Negotiating Identity: Ethnicity, Tourism and Chinatown

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The discovery of gold in 1851 prompted Chinese immigration to Australia in significant numbers. Rather than settling in Australia, such migrants would often return home once they had accumulated some wealth. Sydney’s first ‘Chinatown’, located near the Rocks, reflected the temporary nature of their sojourn in Australia. This Chinatown consisted mainly of boarding houses and produce stores, and served as an entry and exit point for those going to the goldfields. As the gold began to dwindle, many Chinese prospectors moved into urban areas. Restricted to taking up jobs that Europeans found less desirable, such as market gardening, Chinatown gradually moved towards the city markets of Campbell Street. The subsequent move to Dixon Street and its surrounds accompanied the removal of the markets to the Haymarket area, where Chinatown as an ‘officially sanctioned’ precinct was located.

Charting the geographical movements of Sydney’s Chinatown is simple enough, but developing an understanding of its evolution and meaning is more complex. While a Chinatown had existed in Sydney since the 1870s, it was only during the twentieth century that the term came into currency. Moreover, the acceptance of Chinatown as a desirable expression of Chinese ethnicity within Sydney in the 1970s coincided with the adoption of multiculturalism, which culminated in the opening of the Dixon Street Mall in August 1980. The 1970s also marked the rise of the tourism industry as the dominant force mediating the meaning of Chinatown and the ways in which it was presented.

Studies of Sydney’s Chinatown have formed part of larger studies of the Chinese community in Australia, and have focused mainly on tracing the history of the Chinese community from the status of an undesirable threat to a valued part of Australia’s multicultural society. Shirley Fitzgerald’s Red Tape, Gold Scissors: The Story of Sydney’s Chinese raises some interesting questions regarding the nature of Chinatown, but only briefly explores them. In contrast, Kay Anderson’s comparative study of Chinatowns in Melbourne and Sydney, which focuses on notions of race and ethnicity, is the only critical analysis of Sydney’s Chinatown. None of these studies have thoroughly considered the history of Chinatown since its initial refurbishment, and they present its subsequent status as a tourist attraction as a static phenomenon. The refurbishment of Chinatown in the 1970s and 80s marked a new era in its history, shifting its main function from a centre for the Chinese community to an ethnic tourist attraction. Through an examination of how the identity and meaning of Chinatown have evolved, this article seeks to analyse, firstly, the forces that led the Sydney City Council to remake Chinatown and, secondly, the ongoing formative influence of tourism on Chinatown and its relationship to culture and ethnicity.
The white Australia policy institutionalised a form of racism that had existed since the earliest settlement of Australia. Anti-Chinese riots on the goldfields of Victoria and New South Wales led to restrictive immigration policies. In an effort to prevent the growth of a ‘half-caste’ population, the white Australia policy was designed to limit the number of Chinese people entering the country. As the *Bulletin* put it, ‘Australia thinks highly enough of its British and Irish descent to keep the race pure’. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Chinese population declined sharply, though Sydney’s population remained relatively stable due to interstate migration and rural-urban drift. The Chinese community at that time was generally regarded with fear and suspicion by mainstream society, and Chinatown was perceived to be full of vice and crime. The imagined threat of the Chinese legitimised government persecution as a necessary control over the racially inferior. These constructed images created a dubious tourist market for Chinatowns in the 1800s, and documented tours through the Chinatowns of Melbourne and New York confirmed western suspicions about the Chinese. Curious tourists were able to experience first hand the depravity of Chinatown, complete with illegal gambling and opium smoking — often staged — which would leave tourists titillated, but cautioned, about the dangers posed by an inferior and dissolute race.

In the post-war period, the regionalisation of international politics reinforced Australia’s future as part of Asia. Gradual acknowledgment of Australia’s place in the Asia-Pacific region led to changes in Australia’s political agenda away from xenophobic policies towards stronger economic ties within the region. Changes in immigration policy in the 1970s led to Chinese immigrants being accepted in Australia under the same conditions as Europeans. The Minister for Immigration, Al Grassby, officially introduced a policy of multiculturalism that replaced the policy of assimilation. His 1973 speech reinforced notions of ethnic individuality and equality, and referred to multiculturalism as ‘the family of the nation’ and promoted ‘strength in diversity’.

