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# **‘Chinatown Re-oriented’: A Critical Analysis of Recent Redevelopment Schemes in a Melbourne and Sydney Enclave**

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## **Abstract**

This paper develops a critical analysis of Chinatown redevelopment schemes undertaken by State government in Victoria and New South Wales since the early 1970s. This period marks a transition in Australian management strategy toward minority groups from one of assimilation/discrimination to cultural pluralism. At the local level, this shift has been marked by efforts on the part of planners and politicians to promote Chinatown for its perceived contribution to ‘Multicultural’ Australia. The paper argues that the Melbourne and Sydney schemes share with similar projects in other Western countries, long-standing assumptions about ‘a Chinese race’. This has implications both for the conceptualization of ‘Chinatown’ and for public policy relating to ethnic relations.

## **Introduction**

Helen Chung, a Tasmanian of Chinese origin, made the following comment in a news report published in May, 1987: ‘Seventeen years ago,’ she said, ‘Australia had no multi-cultural policy. The Chinese had a low profile, and although there were Chinatowns in some cities, they were limited places. Now it’s different and Chinatowns attract tourists and status – there are shops, restaurants, dragon festivals and parades’ (*The Mercury*, 16 May, 1987).

In the past 15 years, the streets and buildings of Chinatown in Melbourne and Sydney have been the focus of joint government and community efforts to promote their exotic potential. In modern Australia, where, among other aspects of the National Agenda for a Multicultural Society, the Commonwealth government sets out to ‘encourage different cultural groups to share their distinctive heritage with their fellow Australians’ (Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1989, 47), Chinatowns have become ethnic expressions par excellence. The policy of multiculturalism has given official sanction to vibrations within white Australia since the early 1970s. that Chinatown is a symbol of difference to be protected rather than censured; revitalised, not left to the levelling forces of assimilation.

Indeed the impact of Commonwealth policies of cultural pluralism in the 1970s and multiculturalism in the 1980s has been extensive, reaching beyond the Federal arena to lower levels of government where the spirit of pluralistic thinking has been incorporated into seemingly unrelated spheres, such as urban planning. Chinese enclaves that were once deemed to be vice quarters and migrant ghettos, have in recent years been targeted by local and state levels of government for major character-

enhancing schemes. Chinatowns have indeed acquired a 'status', in Chung's words. In Brisbane, a 1984 Act to provide for the establishment of a Chinatown Mall has even created from scratch a Chinese commercial precinct where none existed before (*Local Government (Chinatown Mall) Act 1984*. No. 104 [Queensland]).

In what follows, I develop a critical perspective on the promotion schemes initiated in Australia's two major Chinatowns since the early 1970s. The projects under scrutiny have been implemented during the so-called enlightenment period in Australia's race relations when all levels of governments have attempted to repair the injustices of earlier, overtly racist policies. That such schemes have raised the public profile of Chinatowns is indeed the case. But lest we risk misconstruing the novelty of the multicultural present, it seems important to make some more critical observations. That is, it seems as helpful to identify lines of continuity with the past as it is to emphasize points of change.

The power of white Australians to define and fashion Chinatown in conformity with their European image of a Chinese race has persisted since settlers from China first came to Australia. Late in the nineteenth century, Chinatown's perceived otherness was the basis for hostile state responses. One hundred years later, beliefs about Chinatown's uniqueness have again been the basis for neighbourhood policy-making. Promotion of a Chinese identity and place has occurred, signalling the deeper continuity of what I call the race definition process in Australian thought and institutional practice. It is a process that draws on ideological traces from Australia's more ignominious past and which, I will argue, continues to obstruct the transition to a 'non-racial' Australia.

### **The Multiple Faces of Racial Ideology**

Despite the fact that many social scientists are increasingly careful in their use of the term race, the word continues to feature prominently in Australia's newspapers, popular literature, and government reports. Popular opinion holds tightly, it appears, to the view that races are hard facts of nature. A significant body of human geographers and sociologists have also been slow to relinquish this common sense view. Researchers within the ecological tradition, for example, continue to measure levels of segregation by what is called 'race', as if race refers to objective differences between social groups, and 'racial mechanisms' themselves, in Farley's (1986, 169) words, have a causal effect on spatial inequality.

The belief that the world's people are divided into discrete groups by immutable differences was challenged decades ago by population geneticists. By now many social scientists have joined in the challenge, making compelling epistemological and humanistic critiques of early research paradigms that took race for granted (see, for example, Husband, 1982; Miles, 1982; Prager, 1982; Gates, 1985a). Increasingly it is argued that race is a *cultural* concept born of the significance that people attach to physical, cultural and other (for example, linguistic) features. 'Race' refers to a way of seeing people, not a state of being. Thus it is in the eye of the beholder, not the blood, genes, nature or culture of human beings.

The view that race is problematic has signalled some important new research directions in the social sciences. Most noticeably, attention has turned from the study

of the attributes that were presumed to set minorities apart – either through their own voluntary association or through ‘prejudice’ on the part of excluding groups – to the process and material consequences of what Miles (1982) calls ‘racialization’. Otherwise known as racial categorisation, racialisation is a process quite distinct from ‘prejudice’ and ‘discrimination’, the conventional concepts of liberal social science. Those concepts imply that tension between groups is natural and inevitable – an unfortunate flaw in human nature that will not go away. They also imply that oppressed groups are helpless victims of some putatively innate tendency of humans to fear strangers and mix with their own kind.

By contrast, racialisation refers to a cultural and political process, not a natural impulse. More specifically, it is the process of transforming physical and cultural features into identities, of classifying people into historically specific categories such as ‘Chinese’, ‘Aboriginal’, ‘black’ and ‘white’<sup>1</sup>. Whatever the strength of peoples’ emotional attachment to their origins, the ascriptions are what *allow* prejudice and discrimination on the part of more powerful groups to occur and continue.

Out of this perspective, comes this paper on the territory known as ‘Chinatown’ in Australia’s two major cities. Elsewhere, I have developed the argument that the history of a Canadian Chinatown between 1880 and 1980 reveals as much about the cultural concepts and institutional practices of ‘white’ Canada as it does the ‘ethnic’ attributes of the East (Anderson, 1987; 1988; 1991 forthcoming). Here, my intention is to examine the Australian context, during a period that offers some important, but largely unexamined, insights into the race definition process. Following a selective history of Melbourne’s and Sydney’s Chinatown, I examine the Australian examples since 1970. The contradictory forms of racialization during this period of so-called enlightenment have not been thoroughly examined in the recent literature on the social construction of race. Attention has centred on classical forms and practice, where *negative* conceptions of racially defined people have shaped adverse attitudes and repressive policies (see, for example, Fields, 1982; Gates, 1985b; Markus, 1988, Pettman, 1988).

