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HD Plans for 'Chinese Disneyland' on the central coast

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LP Theme **park** - \$500m proposal - Urban affairs

They say you can see the Great Wall from space, but it is Bruce Zhong's dream for Australia to see the Forbidden City from the M1 motorway.

TD The final months of the Year of the Horse will be crucial in advancing his plans to build a \$500 million **Chinese** theme **park** - working title "Chappypie **China** Time" - on 15 hectares of industrial land on the central coast.

Mr Zhong, a former Sydney journalist and self-described "culturati", expects to submit a development application this month for the first stage of a complex that promises to integrate "culture and happiness, nature and spirit".

It will begin with a thanksgiving temple but plans for the **park** comprise 12 stages, ultimately delivering a replica of the Ming Dynasty's famous Beijing palace, "panda paradise", treasure ship and a series of canals, lakes and gardens.

Mr Zhong, who has never built a theme **park**, said he "eventually" settled on the Warnervale **site**, about 100 kilometres north of Sydney, as the ideal location for what has been likened to "**Chinese** Disneyland" after the idea failed to capture the imaginations of other councils, including Penrith and Gosford.

The first stage of the **park** will open in 2016 "at the earliest", he said, ahead of all 12 stages by 2020. "This is a world's first ever **project**," Mr Zhong said through an interpreter. "So I have no experience, neither others do."

Wyong mayor Doug Eaton has emerged as one of the most enthusiastic backers for what the council's website calls "one of the biggest tourism projects NSW [has] ever seen".

"I believe it is likely that other theme parks will follow the **Chinese** one to Warnervale," Cr Eaton said.

The **project's** planning proposal, part of the rezoning process to accommodate some of the **park's** planned facilities, is expected to come back to the council with a recommendation for approval next month, Cr Eaton said.

"Initially they wanted council - and this is obviously where everyone would have laughed at them - they wanted council to donate the land," he said. "And we obviously said, 'No, councils in Australia don't do things like that.'"

But the \$10 million "**sale**" of the council-owned **site** to Australia **China** Theme **Park** Pty Ltd, of which Mr Zhong is chief executive, has fuelled local concerns about the deal.

"The proponent for the theme **park** have been given a very generous concession by the council," Central Coast Community Environment Network chairman John Asquith said.

Council documents show Mr Zhong's **company**, which opened offices in Kent Street last month but is still registered to a Parramatta townhouse, secured the land with an initial deposit of \$10,000. Two subsequent instalments have brought the amount paid to \$70,000. A \$30,000 payment is due next month.

Mr Zhong said the **project** would be financed by the **company's Chinese**-Australian directors and those keen to invest for immigration purposes. It had already secured the \$30 million for the development's first stage, he said.

Cr Eaton rejects that the **company** has received a "sweetheart" deal, saying the **project** carried the potential of thousands of jobs and had already boosted other **Chinese** investment in Wyong.

But independent councillor Bob Graham counts among those yet to be convinced that the theme **park** will go ahead as proposed.

"Who would spend a half of a billion dollars on putting a **Chinese** theme **park** where here, over the years, we've had to close down Old Sydney Town?" he asked. "I believe there's an ulterior motive. What it is, I don't have a clue."

But the theme **park's project** manager, John O'Grady, from the multinational service consultancy Cardno, said his clients were committed to the "mind-blowing" proposal.

"They're very serious about this," he said. "There seems to be no reason why they won't move forward and finish the whole **project**."

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