The council planned to demonstrate its commitment to multiculturalism, and among the first of its initiatives was the refurbishment of Sydney’s Chinatown. As early as February 1971, the council had discussed plans to create a ‘Chinatown atmosphere’ in the area of Dixon Street. Accordingly, the council approached the Chinese community about turning Dixon Street into a tourist attraction that would be internationally identifiable as a Chinatown. As well as promoting notions of multiculturalism, the council recognised this proposal as an opportunity to revitalise a part of the city that had for many years been perceived as an undesirable ethnic ghetto. Emulating the success and popularity of their North American counterparts, the novelty of a Chinatown would also attract tourist dollars to the city. The Dixon Street Chinese Committee, formed by business owners in Chinatown, represented the Chinese community in negotiations with the council, and was uniformly in favour of the refurbishment plan. The removal of the fruit and vegetable markets to Flemington had created a business vacuum, and the Dixon Street Chinese Committee recognised the need to attract a more diverse patronage. Together, they formulated a plan that aimed to attract non-Chinese locals, visiting international tourists and ‘the community at large’.
It was agreed that the refurbishment would take place, with the council paying for two thirds of the costs, and the Chinese community raising the remaining amount. The Dixon Street Chinese Committee and the council enlisted the honorary services of architect Henry Tsang who, in his own words, regarded the criteria for his selection as based on the fact that he understood the community, he spoke the same language and would ‘do it for nothing’. In the design plan submitted by Tsang, the design philosophy was to:

transform Dixon Street to a pedestrian mall with a distinctive Chinese character [so] that ... the plaza would attract the public to utilise the space and experience the ‘Orient’ of the City of Sydney ... [The] public who came to dine are provided with a pleasant environment ... [and] the restaurant and shop owners are not inconvenienced.

In 1979, Dixon Street was closed to traffic and became a permanent pedestrian mall. On 15 August 1980 the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Alderman Nelson Meers, officially opened Chinatown. The establishment of the ‘official’ Chinatown was not, however, without its own contradictions and complications. As Kay Anderson points out in relation to Vancouver’s Chinatown, ‘Chinatown [is] not a neutral term, referring somehow unproblematically to the physical presence of people from China’. Sydney’s Chinatown was problematic in terms of issues and relationships: the role of tourism in the creation of the renovated Chinatown; tensions between the tourist, cultural and other functions of Chinatown; issues of authenticity and how they could be applied to Chinatown; the influence of other Chinatowns locally and globally; inherent notions of ethnicity and difference used in the formation of a ‘Chinatown’ identity; power relations and ownership as negotiated by the council and the Chinese community; and Chinatown’s position in terms of changing notions of multiculturalism.

The diverse nature of the Chinese community in Sydney meant that it was virtually impossible to represent as a single or unified entity. Since the decline of the white Australia policy, the number of immigrants of Chinese descent rose exponentially. Unlike other ethnic groups in Australia, however, many of those who identified as Chinese were part of a diaspora that emigrated from all over the Asia-Pacific region. Despite living, sometimes for a few generations, in countries outside of China, many immigrants felt a strong notion of ‘being’ Chinese and of continuing Chinese cultural practices, regardless of their prior country of residence. Consequently, Chinese immigrants from Vietnam, Malaysia, Hong Kong and other countries in the region came to Australia with strong Chinese cultural and linguistic ties. The Chinese community was united by some common elements of culture and language but was fragmented by the diasporic experience.

James Buzard asserts that tourists ‘remake whole regions in their homogenous image’, and nowhere was this more evident than in the refurbishing of Chinatown. The promotion of tourism to local and international visitors was clearly one of the main aims of the council and the Dixon Street Chinese Committee. By 1997, Chinatown boasted the ninth highest visitation rate in Sydney and, being the most visited city, this translated into the ninth highest visitation rate in Australia. Attracting tourists to Chinatown was a great success. Henry Tsang and King Fong, who both served as secretary to the Dixon Street
Chinese Committee, acknowledged the influence of other Chinatowns in shaping their vision of Sydney’s Chinatown. In his design of the streetscape, Tsang cited the influence of other Chinatowns in North America as determining particular physical features of Chinatown — including the ceremonial archways that were heavily featured in Chinatowns around the world.29 Fong agreed that Sydney’s Chinatown should be easily identifiable to international visitors as a ‘Chinatown’.30 In following the conventions of other Chinatowns, however, little thought was given to the meanings engendered in these representations. By virtue of its name, Chinatown laid claim to being a representation of the Chinese. The dilemma posed by any form of physical representation is that it creates a concrete, static image of a culture which can never be truly representative of the fluidity of that culture. In terms of Chinatown, it crystallised an image of the Chinese as a unified cultural entity that necessarily masked and obscured the complexities and the dynamism of divergent and constantly evolving cultures.