Yet there are many modes of representation in the ideological construction of otherness. Racial ideology is not a homogeneous ideology, even during periods of overt racism such as colonialism (Satzewich, 1989). It has no universal law of development and does not always assume the same shape. It is carried forward, for example – long after the decline of overt racism and often without bad intent – in policies of cultural pluralism in Australia and also in Canada (Moodley, 1984). Despite placing a positive connotation on otherness, such policies legitimise popular beliefs that essential characteristics – genetic and/or cultural – distinguish groups of Australian settlers. Multicultural rhetoric also strengthens the exclusionary concept of a mainstream (Anglo-European) society to which others contribute. In turn, this keeps

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<sup>1</sup> In pre-contact times, members of different indigenous communities in Australia categorised themselves as belonging to separate communities. Only to Europeans did ‘they’ all look and behave alike, and as a consequence the category ‘Aboriginal’ was coined (see Cowlishaw, 1987). In the case of the ‘Chinese’ category, one spokesman at a recent conference said that ‘the Chinese in Australia do not constitute a monolithic group, let alone a single community capable of united action.’ Within the Chinese-origin population distinctions are boldly drawn between recent refugees from Indo-China, the pre-1965 migrants, the post-65 migrants, and Australian-born Chinese. ‘Under the circumstances,’ he states ‘we should be wary of trying to generalise on “Chinese culture” and of establishing a “Chinese national character” ’ (Loh Kok-Wah, 1988, 70).

alive the myth of a one-character nation whose privilege and responsibility it is to deflect 'other' influences – a position recently invoked in the 'One Australia' debate by the Liberal Party and other conservative groups. The racial frame of reference is indeed alive and employed today in a contradictory mix of old and new, blunt and subtle guises.

Although racial ideology has assumed a variety of forms over a long time period, it would be unhelpful to assume that race is some trans-historical conceptual system with its own explanatory power. Racial representation is best understood as both a set of ideas and a materially embedded structure. One site in which it has been institutionalized is the workplace where assumptions about racial difference have decisively influenced capitalist employment practices and wage differentials (on the Chinese, see for example, Creese, 1984; Boswell, 1986). Racial consciousness penetrates, and is itself structured by, economic relations in forms that are yet to be fully specified for people of Chinese origin in Australia.

Racial ideology has also been inscribed over time in territorial arrangements (Jackson, 1987; Smith 1989), although the epistemological significance of this has gone virtually unnoticed by anthropologists and sociologists in the new writing on race. Yet, as some geographers have more generally argued, space is an important nexus through which social processes are mediated and objectified (Gregory and Urry, 1985; Dear, 1988). Cultural geographers have also recently shown that landscapes are critical mediums through which folk knowledge is organised and naturalised (Ley, 1987; Duncan and Duncan, 1988).

In the example of ideas about a Chinese race, the enclave foundation has been particularly significant. 'Chinatown' has been a locus for the renewal of white Australian conceptions of the Chinese for over a century. Beliefs about a Chinese race have informed official neighbourhood practices, which have themselves materially re-created the original cultural beliefs. Earlier in the century, assumptions about the existence of a separate Chinese race prompted government responses that isolated and stigmatised the area. More recently, as we shall see, Chinatown in Melbourne and Sydney has been revitalised – both symbolically and materially – in the image of white Australian beliefs about an essential 'Chineseness.' With the acknowledgement of the Chinese themselves, the two Chinatowns have been 'reoriented,' to use the words of a newspaper headline in May, 1989 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May, 1989).

### **Australia's Major Chinatowns in Brief Historical Perspective**

Like their counterparts in Canada and America, people from China settled in small enclaves on the fringes of emerging commercial districts in Australia. In Melbourne, some 50 people from China congregated around the Little Bourke and Swanston Street intersection in the mid-1850s. Numbers increased after the demise of the goldfields in the 1860s, when a zone of lodging houses, provision stores, butchers, candle-makers and opium manufacturers emerged to serve resident and up-country Chinese (Melbourne City Council, 1985, 10). By 1907, Chinese settlement had extended northwards to Little Lonsdale Street and its adjoining lanes.

Sydney's early Chinese settlement was more mobile. The original 1860s settlement was in Lower George Street, close to the main wharves (Wolforth, 1974, 209). Some thirty years later, when the Chinese population exceeded 4,000, the locus of settlement had moved to the Wexford and Campbell Street area. Later, the Haymarket and Dixon Street district became home to people, mostly men, from China. In both cities, most of the Chinese labouring class was employed in market gardening and cabinet-making, while entrepreneurs ran green groceries, furniture stores, wholesale fruit (especially banana) establishments, market gardens, import and export houses and other businesses (Yong, 1977, 35-45).

The Chinese populations of Melbourne and Sydney declined rapidly in number after 1901, when the new Federal Government passed an Immigration Restriction Act to quell mounting anti-Chinese sentiment. Throughout the colonies, and especially in Queensland, tension had been building to bar the intake and limit the opportunities of people deemed to be of 'unacceptable stock' (May, 1984). Community living offered support against policies that denied the entry of the Chinese men's wives and families and restricted access to certain occupations. The concept of a Chinese race was accepted wisdom among white Australians, and in addition to many other things, it informed employment and real estate practices. Inflated rents and low wages, in particular, constrained the residential choices and living conditions of people of Chinese-origin in cities.

The early Chinese settlements of Sydney and Melbourne were perceived through the lenses of an influential culture of race. White settlers, including scientists and politicians, accepted the concept of race unthinkingly and unhesitatingly. Indeed it was quite conformist for Europeans to attach one defining characteristic to people from China-and that was their membership of a separate race and culture. This would not have been so significant, but for the fact that during this period in Australia's race relations, the racial ascription carried with it a host of derogatory assumptions about an inherently 'Chinese' standard of living and morality. Although some white people expressed favourable opinions of the cheap Chinese labour, most saw the Chinese as dirty and clannish, hardened opium and gambling addicts, and perverted seducers of white women (McConville, 1985). They also resided in 'Chinatowns' which, by association, were 'sinks of iniquity', to use a common phrase of journalists.

Politicians and bureaucrats shared and fomented the neighbourhood stereotype. Victorian Premier Duncan Gillies said in 1888 that the Chinese 'occupy an isolated position in every community where they are found the 'Chinese quarter' in our cities and principal towns is proverbial – it is always distinct and often notorious' (cited in McConville, 1985, 58). Negative images of Chinatown were widely circulated among senior government figures, one of whom, in Victorian Parliament in 1888, argued that the 'one blot on the city of Melbourne' (at Little Bourke Street) was evidence of the threat of Chinese immigration and justification to end its passage to the colony.

