

## ‘It’s all bubble tea shops’: The battle over the soul of Chinatown

By Caitlin Fitzsimmons

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Diners outside Nakano Darling on Steam Mill Lane in the thriving Darling Square area. EDWINA PICKLES

**E**verywhere you look in Chinatown, shopfronts are shuttered and revered restaurants are calling time on the torpor of the past two years.

Two weeks from now, Cantonese restaurant Marigold, beloved for its yum cha for 40 years at a few locations including its current home in the Citymark building, will close its doors for the last time. This follows the demise of late-night dining institution Golden Century at its Sussex Street location in August and BBQ King, famous for its Peking Duck, back in 2020.

You only have to count the number of empty shops on Dixon Street to see that big-name closures are only the tip of a much bigger problem. If Dixon Street is the beating heart of Chinatown, the pulse is faint and erratic.



News that the famous Marigold Restaurant is closing has brought new customers. STEVEN SIEWERT

Kevin Cheng, the co-founder of the Soul of Chinatown not-for-profit group and Instagram account, says there are many lesser-known Chinatown businesses including family-owned restaurants and authentic grocery stores “fading into obscurity”.

“The soul and fabric of Chinatown has already changed and is in danger of fading out completely,” Cheng says.

Sydneysiders have been returning to Chinatown in droves since lockdown ended, particularly for yum cha after reports of the Marigold’s pending closure. The queues at Marigold for weekend lunch have blown out to up to three hours, while waiting times have been up to 45 minutes at nearby places such as Zilver on Hay Street.

Marigold group manager Connie Chung has been quoted saying the restaurant was closing because of the hit to the functions business from COVID-19 and the redevelopment of the Citymark building. She said in an email to *The Sun-Herald* that she did not have time for a further interview because the “overwhelming” response from the public meant staff were swept so busy trying to ensure customers left with happy memories.

“The emails and telephone calls of support and well wishes have not stopped since news broke of our closing, not to mention customers coming out to ‘get as many yum cha’ as they can before we close,” Connie Chung says. “One is flying from Melbourne for her last yum cha with us!”

A lot of the shops have been replaced with chain stores. STEVEN SIEWERT

But as restaurateur and bar owner Howin Chui says, Chinatown businesses need more consistent support.

“If people only come for the grand opening or grand closing, you’re going to see all these businesses closing down,” Chui says. “I’ve seen people post about how they’re sad Marigold is closing and they’ll miss it, but they haven’t been there for 10 years.”

The loss of international students, many of whom lived and worked in the area, and foreign and interstate tourists has been a big blow. City of Sydney councillor Craig Chung says before the COVID-19 pandemic, 1.2 million tourists came to Chinatown specifically each year, and with international and state borders closed it was a fraction of that.

Howin Chui said businesses need consistent support. STEVEN SIEWERT

“Eventually they’ll come back, but there’s going to be a lot of pain and suffering for families and family businesses along the way,” he says.

Craig Chung visits Chinatown two or three times a week and has a long family connection to the precinct, dating back to his great-grandfather who arrived in Sydney as a fabric merchant in 1883.

Economic recovery won’t bring back the businesses that have already closed and there’s a question over what will replace them. Chui, the owner of three Hong Kong-style, neon-lit premises - including Kowloon Cafe in the heart of Chinatown and Kowloon Stir Fry King and Ni Hao Bar in the CBD a few blocks from Haymarket - says even when new businesses open, they are not necessarily authentic.

Bubble tea shops have become popular in the area. STEVEN SIEWERT

“Chinatown is now all bubble tea shops and hot pot restaurants - they’re franchise businesses and not part of the culture of Sydney’s Chinatown,” Chui says.

Not everyone agrees this is a problem.

As Cheng from Soul of Chinatown points out: “What would you rather? A bubble tea shop or a vacant store?”

Billy Wong, the son of the Golden Century founders, says bubble tea is part of Chinese culture and while he acknowledges many of them are chains, he says they are equivalent to coffee shops.

Craig Chung says the neglect of Chinatown predates the pandemic, stemming from under-investment by local and state government, the closure of the Entertainment Centre which previously brought thousands of people to the area every night, and the road closures and construction works to build the light rail and pedestrianise George and Hay Streets.

Billy Wong, from XOPP by Golden Century. His family closed the Golden Century on Sussex Street after 32 years.

STEVEN SIEWERT

A number of restaurateurs, including Chui and Wong, complained about road closures and lack of parking because their customers wanted to drive and it was hard to get deliveries.

“One thing that would improve the vibrant nature of Chinatown and also Haymarket as a whole is making them accessible, whether it’s by public transport, whether it’s by foot traffic, but importantly it has to be accessible by cars and roads as well,” Wong says.

Chui says many families want to drive to the city, especially on the weekend, and many of his friends with children were still avoiding public transport because of the COVID-19 risk.

Craig Chung says he is not against pedestrianisation but it needs to be done in consultation with businesses. He says the planning regime for Haymarket needs to be thoroughly reviewed at both state and local government level, to have a vision for the future of Chinatown, provide an incentive for people to look after and maintain the buildings, and reducing ‘red tape’ for outdoor dining.

“All levels of government have got to focus on looking after and nurturing these small specialty villages around Sydney, because they’re important cultural places and they’re also important economic drivers,” Chung says.

“You could make it a place where it’s fun to be and where alfresco dining is available all the time but at the moment it is often too hard to go through the planning process to get those things done. It’s also really difficult for people who have English as a second language to navigate the whole planning regime.”

There are plans in progress to open a Museum of Chinese in Australia in the old Haymarket Library building on George Street, which will help keep the old stories of Chinatown alive. At the other end of

Chinatown, next to Darling Square and only a few blocks from Dixon Street, is the Chinese Garden of Friendship.

Parts of Chinatown have struggled during the pandemic. STEVEN SIEWERT

Simon Chan, the president of Haymarket Chamber of Commerce and an advisory committee member for the garden, says cultural institutions and events are essential for Chinatown's recovery.

"People come to Chinatown for a bit of shopping and a bit of food and if they can also go to the Chinese Garden or a museum, they can make a day of it," Chan says.

He says the Chinese Garden was closed during lockdown but otherwise compensated for the loss of international tourists by encouraging more locals to visit. The garden recently launched a membership

program to encourage Sydneysiders to come as often as they like and Chan says there was a 600 per cent increase in local visitors in October and November compared with the same time in 2019.

## **Birds' nest view**

The newly developed Darling Square area on the western edge of Chinatown is thriving, with buzzing restaurants and bars in the new The Exchange building nicknamed 'the birds nest' (where the old Entertainment Centre used to be) and laneways festooned with lanterns.

This is where the Wong family, who owned Golden Century, have landed. Despite creditors voting to "save" Golden Century, the family pressed ahead with moving out of the Sussex Street restaurant and reopened XOPP in The Exchange after lockdown as XOPP by Golden Century. They also still operate The Century restaurant at the casino. Billy Wong says they brought across a lot of the Golden Century menu and added the branding to honour their history and maintain the link for customers.

Wong says it was sad they had to leave Sussex Street and not a decision they made lightly but it was also exciting to be part of a new precinct with a lot of life.

While some are critical of the new stores in Chinatown, others say they are better than empty shopfronts. STEVEN SIEWERT

"I wouldn't say it's the new Chinatown but it's definitely buzzing," Wong says. "I think it's just an extension of Chinatown and also an expansion of the vibrancy of Haymarket."

Wong says Darling Square can't replace the cultural and historical significance of the old Chinatown and there needs to be a revival of the whole area.