In the refurbishment of Chinatown, the power of the tourist to reshape an ethnic enclave into something more acceptable was evident. Before refurbishment, it serviced the local Sydney Chinese community, providing fresh produce, specialty Asian goods, authentic Chinese meals and Chinese-speaking services, but few non-Chinese would have ventured into the district. The council and the Dixon Street Chinese Committee aimed at projecting over this precinct a more exciting, user-friendly version of Chinatown that would appeal to non-Chinese visitors. The commodification of ethnicity as a marketing tool for tourism has been well documented in developing nations, where the past is reconstructed and performed for tourist consumption in the present.31 Similarly, the reshaping of ethnicity in Chinatown demanded a reconstruction of an imaginary past and a unified cultural identity, which most of the ethnic Chinese in Australia would never have experienced. The use of antiquated ‘traditional Chinese’ symbols to represent the Chinese community — ceremonial archways, lions, lanterns and pagoda style shopfronts — reclaimed a common Chinese heritage that could instantly be identified as ‘Chinese’ by non-Chinese people. These reshaped images of Chinese ethnicity, especially the ceremonial archway, became a mnemonic for Chinatown: a unified, sterilised identity for the Chinese community reconstructed from an imaginary past that elided the complex heterogeneity of Chinese communities.32 The acceptance of this simplistic, reconstructed identity by visitors, and the notion that their presence somehow contributes to a multicultural society, overlooks the fact that Chinatown failed to represent anything but a sterile, pre-digested version of a culture which omitted diversity and complexity. In the endless reproduction of Chinatown images, it has ceased to be representative of anything other than itself. It refers neither to China, nor to the Chinese people living within a multicultural society, and has become a simulacrum — a copy without an original.33 Chinatown was transformed into a hyper-real product of postmodernity.

The da mien or ceremonial archways that stood at both ends of Dixon Street were the identifiable structures that demarcated Chinatown. In the foundations of the archways, Tsang located the real meaning of the gates in their traditional symbolism: gold coins from China, symbolic of investment in Australia rather than the removal of assets that previously took place; sand and pebbles from
China, symbolic of setting down roots in Australia; and the golden tortoise that represented the good luck and long life that the Chinese community would bring to Australia. Tsang insisted that the existence of Chinatown was a positive commitment to Australia: it said, ‘we will contribute’, it was a symbol of Australia’s multiculturalism and a symbolic centre for the Chinese community. Despite this obvious symbolism, however, Tsang’s reading of Chinatown is ambiguous: it does not locate the contradiction that exists between these traditional symbols and the tourist marketing of the site. As a member of the community and a former deputy lord mayor, Tsang’s failure to acknowledge the tension in these disparate roles is indicative of the contradictions inherent in negotiating the meanings of Chinatown, and his own position in representing both the council and the Chinese community. The ceremonial archways stand as a cipher representing the identities that are encapsulated in Chinatown: a commodified cultural product, a remodelled tourist package, and an attempt, however limited, at representing Chinese traditions.

Chinatown’s role as a tourist attraction has increasingly been seen as its main function. In an SBS interview, Sydney Lord Mayor Frank Sartor referred to Chinatown as a ‘critical tourist precinct, with unique characteristics’. Despite Tsang’s musings about the traditional symbolism of Chinatown, it is clear that the tourist function is beginning to outweigh other functions. In its pre-tourist incarnation, Chinatown evolved as a site of early Chinese settlement. Forced to settle in the cheapest and poorest parts of Sydney, Chinatown grew out of white hostility to Chinese settlement. By the time of its refurbishment, the dispersion of the now larger and more diverse Chinese community relegated Chinatown’s significance as a community centre to a merely symbolic role.

Numerous exposés of Chinatown of the late 1970s and 80s reproduced notions about ‘old Chinatown’ and defined it as an exotic and mysterious part of multicultural Australia. The manner in which Chinatown was described conveyed a sense that before Chinatown was ‘discovered’ by mainstream society it had few, if any, redeeming features. Marion MacDonald described old Chinatown in a most unflattering way:

All that seemed left in its dim streets were the natural inhabitants of an urban badland: small ‘mixed businesses’, stocked with goods of dubious provenance, fat-fried fast-food outlets, pinball alleys, left wing book shops and a cluster of cheap Chinese restaurants dishing up short soup and chow mein in the ambience of the interrogation cell, their unseductive windows interspersed by dark doorways from which issued the soft plop and clack of — one imagined — mysterious, and possibly illegal, oriental games.