At the local level of government successive generations of building and license inspectors, police, magistrates, councillors and other officials took such views as their call to action. Melbourne's local administrations were firmly opposed to any settlements they considered alien and threatening, and in the case of Chinatown, public scrutiny was intense. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, respective rounds of officials kept a close eye on bylaw enforcement in the areas.

Raids of reputed gambling and opium dens were common, and tenements were routinely condemned in part to avert the public health threat the areas were said to supply (McConville, 1985).

By the first decade of this century, immigration and citizenship procedures had been sufficiently regulated to ensure that Australia's major Chinatowns were marginal and squalid communities well into the twentieth century. By the 1930s, Melbourne's Chinatown had shrunk to a handful of shops and the quarter seemed doomed to extinction (Melbourne City Council, 1985, 12). Only in the late 1940s was the process of reforming discriminatory migration and nationality laws, municipal regulations, work practices and trade union rules commenced. In turn, the sex ratio of Chinese settlement grew more balanced, and many people of Chinese origin dispersed through the occupational and residential structures of Australian cities.

### **From Classical Racism to 'Cultural Pluralism': A Brief Review**

In Australia's more tolerant multicultural present, the contrast with past government responses toward Chinatown is, in many ways, marked. 'Chinatown has grown up and the unsavoury ghetto days are over,' said one Chinatown businessman in 1986. 'The politicians respect us now because they see Chinatown as a valuable attraction' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 June, 1986). The area that once carried the stigma of a fearful slum, had by the mid-1970s, gained the reputation of being a valuable contribution to 'pluralistic' Australia.

Among the significant reforms implemented by the Whitlam administration after the Australian Labor Party's victory of 1972, was the replacement of Australia's long-standing policy of preferring British and European immigrants. Most remaining restrictions of the White Australia Policy were removed, and immigration from non-traditional sources sharply increased. So-called 'Chinese' people, for example, arrived from the diverse countries of China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kampuchea, Timor, Papua New Guinea, and Taiwan, boosting the census count of 'Chinese' from 9,144 in 1947, to 21,712 in 1966, and 172,483 in 1986 (Ho and Kee, 1988).

Equally important was the shift that took place during the Whitlam and, in particular, Fraser administrations from an assimilationist to a pluralist migrant integration strategy. In 1973, Whitlam's first Minister for Immigration, Mr A. Grassby, signalled the shift in philosophy in his 'Family of the Nation' speech. There he described the 'multi-cultural society of the future' and advised that 'the increasing diversity of Australian society has ... rendered untenable any prospect ... of fully assimilating newcomers to the Australian way of life' (cited in Castles et al., 1988, 59). Other shifts ensued. Slowly, pressure on immigrants to conform to the white-Anglo model of family, community and institutional life was eased. The differentiation along ethnic lines that had existed since European settlers first arrived in Australia became more openly acknowledged. The injustice and uniformity of the assimilationist doctrine was increasingly conceded, awareness of the migrant vote began to register, and by the mid-1970s, notions of cultural pluralism were filtering into government rhetoric, and more slowly, into government practice, especially in the area of education (Martin, 1978).

In Australian cities, local council and planners also took the paradigm of pluralism on board. Select symbols of ethnic diversity became objects of civic pride and in the case of Chinatown, Victorian and New South Wales governments joined their counterparts in many Canadian and American cities by sponsoring major redevelopment plans to boost the declining areas. A new phase in Chinatown's development commenced. In both Melbourne and Sydney, the once stigmatised districts became courted by governments for their perceived distinctiveness. In the eyes of many white Australians and their policy-makers, the Chinese were no longer vice-addicted and dirty, but rather worthy, law-abiding citizens who were 'filial to elders' and possessed 'business acumen' (*The Australian*, 6 June, 1975).

Other benefits began to be seen in the Chinese presence. Cuisine was certainly one, and its discovery by Europeans in the 1960s reinforced the emerging perception of the 'Chinese' and 'Chinatown' as exotic. In the words of the Melbourne Chinatown Association in 1986: 'The success of this industry in Chinatown for visitors is one of the contributing factor for the continuation of the Chinatown area' (Melbourne Chinatown Association, 1986.3). Connel and Ip (1981, 307) similarly note for Sydney 'Chinatown is now important as much for non-Chinese dining as for servicing the Chinese in Sydney.'

Chinatown's residents and retailers clearly enjoyed a much more congenial climate than their fellow countrymen at the turn of the century. Discriminatory legislation had been rescinded and the burden of negative stereotyping relieved. Yet the habits of mind that underlay the Chinatown plans suggest that, in another sense, the retreat from the days of neighbourhood targeting was less decisive than it seemed. To be sure, changing white attitudes marked Chinatown's rising appeal. But the belief in a Chinese race – and the sense of separation upon which that belief relied – were persisting through the new discourse of pluralism. As Satzewich (1989, 325) argues more generally: 'There is no necessary correlation between the belief in the existence of different "races" and negative evaluations of "race" difference.' Biological determinism had been assimilated into a new current of cultural relativism in which ancestral culture was being filtered, commodified, and reified by and for white Europeans. It was also a development into which certain Chinese groups themselves had an important input, as we shall see. The paper now turns to a demonstration of that argument.

## **The Social Construction of Contemporary Chinatown**

### *Melbourne's 'Dandied-Up Celestial Avenues'*

*Stage One of Redevelopment, 1975-76.* The most enthusiastic advocate of Melbourne's Chinese precinct was no less than Lord Mayor R. Walker, who in June 1975, prompted an investigation into the formal establishment of a Chinatown on Little Bourke Street. It was the city's 'first attempt to develop an ethnic quarter', he said in a news report (*The Age*, 30 September, 1975). Council was fully supportive of Mr Walker, and in September it approved the first stage of an anticipated five-year refurbishing program designed to 'enrich and revitalise the blocks bounded by Swanston, Bourke, Exhibition and Lonsdale Streets' (City of Melbourne, Town Clerk's Office, *Council Minutes*, 29 September, 1975, file no. 60/75/2886). To this project, Council agreed to commit the not insubstantial sum of \$160,000.



The plan entailed erecting four 'Chinese archways' across Little Bourke Street and twenty clusters of 'Chinese-style lantern lights.' A Chinatown Special Advisory Committee was established to administer the spending of Council's grant, and in October, Premier R. Hamer agreed it was apposite 'to give recognition to the Chinese community in the form of a Chinese village' (Victorian Legislative Assembly, 1975, 7045). 'Chinatown is backed by this Council to the hilt', assured Mr Walker in a letter requesting State support from the Minister for Tourism and Development (Walker to Byrne, 15 September, 1975, file no. 60/75/2886) and within months, the State government committed itself a \$100,000 grant (Hamer to Walker, 3 December, 1975, file no. 60/75/4898).

