, Australia, which is located on the other hemisphere from where I live. Due to the long distance, a travel of this type was taken by me very seriously, so, in an attempt to reap the most out of this exploration trip, I had my information-seeking went underway long before I embarked this journey. The more I knew about this Chinatown, the firmer my zeal for the trip was.

My “admiration” guided me to make efforts of visiting what Melbourne’s Chinatown possesses. What I achieved was in fact more than expected, because, along with my intended targets, I also learned the history of how Chinese people in Melbourne chased their dreams centuries ago. After the visit, I have a clear picture of how and why this fairly small neighborhood can stand as a continuous, for 168 years, enclave without any interruption or location shifting.

Based on the knowledge acquired from reading literature; my personal experiences in touring the facilities; as well as thoughts conceived while making strolls along the streets, I describe my share of impression and opinion in respect of this Chinese community as follows.
BRIEF HISTORY

This gold nugget, dug out in Melbourne in 1852, has ever since changed the landscape of then quiet town, not only the local Australians being affected, but also the shockwave spreading to tens of thousands miles away to China. Within a few years after the discovery of gold mine, countless Chinese people, mainly from Guangdong of China, came in flocks to this area and worked as gold diggers. In 1855, the first flat of apartments was built, as a convenient staging point for those workers, near Little Bourke Street, and this marked the formation of Melbourne’s Chinatown.

When the fervor of gold rushes in Melbourne subsided after a couple of years, most of Chinese miners returned home, some traveled to other places continuing their searches of gold, but quite a few actually stayed at their apartments. For those who remained in town, they started to work as carpenters, vegetable wholesalers, or opened restaurants. It was these pioneers who laid solid foundations for the development of Chinatown.

As soon as the Immigration Restriction Act was introduced in 1901, this community began to suffer the decline. During the early 1940s, the rumor that the doomsday for Chinatown was already on the horizon had been circulated. However, after the WWII, discriminatory immigration restrictions started to be relaxed, and in 1966 The White Australian Policy was dismantled. These preferential factors contributed to the rapid growth of immigrants from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan and the business flourishing of this community after the 1980s.
GEOGRAPHICAL ADVANTAGE

From the researches I conducted, many assumptions had been expressed for why this Chinatown could outlive “endangered” status through some historical adversities. Truly, all of them had the effects contributing to this community’s miraculous survival and continuing to stay strong. Nevertheless, among those explanations in literature, “Geographical advantage” seems absent in the spectrum. However, from my perspective, this Chinese district has undoubtedly been blessed with a favorable location, along with the benefits of tram service.

Chinatown is situated along the narrow Little Bourke Street, within the radius of four blocks—Swanston Street, Russell Street, Exhibition Street, and Spring Street. This compact precinct is in the vicinity of Melbourne’s central business district, so is in a walking distance of many government sites, such as: Parliament House; Old Treasury Building; and State Library of Victoria, plus some tourist spots, for instance: Federal Square and Tower Sky deck. Therefore, this neighborhood is naturally abounded with all kinds of booming enterprises.

On top of the above convenience and local resources, the fact that Chinatown can be reached, through an alley, from one of FREE tram stops is definitely a huge draw of its attractiveness. After having enjoyed this benefit of going back and forth from my hotel to Chinatown numerous times, without spending a dime, it is my belief that this Chinese enclave could last forever as long as the generosity of free tram would not expire.

ALLEY AND LANE

From the previous paragraph, this word alley was first ushered into the picture. Because the existence of this characteristic makes street layout quite interesting, I strongly feel that my viewpoint is shared by many visitors.
Last time I found those amazing stories about lanes, arcades, and alleys within a neighborhood was when I walked through Bangkok Chinatown. As a matter of fact, over there I could hardly cross any of them without making detours, because vendors, stalls, and booths have made the paths almost impassable. Numerous winding and small streets provide venues of making a living to local merchants, and those makeshift markets have become iconic scenes of Bangkok Chinatown.

In fact, the scenery is interestingly identical as well as a sharp contrast at the same time at Melbourne’s Chinatown! Within 4 street blocks on Little Bourke Street, there are over 15 of those being considered as alley and lane. The difference occurs mainly due to the lane utilization between these two Chinatowns. Although there may be stores or restaurants residing along some of those short blocks in Melbourne, NO hustle and bustle were being felt while I was there. Besides, it is obvious that they don’t nurture the birth of street vendors at all. Some alleys provide shortcut from Chinatown to major thoroughfares (i.e. from Little Bourke Street to Bourke Street), but others are dead-end lanes. I would say it is fair to credit alley and lane for adding serene quality to this well-preserved Chinatown.

**HEART OF CHINATOWN**

Actually, there is no particular place or a section, which is deemed with this title. However, when I strolled down Little Burke, I fell in love with the vicinity between Russell Street and Exhibition Street, because it represented a focus of all the sights and facilities on my visiting list for this Chinatown. Most tourists, myself included, would agree this vibrant area is like heartthrobs to Chinatown. There are five counts, at the very least, to support this theory

1. **Gateways**

   As stated in the beginning, gateways were my major driving force for visiting this Chinatown. Besides their uniqueness, frankly speaking, there is another impetus as my own attraction. New York City, one of the largest city of Chinese congregates outside Asia, has a minimal four well established Chinatowns, but my hometown has disappointingly failed to have a single Chinatown arch built! This reason partially explains why Chinatown archways always excite me so much.