This description of Chinatown reinforced what would have been accepted ideas about Chinatown and Chinese people. All of the conventional stereotypes were present: the ‘inhabitants’ of ‘dim streets’, the ‘dubious’ foods, the despotic oriental allusions of the ‘interrogation cell’, and of course the ‘mysterious and illegal oriental’ gambling games. Ironically the Chinatown she described, was probably the more organic, lived Chinatown. Articles like ‘Orient Espresso’ — from one of the many ‘lifestyle magazine’ guides to Chinatown in the 1990s — moved to accept it into mainstream culture, and yet recreated notions of difference that prevented this. The juxtaposition of a new Chinatown that was ‘young, fun and
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funky’ with the old Chinatown that was ‘quaint’ and like ‘an ancient Oriental
enclave’ served to perpetuate essentialist notions of race. The old Chinatown is
constructed as a place of mystery that has finally been superseded by a more
acceptable repackaged Chinatown.

In multicultural societies, the existence of a Chinatown had generally been
accepted and embraced uncritically as an indication of a triumph over ignorance
and racism. In her work on Vancouver’s Chinatown, Kay Anderson explores
Chinatown as a ‘site through which white society’s concepts about the Chinese are
constituted and reproduced’.38 Her reading of Chinatown examines the racialising
notions of difference that form the fundamental framework for the existence of
Chinatowns: ‘the process of transforming physical and cultural features into
identities, of classifying people into historically specific categories such as
Chinese, Aboriginal, black and white’.39 In relation to Sydney’s Chinatown, the
‘power of white Australians to define and fashion Chinatown in conformity with
their European image of a Chinese race’ rendered it a site of orientalised fantasy.40

The images of Chinatown as portrayed in media and film continued this notion
of the oriental dichotomy: exotic and mysterious on one hand, and sinister and
criminal on the other. The construction of Chinatown as a ‘voyeuristic object’, an
oppositional ‘other’, legitimated the authority and dominance of the west.41 In his
work on New York’s Chinatown, Jan Lin contests that while these were not the
sole images of Chinatown, other images — like the ‘benevolent “model minority”
image’ — are just as blinkered and homogenising as the more negative
stereotypes.42 Whether positive or negative, stereotypes continue the orientalising
process by allowing classification and definition by the west while circumventing
diversity and difference within the community. Chinatown therefore remained, in
its essence, a western construction of Chinese people: the product of assimilation
and multiculturalism.

While they offer a useful critique of notions of ethnicity and race in relation to
the concept of Chinatown, Lin’s and Anderson’s ideas became problematic when
applied wholly to Sydney’s Chinatown. The complicity of members of the
Chinese community in the design and construction of Chinatown created an
interesting tension that complicates theories of western domination. Particularly
problematic is the fact that the design of the Dixon Street Chinese Committee’s
chosen architect, himself Chinese, reproduced orientalised or assimilationist
notions of Chinatown. In a joint decision by the council and the Dixon Street
Chinese Committee, the appearance of Chinatown was deliberately designed to
conform to accepted notions of what a Chinatown should be. The Dixon Street
Chinese Committee exercised its agency in exploiting these notions of Chinatown
for profit, undermining the premise that these notions were imposed solely by the
west. The reconstructed identity, though defined and constructed by the west,
became a partially self-imposed stereotype for the sake of economic gain.

Buried beneath these layers of meaning, Chinatown’s history remains a
complex web of ambiguous and competing identities. Concerns have been voiced
more recently over its future, as the area has been perceived by many people in the
community to be in decline. A 1997 report by David Yenken, which was
commissioned by the council, confirmed claims of a decline in Dixon Street by
‘superficial observation’ that the street did ‘not look very alive and vital’.43 What
had been designated as the heart of Chinatown seemed to be ‘languishing’ in comparison to other retail areas in the district, like Sussex and Thomas Streets, which were ‘bustling’.44 Yenken provided several reasons for this decline: the influence of the opening of the casino; draining of retail expenditure to gambling; and competition from more modern forms of Chinese restaurants and shops in the precinct.45 His recommendations for revitalising Dixon Street included improved lighting facilities, improvement of the streetscape and increased attention to issues of public safety.46