One of the primary objectives of the Chinatown redevelopment plan seems to have been to inject 'Chinese' character into the area. In the words of Melbourne City Town Clerk, the project's goal is 'to create a characteristic Chinatown atmosphere.' Others, including members of the Chinese community, found much sympathy with the idea. The pagodas would be 'replicas of traditional Chinese entrances, thus giving a Chinese identity to the area,' said Melbourne University architect, Mr T. Chu at a November 1975 meeting of the Chinatown Special Advisory Committee (Minutes of meeting, 7 November, 1975, file no. 60/75/2886).

Indeed the 90-member Chinese Professional and Businessmen's Association of Victoria, of which Mr Chu was vice-president, was quite adept at delivering the Chinatown concept Mr Walker envisaged. For later stages, it promised to organise the refurbishing of building facades in the area, promote exhibitions of Chinese art and culture, organise an annual Miss Chinatown Quest, initiate plans for the construction of a Chinatown community centre, and organise various festivities in accordance with the Chinese lunar calendar (Chu to Lord Mayor, 5 August, 1975, file no. 60/75/2886).

Not all of Melbourne's Chinese population, however, shared the views and objectives of the Chinese Professional and Businessmen's Association. Moreover they were not shy to express their reluctance, bitterly condemning Council for promoting a project that had the approval of only a select number of Chinatown businessmen, including Councillor and major Chinatown property owner, David Wang. One spokesperson captured the essence of the grievance when he told the press that Melbourne's 10,000 citizens of Chinese-origin 'want to be treated as Australians and with dignity. ... We don't want to bring back the image of an opium-smoking, mah jong playing people which the whole concept of Chinatown encourages' (*The Australian*, 22 August, 1976).

Disputes raged through early 1976 between such critics and Council, the one party arguing the project made people of Chinese origin 'items of curiosity', the other defending it – in Mr Walker's words – as a 'tribute to the Chinese people who have served the State of Victoria in many community activities' (*The Age*, 30 June, 1976). It was a debate Mayor Walker tried to defuse by sending the project's architects to China. He believed it would lend credibility to the project if materials from China were used and Chinatown was developed to have a traditional image like the homeland itself. 'We want to make sure the decorations are original.' he said in a bid to boost support (*Herald*, 9 April, 1976).

Mr Walker's strategy, however, did little to placate his critics. Given the assumption behind his Chinatown agenda that there naturally existed a unitary Chinese race and culture, it is perhaps not surprising that he alienated some of those he sought to acknowledge. Indeed his plan seemed to allow little for the possibility that China's culture might itself have changed since the days when Marco Polo first visited the 'Flowery Kingdom.' Not only that, but to assume Little Bourke Street's residents and retailers had more in common with medieval China than twentieth century Victoria was also something of an imaginative leap on the part of Mr Walker.

Rate-payers in the Little Bourke Street area grew increasingly vocal when it became clear the plan had already received the support of two levels of government. In April 1976, the Victorian Chinatown Project Study Committee was formed to fight the plan and its future stages. This organisation was also quick to see the exclusion operating in Melbourne's civic planning under the guise of a policy of inclusion. In the Committee's view, the project would have the following results: isolate Chinese citizens in Melbourne as different, queer, quaint – a side show like Luna Park; revive past unhappy experiences suffered by the Chinese in Australia; revive the term Chinaman despite the fact we do not speak of an Australia-man; spark prejudice and discrimination; and invite higher rates and taxes for Little Bourke Street owners (Victorian Chinatown Project Study Committee, 1976, file no. 60/75/2886).

In addition, the Committee passed judgement on the project itself. In its view, the project was 'tasteless' and 'too hastily conceived' by a Lord Mayor who envisaged a model Chinese city. Moreover, the Committee claimed it was also not an 'authentic' symbol of the Chinese experience in Australia, and as dubious in conceptualisation as a project to build an English city of the 1800s in Melbourne City Square. As the Committee told Council in a strongly worded letter in April, 1976, all of these problems were sufficiently grave to warrant abandoning the project (Heng and Leong to Town Clerk, 27 April, 1976, file no. 60/75/2886).

Despite the efforts of the Committee, the City's Finance Committee, empowered to act on the Chinatown project, voted to continue with the project (see McCaw to Heng and Leong, 3 I May, 1876, file no. 60/75/2886). The Chinatown Special Advisory Committee of Council tried to appease the aggrieved rate-payers by pointing out that the finished product would satisfy any sceptic (Rogan to Heng and Leong, 9 August, 1976, file no. 60/75/2886). The Town Clerk also assured the Hon A. Grassby, who had made an enquiry about the controversy, that 'promoting interesting ethnic areas gives greater variety and brightness to Melbourne' (Rogan to Grassby, 17 August, 1976, file no. 60/75/2886). Melbourne's 'Celestial avenues' would, it seemed, be 'dandied up' regardless of what concerned locals felt (*The Australian*, 28 August, 1976).

Indeed while the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and other officials who officially opened Chinatown in late August, 1976 were arguing that the project marked a 'new era in the attitude of Australians to people of other stock' (*The Sun*, 30 August, 1976), the disgruntled lobby was still presenting its case. Only the Builders' Laborers' Federation heard their voice, and when that influential organisation threatened – on behalf of the Chinese lobby – to halt work on Stage One, Stage Two of Mr Walker's redevelopment project was axed.

*Stage Two of Redevelopment 1983-88.* Some eight years later, in 1983, the issue of Chinatown's upgrading was rekindled. Despite the fact the Little Bourke Street area was increasingly losing its service and retail function to the suburbs for people of Chinese origin, a comprehensive project to signal Chinatown's existence to the Melbourne community was undertaken by the State and local levels of government. 'The symbols [of Stage One] were not enough to guarantee the continued existence and liveliness of the precinct,' stated a *Chinatown Urban Design Plan* of 1984. 'Ethnic enclaves [like the Greek and Chinese precinct] need clear separation, otherwise integrity will be lost' (City of Melbourne, 1984, 1 and 16).

In Federal Parliament, members had been echoing these words from 1979, when the Galbally Report was tabled and the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs Act was passed. In 1985, for example, the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Mr C. Hurford, remarked: 'It is important that there should be a lift in the pride of the Australian community in our multicultural society. ... There is the need for maintenance of a social environment which accepts racial and cultural diversity and the contribution of the migration program to Australia's national development (Commonwealth of Australia, *Debates*, Vol. 240. 1985, 1034-35).

