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Sydney Chinatown: The Haymarket Revitalization Plan

Activity #1: Exploring the historical and cultural context surrounding Sydney's Chinatown & The Haymarket Revitalization Plan

Read the following. Feel free to highlight important information, write notes in the margins, or use other active reading strategies you find helpful.

Early History (1850s-1970s)

Sydney's Chinatown was established in the 1850s, when a gold rush brought Chinese miners, especially from Cantonese-speaking Guangdong, to Australia to search for gold (Mak 2003, 93). During this period, Chinatown consisted mostly of boardinghouses and Asian groceries, since many miners returned home with their riches instead of settling in Australia (Mak 2003, 93). Those who stayed were restricted to 'undesirable jobs' like market gardening, and as the gold supply ran out, Chinatown moved to its modern, 'officially sanctioned' location in the urban Haymarket area (Mak 2003, 93).

In 1901, anti-Chinese sentiment from white Australians culminated in the passing of the White Australia policy, which like the American Chinese Exclusion Act and Canadian Head Tax, put limits on Chinese people entering Australia (Mak 2003, 94). Under the policy, Chinese Australians faced strong racial discrimination, and Chinatown became a tight-knit community that served as a refuge for its residents (Wong and Ang 2017, 22). In this era, Chinatown acquired a reputation of being "an undesirable ethnic ghetto" and businesses did not receive much patronage from outside the community due to fear of the unfamiliar (Mak 2003, 94).

Redevelopment (1970s-2000s)

The White Australia policy was finally dismantled in the 1970s and replaced by a policy of multiculturalism (Wong and Ang 2017, 21). The government now wanted to present Australia's diversity and multiculturalism to the world, and an early priority was to upheave Sydney Chinatown's "ethnic ghetto" image (Mak 2003, 94). Alderman A. Bridger commented that "one must admit to a sense of shame when one shows a San Franciscan our version of a Chinatown," and modeled the redevelopment on a caricaturized, essentialized view of Chinese people and culture (Anderson 1990, 15). He hoped that the ancient Chinese-inspired architecture and lantern decorations would attract tourists to the area, just like they had in North America (Anderson 1990, 14).

Bridger's plan met "only minor resistance" from the Sydney Chinatown community (Anderson 1990, 15). Conversely, merchants and business owners heavily supported it, as they were eager to tap a more diverse consumer base (Anderson 1990, 14). The plan was put into effect and followed by other projects to make the area more "Chinese," including the 1980

Name: _____ Date:_____

erection of ceremonial paifang arches to mark the entrance to Chinatown (China-Australia Heritage Corridor). Tourists flocked; by 1997, Chinatown had "the ninth highest visitation rate in Sydney" (Mak 2003, 95).

Contemporary Times (2000-present)

The 2000s saw a new wave of migration from Mandarin-speaking mainland China as well as countries in southeast Asia (Wong and Ang 2017, 27). This resulted in a more diverse Chinatown, offering cuisines from all over Asia, as well as region-specific Chinese restaurants (Wong and Ang 2017, 27). International students also became an important driver of the Chinatown economy, with 70% of Asian-background university students in Sydney visiting Chinatown at least once a month (Wong and Ang 2017, 29). For businesspeople, Sydney's Chinatown serves as a jumping-off point for transnational trade (Wong and Ang 2017, 33).

Overall, according to Wong and Ang (2017), today's Chinatown is "a commodified ethnic precinct for tourism and cultural consumption" (24), the culmination of policy efforts that began with Alderman Bridger's initial redevelopment plan fifty years ago. Many Cantonese-speaking older residents, the only ones who remember Chinatown as a tight-knit community, have long since moved away to the suburbs (Wong and Ang 2017, 31).

The Haymarket Revitalization Plan (2023)

In 2023, the City of Sydney Council passed the A$44 million plan to revitalize the Haymarket-Chinatown district (Feng 2024). Its priorities include improving walkability, installing public art, organizing cultural events and fostering collaboration and partnerships between the city and Chinatown businesses (City of Sydney, 45). During the planning process, the city heard the visions of over 1,150 people (City of Sydney, 8). Based on their input, the council is striving to turn Chinatown into a bustling business center that uplifts diverse Asian cultures (City of Sydney, 8). This is especially important after the impact of the covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, the district was deprived of patronage from international students and tourists (Cheng 2023), resulting in numerous restaurant and business closures and creating a lasting mark on the area (Feng 2024). It wasn't until 2023 that foot traffic in the Haymarket area returned to its 2019 level (Cheng 2023).

The Haymarket plan aligns with the city's overarching Sustainable Sydney 2030 Strategy, which aims to embody "a 'cultural and creative city' with more public space" (Anderson 2018, 142). The strategy identifies Haymarket as a "key activity hub" or focal point for development, which Anderson (2018) hypothesizes is due to Chinatown's role as "one of the city's strategic platforms for producing trans-Pacific relations of exchange" as Sydney becomes a global city (144). Haymarket's revitalization slots in at an opportune time on the city council's agenda, after the recent completion of renovations on nearby George Street (Feng 2024).