   From literature searching, my basic knowledge was that there were four gateways, one on each crossing block of Little Bourke. It turned out that my information was not quite accurate, because, all told, there are five of them in this small community! Furthermore, the density is even more intense in this quarter than I could imagine. Firstly, your eyes will be met with one of those four identical archways called Melbourne’s Chinatown (words in Chinese only) Then, within 100 meters away, there is another gorgeous gateway named Facing Heaven Archway.
The first kind (four of it) was built by the donations from the Chinese community in 1976 (re-constructed in 2010). The 2nd one was a gift from sister state Jiangsu Province of China in 1985. If interested, more information about these archways is provided at further reading after the text of the essay.

2. Dr. Sun Yat Sen memorial statue

Standing on a wide-open area, it was erected in 2011 by Chinese community in Melbourne, in memory of Dr. Sun’s huge contributions to the establishment of Republic of China. When visiting, I was sitting on the bench behind it for a lengthy period of time, appreciating this statue and the archway. After a while, I made an unrealistic connection between these two sights. It seemed to me that Dr. Sun, a distinguished leader, is looking at the masterpiece of Facing Heaven Archway, which is as great as he was.
As a religious person, I always have a particular affection to the sights of worship places. The appearance of this church, built in 1872 (re-constructed 1902), was not very eye catching, but its history of architecture is stunning. Since it represents an example of brick polychrome in Victoria, it holds a prominent record to the state of Victoria. Unfortunately, due to my short time frame of staying in Chinatown, I was not able to have a tour of the establishment. Other than physical importance, it also has historical significance to the Chinese community. It demonstrated efforts by Wesleyans and other denominations in Victoria to provide comfort through religion along with assistance in language and social life to local Chinese people during that gold rush era.
4. *Chinese Museum*

Every year the celebration of Chinese New Year is a momentous event in Melbourne City. Among many happenings, it certainly includes cultural festivities. The awakening of the dragon, in front of Chinese Museum, kicks off the activities. Needless to say, the Museum also anchors the procession of all other cultural occurrences during this period, actually, throughout the whole year.

After viewing those gateways, this Museum was the 2nd stop I was heading to for a planned “meeting” with my fantasy friend-Dragons—in the Dragon Gallery. Never in my life did I see this mystical animal in such a magnified form! I could stay in front of it and verify each element of its body against what I studied from hearsay—The head of a camel; eyes of a rabbit; ears of a cow; neck of a snake; scales of a carp; and palms of a tiger. It was SO incredible!! My spirit gained from those dragons was beyond the description! I would not hesitate to say this joviality alone was already worth the hassles of making a long distance trip.

When I stepped out of this Dragon Gallery, other exhibits of this museum did not fail to keep me in awe during my a few hours staying. Found in 1985, and located at the central position of this heartland, the Chinese Museum is pivotal in promoting the heritage and culture of Chinese people in Australia. For detailed information about its collection, its website is highly recommended for visiting.

5. *Her Majesty’s Theatre*

Established in 1886, this 1700-seat Theatre is situated next to Chinatown gateway on Exhibition Street, and a few feet away from Chinese Museum. While there have been many changes of its owners and different names during its course of 135 years, its location remains unchanged. Being listed on the Victorian Heritage Register, and having played host to countless western shows, musicals, and operas, this iconic Australian theater resides right next to the entrance of Chinatown, so it can also serve as a perfect example to explain the success of cultural diversity in this Chinese community.
CONCLUSION

After a few days staying in Melbourne, and a couple of whirlwind visits to Chinatown, my strong impression, resulting from my cognitions, about this Chinese community is “something similar to ; something different from” other Chinatowns which I have visited around the world.

Golden-roofed gateways, flanked by black & white lions, and hanging red lanterns along Little Burke Street give away a signal that this community is as well preserved and beautiful as it could be. However, beauty alone would not make it distinctive. A signature feature of packed eateries on the streets or in the shopping mall is not extraordinary either in comparison with other Chinatowns. Meanwhile, while it is crowded with shoppers seeking merchandise, either bargains, or unique to Chinatown, this is still a characteristic prevalent among many Chinatowns.

Aside from above similarities, what different qualities, from my personal view, has this Chinatown presented? To answer this question briefly, two points worthy of mentioning are: Great neighborhood combined with convenient transportation (as stated earlier) and the cultural diversity (Being brought up at the description of Her Majesty’s Theatre). I do think both of them are important characteristics of Melbourne’s Chinatown, which are not easy to be comparable from other Chinatowns. I already stated my input about the benefit of great location. The elaboration for the 2nd quality is as follows.

The concept that different cultures, including residents’ multilingual capabilities, coexist in one place is an easy way to understand the term of cultural diversity. In a society with multi-cultures, people from a variety of cultural backgrounds are equally accepted and recognized, so this foundation serves as the basis for everybody to approach others with an open mind. It goes without doubt that peaceful living in a community, and in a city could easily be achieved. From my own encounters with some Melbourne’s people of variant races, I have to praise the merit of delicate balance for the recognition of differences and finding meaningful similarities among each other existing in Chinatown, under the umbrella of Melbourne City.
This exploration trip yielded a great deal for me to enrich my knowledge and enhance my comprehension of many aspects regarding racial identities.

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FURTHER READING

About Chinatown


Immigration Restriction Act of 1901

White Australia Policy
Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Australia_policy