Mr Hurford's words belonged to a new discourse of cultural pluralism that was slowly being institutionalised in Australian policy-making through the 1970s and 1980s. 'Multiculturalism', as it became known in the 1980s, envisages Australia quite differently from prior versions of the nation. Whereas Australia was once defined as a white Anglo-nation, multiculturalism has attempted to formally acknowledge Australia's diverse composition (Castles et al., 1988, 13). Moreover, it attaches a virtue to such variation; it envisages a country where harmony is built out of differences, where there is 'unity through diversity,' to use the Canadian slogan.

In this intellectual context, Stage Two of Chinatown's redevelopment in Melbourne was devised. As we shall see in the following account, the project was implemented with greater care on the part of planners and politicians. Chinatown was not just for tourists, as Mayor Walker and Councillor Wang had earlier perceived it; it was also a symbol of the ethnic presence in Australia, a mark of what was seen as the special contribution of the Chinese, and an asset to an otherwise uniform city. The project will be 'a contribution to the Australian ideal of multi-culturalism,' a broadsheet publication of the City of Melbourne boasted in 1983 (*The Chinatown Action Plan has commenced*, 1983, 2 in City of Melbourne, Town Clerk's Office, file no. 83/1 125/12, Part 1).

While more subtle, however, the new round of Chinatown's redevelopment carried forward the process set in train by Mayor Walker. In the eyes of its more recent architects, Chinatown was still a product and symbol of some essential 'Chineseness', some inherent difference against which mainstream Australia was set. And this view still enjoyed all the authority of official fiat. Beliefs about race were continuing to shape planning decisions which in turn were further inscribing in the urban landscape, the assumptions on which the institutional practices were predicated.

In June 1983, a committee of representatives from the Victorian Tourist Commission, the Melbourne City Council, the Ministry of Planning and Environment, the National Trust, and the Melbourne Chinatown Association was established to investigate the

potential for Stage Two of Chinatown's redevelopment. The initiative for the committee lay with the Victorian Tourist Commission which saw its aim as providing 'the basis for the enhancement of Chinatown's unique character' (City of Melbourne, 1984, 9). Stage Two would be 'sensitive', however, and implemented 'in a dignified manner', to use the words of Victorian Tourist Commission chairman and prime instigator of Stage Two of redevelopment, Mr Don Dunstan (Victoria Tourist Commission, Notes on meeting, 5 May, 1983, file no. 5/0/61/1).

Mr Dunstan commenced his mission by establishing a permanent coordinating body with the power to raise and dispose of funds in Chinatown and to promote the district. Officials and bureaucrats from the State and local levels of government cooperated by drafting a Bill which became law in February 1985. The Chinatown Historic Precinct Act, as it was called, gave ultimate authority to the concept of Chinatown, specifying in legislation the area's physical existence and boundaries (Fig. 1).

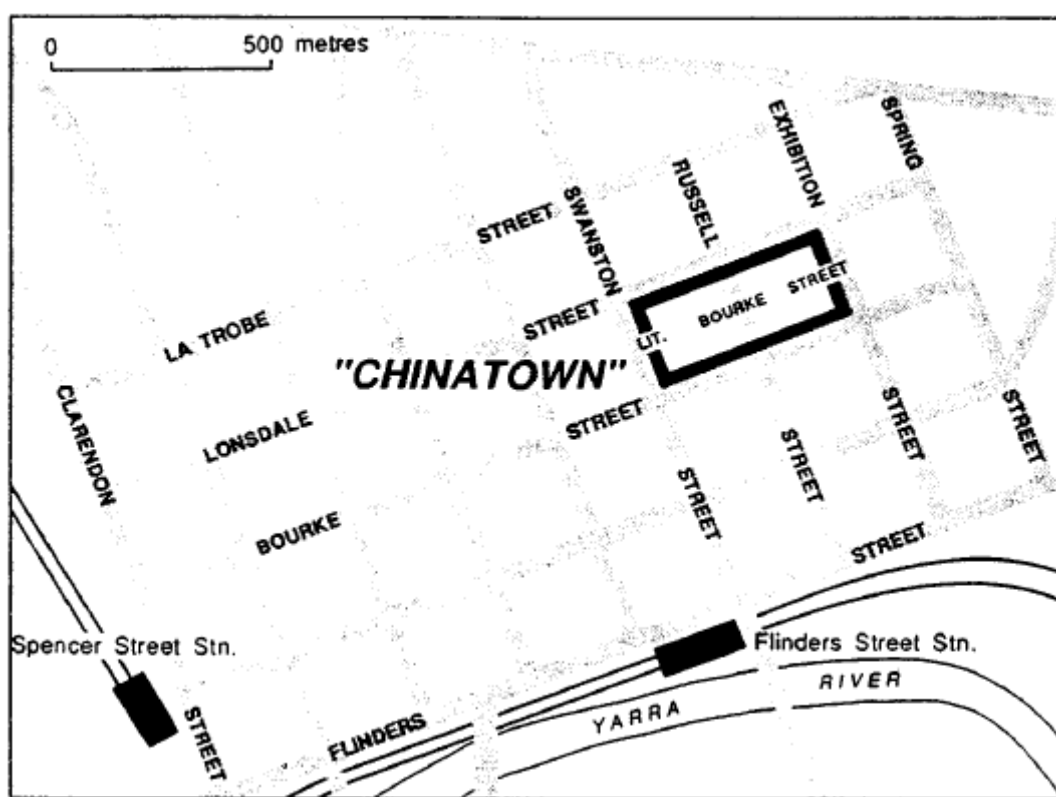


Fig. 1 The location of 'Chinatown' in Melbourne

More specifically, the Act established a Chinatown Historic Precinct Committee and a Chinatown Historic Precinct Fund for the 'management, development and promotion of Chinatown.' A significant clause empowered Council to issue directions to any owner 'to render the external appearance of the land or building consistent with the character of the precinct' (*Chinatown Historic Precinct Act 1984* No. 10 165, sec. 14 [Victoria]). In other words, the powers in the Bill were designed to achieve not only the area's preservation but also its enhancement. 'The Bill encourages certain areas of the city to become more attractive to tourists and to utilize the flair and drive of the people residing in those areas,' the member for Narracan, Mr Delzoppo, told the Assembly during the second reading of the Bill (Victorian Legislative Assembly, 1984, 945). Other Opposition members were equally supportive of the Victorian

government's 'attempts to . . . make [the precinct] more in keeping with the Chinese flavour of the area.' A member for the National Party, Mr Wallace, for example, argued that 'it is extremely important to be able to see how other communities live' (Victorian Legislative Assembly, 1984, 950). Meanwhile, Melbournians of Chinese origin had not seen a copy of the Bill.

In August of that year, Council adopted the follow-up *Chinatown Action Plan* (Melbourne City Council, 1985). Proposed construction projects included a museum of Chinese-Australian history in Cohen Place to 'offer a Chinese experience to visitors', an 'authentic Chinese Gateway' in Cohen Place, a major streetscaping of Little Bourke Street, upgraded lighting on Little Bourke and adjoining lanes, the reconstruction of Market Lane, and the provision of street furniture. In addition to such capital works, the *Action Plan* suggested there be a 'promotion of activities in the precinct which are unique to the Chinese culture, way of life and customs' (Melbourne City Council, 1985, 91). Little Bourke Street would be 'more colourful and attractive with an increase in ethnic activities', the report stated.

After the Act came into operation, the major recommendations of the *Action Plan* were implemented. In late-1985, construction of the museum commenced with a grant from the Victorian Tourist Commission that would grow to over \$2m by the time the museum was completed (City of Melbourne, Town Clerks' Office, file no. 83/1125/15, Part 5). Council bought two sites compulsorily acquired by the State government in 1985 to carry out the Cohen Place projects. Market Lane was repaved with Chinese symbols in 1985, as was Cohen Place. The suspended Little Bourke Street Arches (of Stage One) were also converted to free-standing arches at a cost of \$300,000 to help give greater 'definition to the precinct,' Lord Mayor T. Huggard said at a Chinatown public meeting on 16 December, 1986 (Victorian Tourist Commission, file no. 5/0/61/6, Part 3).

The Act also marked the beginning of a review process by the Precinct Committee of all changes to Chinatown building facades and development applications. One applicant in 1986, for example, was required to install a neon light and a vertical sign so it conformed more closely to the Precinct's planning controls. Others were required to paint their exteriors in 'Chinese colours' (Chinatown Historic Precinct Committee Meeting, Minutes, 24 January, 1986 in file no. 83/1125/15, Part 2). Special lighting and street furniture was installed in Little Bourke Street and the main laneways (City of Melbourne, planning Department, file no. E1986/641). Also implemented in Little Bourke Street was a Design Project that cost \$850,000. The Ministry for Environment and Planning decided to meet this expense when rate-payers – still defiant perhaps – refused to pay a 'special rate' that the Precinct Committee tried to impose (Petition to Mayor and Councillors relating to proposed levy, 3 October 1986, in Victorian Tourist Commission, file no. 5/0/61/6, Part 3). Finally, an Activities Sub-Committee was formed to organize the running of the Chinese New Year, August Lantern and Dragon Boat Festivals<sup>2</sup>. To these activities, the Victorian Tourist Commission – the major sponsor of all projects in Chinatown – contributed \$200,000 for the two years

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<sup>2</sup> Chooi (1986) makes the point that such festivals have become "social dramas" in which the major divisions within the Chinese community are symbolically represented to the Chinese but are undisclosed to the watching Australian public, to whom the festivities confirm their image of a single cohesive Chinese community' (cited in Chan, 1988, 53).

1986- 1987 (Chinatown Activities Report, September 1988, in City of Melbourne, file no. 15/83/1125, Part 7).

Back in July 1985, an administrator of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) had expressed ‘considerable concern’ at many of the urban design strategies of the *Chinatown Action Plan*. He pointed out that many of the proposals would achieve precisely the ‘tourist trap’ that concerned planners were trying to avoid (Macneil to Floyd, 15 July, 1985, in City of Melbourne, file no. 83/1125/15, Part 2). Two years, and approximately \$3m of State and municipal government funds later, the advice of the National Trust seems not to have been heeded, despite the fact that gimmicks were mostly avoided in Stage Two.

Indeed the nature and magnitude of government-initiated and funded projects in Melbourne’s Chinatown suggest that if white Australia was being given insight into ‘how another community lives’, as the member for Gippsland had argued, it was a view heavily tailored to white Australia’s concept of that community. Of course Chinatown is different from the likes of Melbourne’s Toorak district. But in popular and official consciousness, Chinatown bore the distinction of being an ‘ethnic’ enclave (City of Melbourne, 1984, 29). Chinatown’s defining characteristic, in the eyes of white Australia, was its ‘difference’, its uniqueness, its ‘contribution’ to multicultural Australia. Moreover, with the encouragement of certain property interests in Chinatown, that view was being made the basis for policy-making that re-activated it further. Chinatown may well owe some of its character to the East, but as we are witnessing here, it is also testimony to the power of white Australians to dramatize differences that in reality are subject to change.

#### *‘The Dragon Wakes in Dixon Street: The Sydney Case*

Two years after the completion of Stage One of redevelopment in Melbourne’s Chinatown, Alderman A. Briger made his mark on civic politics in Sydney with the announcement of a \$323,000 plan to upgrade the city’s Dixon Street area (Fig. 2). Despite the fact that the Chinese-origin population was itself ‘unusually evenly distributed throughout the city’ (Connell and Ip, 1981, 303), Council decided to consolidate a distinctive Chinese territory in an area whose residential function had become limited. As in Melbourne, the European belief in a ‘Chinese’ identity and place in the 1970s had come to assume radically different policy implications from the days of derogatory stereotyping and harassment. Chinatown had become a window on the Orient.

Alderman Briger’s project proved to be considerably less strongly contested than Stage One of Melbourne’s redevelopment. From September 1971, when Briger first requested the Chinese Consul-General to help ‘create a Chinatown in the Dixon Street area,’ he met little resistance to his plans (cited in Lai to Town Clerk, 14 March, 1973 in City of Sydney, Administrative Dept. Archives, file no. 2808/72). Indeed as with Melbourne’s Chinese Professional and Businessmen’s Association, Sydney’s Chinatown merchants were as willing to indulge romantic conceptions of the Chinese, as were white Australians like Alderman Briger. Both parties belonged to the prevailing culture of racial representation (Prager, 1982), and entrepreneurs of Chinese-origin were well able to manipulate and appropriate the symbols of ‘Chineseness’ that white Australians had come to expect in Chinatown.

Following Alderman Briger's request to the Consul-General, a Dixon Street Chinese Committee formed to lobby Council on Chinatown's redevelopment. Its 'Proposal for the Beautification of Dixon Street' met with approval at Town Hall where, in October 1972, Council agreed to erect and maintain 20 'Chinese-style decorative lanterns' on Dixon Street properties, a 'steel-structured portico of Chinese design' near Goulburn Street, and to supply litter bins with 'Chinese motifs' (see *Council Minutes*, 20 October, 1972, in file no. 2808/72). 'If one faces facts,' said Briger the following year, 'one must admit that though the standard of cuisine served in the Chinese restaurants of that neighbourhood is indisputably excellent ... one must concede that the overall setting of the area itself is drab. One must admit to a sense of shame when one shows a San Franciscan our version of a Chinatown' (Briger to Council, March 1973, in file no. 2808/72).

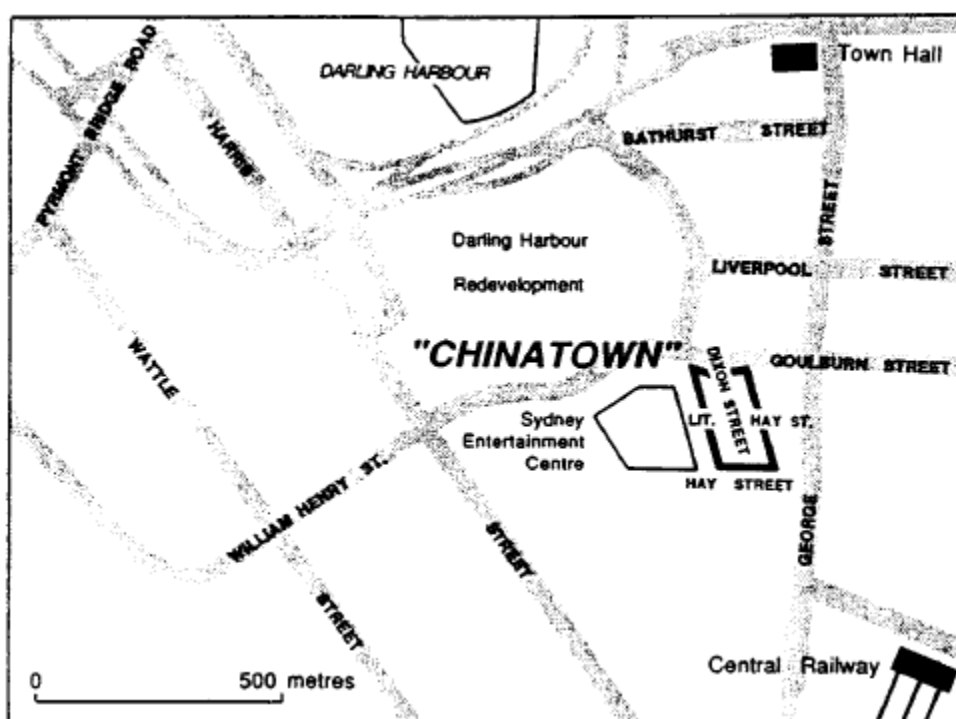


Fig. 2 The location of Chinatown in Sydney.

Although Alderman Briger encountered only minor resistance to the idea of upgrading Sydney's Chinatown, opinions were divided among the Dixon Street business community about the form that a 'Chinatown' facelift should take. Gus Homeming's ambitious proposal to build an 'Asian village ... with all the atmosphere and activities of the Chinese culture it is possible to introduce', won the support of State cabinet in 1975 (see correspondence in file no. 2808/72; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July, 1975). Eventually, however, it foundered due to lack of private finance and split loyalties within the Chinatown business community to Mr Homeming's proposal.

The significance of such internal struggles for the right to represent Chinatown to Sydney society was, however, lost on Alderman Briger. For him, a singular Chinese culture, identity and presence could be re-created on Dixon Street area, and his was the image that exerted an influence on policy-making. Early in 1977, he proposed that

Dixon Street be converted to a pedestrian mall to give ‘an atmosphere of Chinatown’ to the street (Report of meeting between Council and Chinese community, 26 May, 1977, in file no. 29/77). ‘It is essential that this project should achieve an “instant atmosphere,”’ he told the City Planner in April, 1978. ‘The objective is to get as much visual effect as possible’ (Briger to Doran, 24 April, in file no. 291/77). Briger justified the proposal to the Traffic Authority of NSW in much the same terms. The intention of the street closure, he wrote, is ‘to improve the amenity and promote the unique Chinatown atmosphere in this restaurant and entertainment sector of the City’ (Carter to The Secretary, 18 July, 1978, in file no. 291/77). Alderman Briger’s Dixon Street planning team also suggested that a ‘traditional Chinese ceremonial archway’ be constructed over Dixon Street near Factory Street, and that decorative lighting be extended to adjoining streets.

Council took little convincing of the value of the Dixon mall concept. Indeed it insisted that the commencement of a six-month trial closure of Dixon Street be made to coincide with the Chinese Moon Festival in August, in order to maximise visitor interest. Some months later, concerns were expressed by the Dixon Street Chinese Committee that the trial closure resulted in a loss of business. In Council’s view, however, the pedestrian mall helped complete ‘a total Chinatown concept,’ and in April 1979, it voted to close Dixon Street permanently (Council minutes, 9 April, 1979, file no. 39/09/0026).

In the wake of such official interest in the area, and changes to immigration regulations, a boom of property investment from Hong Kong and other sources occurred in the Dixon Street area (see *Financial Review*, 17 February, 1978; Chong, 1986). After 1976, Dixon Street property escalated in price and was converted into lucrative uses, such as restaurants, supermarkets, gift stores, and a Chinese cinema. Chinatown was quickly transformed, then, in conformity with Alderman Briger’s image of it as a ‘restaurant and entertainment sector.’ ‘The Dragon wakes in Dixon Street,’ stated one commentator, though in her opinion, the area’s resurgence was more a ‘testimony to the merchant genius of the Chinese race’ (MacDonald, 1979, 621), than to external pressures.

The design objective for the streetscaping approved by Council in June 1979, was to give Dixon Street ‘a distinctive Chinese character’ (Proposed Dixon Street pedestrian plaza, June 1979, file no. 291/77). This would apparently be achieved by ornamental paving, plazas, pagodas, telephones, planter boxes, temple dogs, red and green paint, and archways. The full impact of beautification ‘will not be achieved,’ Alderman Briger told the project’s architect in an attempt to hasten construction, ‘until the unique Chinese embellishments to the archways and pavilions have been installed’ (Briger to Tsang, 7 March, 1980, file no. 39/09/0026).

The Alderman’s attempt to make Chinatown more recognisable as a Chinese turf was as self-conscious as that of Melbourne’s Lord Mayor Walker. In an officially multicultural society, this seemed easy to justify. ‘I am sure the Dixon Street Landscape ... will become a permanent symbol of the close cooperation that exists between the Chinese community in Dixon Street and the Sydney City Council,’ said the Town Clerk in a letter to the Dixon Street Chinese Committee in June 1979 (Carter to Fong, 8 June, 1979, file no. 291/77). In reply, the Committee agreed to contribute \$45,000 to the project.



Making the area more ‘Chinese’, seemed to mean making the area appear more consistent with the architectural motifs and symbols of ancient China. In describing the Dixon Street archways to an official in Canberra, the Town Clerk pointed out ‘the materials have been chosen in order to satisfy the need for authenticity in the appearance and harmonious spiritual significance’ (Carter to Deputy Director, Dept Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, 22 October, 1979, file no. 39/09/0026). What the Town Clerk seemed to be invoking was Marco Polo’s ‘old Cathay’, a romantic image that had captivated many medieval travellers to China (Dawson, 1967). Along with Mayor Walker, such civic officials seemed to believe that Chinese culture was a self-contained ‘entity’ that had been transported as hermetically sealed baggage to Australia. Select symbols of this timeless ‘Chineseness’ could be transplanted to Dixon Street, it was presumed, as if they told of some essence that resided in people of Chinese origin in Australia.

Meanwhile, other versions of Chinatown competed with the City of Sydney’s romantic one. One Chinatown community organization, for example, argued that Alderman Briger’s concept of Chinatown as a showpiece was limited, and that despite meagre financial resources, the district still performed a valuable welfare function for the area’s aged residents (Australian Chinese Community Association, 1982). Other local people of Chinese-origin no doubt felt pride in their enclave, while many suburbanites, too, made contact on weekends with this symbol of the Chinese experience in Sydney (Connell and Ip, 1981).

Alderman Briger’s concept of Chinatown certainly enabled such visions and functions of Chinatown to continue, but they were not the basis for the neighbourhood policy-making we have been examining. Indeed despite the claim of a newspaper feature that ‘there’s more to Chinatown than meets the chopstick’ (*The Sun*, 6 September, 1984), the history of Chinatown’s upgrading in Sydney suggests that European representations of the East were the ones that shaped government, and apparently, media, decision-making toward the area. In September 1980, Lord Mayor N. Meers was on hand to open Sydney’s Chinatown ‘to the beat of a dragon dance’ (*Australian Post*, 9 September, 1980). So too was Hong Kong-born, race-horse owner and president of the Dixon Street Chinese Committee, Mr Stanley Wong, whose ‘colourful ceremonial attire’ helped deliver to the public the concept of Chinatown they understood. Eight years later, in 1988, the ultimate in imagined ancestral symbols of Chineseness was presented to Sydney’s public in the form of a classical Chinese garden at nearby Darling Harbour.

## **Conclusion**

In the last few years, a body of anthropological research has critically examined the modes of representation that various Western commentators – including travellers, missionaries, and academics – have adopted in their renderings of non-Western cultures and places. The ‘deconstructive turn’ has followed in the wake of powerful critiques of Western bodies of knowledge such as ‘orientalism’ (Said, 1977; Fabian, 1983) and revisions of the culture concept by, for example, Clifford Geertz (1973). In different ways, such writers challenged essentialist and primordialist assumptions about the ‘natives’ whose point of view had for decades been the subject of anthropological inquiry. The critiques, in turn, brought the focus of anthropological

study back to the West, where the discourses and practices that create and sustain the otherness of non- Western societies have their origin.

Cultural geography has undergone a similar revision in the last ten years. Whereas cultures were once conceived as stable, super-organic entities, culture is now seen as a process by which all people represent their worlds (Duncan, 1980). It is not a fixed thing governing humans who inhabit discrete 'culture-areas' (Wagner and Mikesell, 1962), but a web of historically situated ideas and practices that set the context for group life. This conceptual shift has drawn the empirical focus of cultural geography away from the man/land interactions that absorbed a generation of Berkeley School geographers (Ley, 1981). Now there is more attention paid to the Western and non-Western landscapes and places that are created, socially and materially, out of peoples' ways of seeing and acting.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the links between neighbourhood policy and one such way of seeing called 'race' in two Australian Chinatowns. I have tried to show how assumptions held by planners and politicians about a separate Chinese race and culture informed recent development schemes, and the political and intellectual context in which the schemes were framed. Such a perspective departs from the conventional social science depiction of Chinatown as a product of some innate 'Chineseness' (see for example Michael, 1987). The argument here is that Chinatowns are, in part, spatial manifestations of European constructs of, and practices towards the Chinese. This seems particularly clear in the last twenty years when the streetscapes of Chinatown in Melbourne and Sydney and other Western settings – including Vancouver and Toronto in Canada, and San Francisco and New York City in America – have been refurbished in the image of Western Conceptions of the East.

Chinatown's ideological construction has not, however, been a simple process of cultural imposition on an unreflective audience. The social construction of space has been a complex boldly appropriated the conceptual symbols of Chineseness, and seemed strategically aware of the benefits of framing their plans in terms of the representations that filtered them and their place to white Australia. Nor did Melbourne's Chinatown merchants blindly swallow racial ideology. Some entrepreneurs, including Councillor Wang, were keen to invest in the Chinatown concept, while others clearly saw that the ultimate struggle lay in resisting the conceptual categories that for so long had oppressed them.

In Australia and Canada, the redevelopment schemes have been implemented during periods when policies of cultural pluralism have been in place at the Federal levels of government. They have also been implemented during periods when instances of overt or classical racism have been abundant in both countries. In Australia, we continue to see the most heated of immigration debates about Asian entry, and in Canada there is growing resistance to wealthy immigrants from Hong Kong dubbed the 'Yacht People' (*The Weekend Australian*, January 13-14, 1990).

In government and media circles, cultural pluralism is often opposed to what is described as 'racism'; that is, promoting 'freedom of cultural expression' and 'acceptance of difference' (Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs, 1988, 5) is thought to be fundamentally at odds with the racism of discrimination and

assimilation policies. In one sense, this is surely correct, and as I pointed out earlier, Chinatown's residents and retailers were much better placed in the 1970s than their counterparts earlier in the century. Yet, as this paper has uncovered, the two management strategies of pluralism and discrimination share assumptions that have gone unnoticed in media, policy and some academic circles. Obscured from view, they continue to confound political debate.

Though quite different in intent, the rhetoric of multiculturalism risks extending the twin assumptions of classical racism that first, genetic and cultural differences exist naturally and eternally, and second that such differences inevitably prompt social tension. pricking as they do 'the deep veins of racial prejudice,' to use the words of a recent news report (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 1990). The beliefs quite obviously underpin arguments for the restriction of Asian immigration, of the kind still stridently advocated by conservative and other groups in Australia. But they also reside within the language of multiculturalism and ethnic promotion schemes of the kind documented in this paper. The point is not that Australia would be a better society if Chinatowns were razed to the ground, and the Other became the Same. The issue is rather that racial representation masks individuals, and until beliefs in race are themselves exposed and transcended – amongst whites and non-white alike – the quest for a genuinely accepting, non racial Australia, may continue to be frustrated.

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