In response to this report, the council undertook a round of new refurbishments to update and modernise Chinatown. Once again the council consulted members of the Chinese community, who were leading business people with commercial interests in the area, and designs for a more modern facelift were accepted. New modern lighting and seating replaced the old lanterns and pagodas. Dixon Street and surrounding areas were repaved with granite pavers and trees were planted. This new image for Chinatown divided the Chinese community, with claims that the refurbishment had bought about a downturn in business due to bad feng shui.47 Lord Mayor Frank Sartor claimed that the feng shui was not at all the issue and that the backlash by some of the Chinese community was due to height restrictions in Chinatown — their comments were politically motivated.48 The issue of Chinatown’s height restrictions dominated the council election campaign and with the 11 September 1999 council election Chinatown entered a new phase in its history: the movement into mainstream politics.49

The old ‘Chinesefied’ Chinatown had given way to new notions of identity. Of the original 1980 refurbishment, all that remained by 1999 were the ceremonial archways and lions; the new features involved high tech lighting and modern understated streetscape design, which modernised Chinatown’s image in keeping with the times, asserted King Fong.50 Both Fong and Henry Tsang agreed that, to update Chinatown’s image, some break with tradition was necessary to cater to the market that was now utilising Chinatown’s facilities. When the issue of feng shui was raised with Tsang and Fong, they replied that members of the Chinese community no longer necessarily believed in the old superstitions and that abandoning them was part of the modernisation process. This stance indicates a significant move away from the original refurbishment process, where a Chinese geomancer was consulted on every part of the refurbishment.51

The ownership of Chinatown has always been a complex question. Regardless, the agenda of the council and the Dixon Street Chinese Committee, at the time of its official opening the refurbishment of Chinatown represented real recognition for a community that had been alienated from the mainstream for many years. The fact that Chinatown was a place where the council would invest money was a matter of pride and signalled a move towards acceptance for the Chinese community, but it did not translate into ownership of the site. As the Chinese population grew and spread throughout all of Sydney, Chinatown became less of a base for the community and more of a symbolic centre, depending increasingly on non-local, non-Chinese patronage. The rhetoric proffered by Effie Pantechis, an independent candidate for the council, suggested that Chinatown no longer belonged solely to the Chinese, but to all of Sydney and all of Australia, inferring that all Australians should have a say in its future.52 Chinatown’s patronage was changing to mostly overseas tourists and younger people.
The growth of suburban Chinatowns had a very visible impact on Sydney’s Chinatown: Chinese people, especially older people, no longer needed to venture into the city for goods and services. In suburban Chinatowns, like Chatswood, Hurstville and Cabramatta, Asian grocery stores supplied all of the items that used to be available only in the central city Chinatown. The movement of Chinese business away from Chinatown to smaller urban centres was evident in the changing nature of retail stores in Chinatown. Duty free stores, gift shops and fashion houses, which catered for a new, more fashionable younger market and for overseas tourists in search of bargains, replaced most of the grocery stores.

Market City, the development of the Paddy’s Market site, was indicative of the new demographic that was now utilising Chinatown. As the Tokyo and Hong Kong styles became increasingly fashionable, Chinatown’s fashion shops became prominent suppliers of new and experimental fashion. The establishment of Chinese-speaking services in smaller centres also downgraded Chinatown’s function as a service centre for Chinese-speaking clientele. In terms of Chinese-speaking businesses listed in the 1999 NSW Chinese Business Telephone Directory, less than thirty per cent of accountants listed practised out of Chinatown, and an even smaller seventeen per cent of medical practitioners were located in Chinatown.

Chinatown’s official endorsement by the council began an ambiguous history, which included the adoption of easily identifiable cultural icons and familiar expressions of Chinese ethnicity as mediated through popular media images of North American Chinatowns. The decision by the council to institute an official Chinatown was motivated by the multicultural discourses that were gaining currency in Australian society at the time and the need to demonstrate the council’s commitment to multicultural policies, while simultaneously marketing this multiculturalism to non-Chinese visitors to the area. In the minds of the council and, to some extent, business owners in Chinatown, the tourist dimension came to dominate Chinatown’s identity. The tension is now less about Chinatown being a cultural centre or a tourist attraction, but what form this attraction should take.

Unravelling the fabric of Chinatown’s identity between 1970 and 2000 has been a complex process of isolating the disparate, often paradoxical, elements that have contributed to the fabric of Chinatown’s identity; establishing a single, neat, identity through this process would only serve to obscure the competing tensions inherent in its history. As one of the major pedestrian corridors to Darling Harbour, it was clear that tourism would dominate Chinatown in relation to the 2000 Olympic Games. Although still a symbolic centre for the Chinese community, Chinatown has increasingly became the creature of the council and commercial interests, and it has not regained its function as a cultural centre or as the expression of Australian-Chinese identities that it could have been. Notions of authenticity derived from western images of Chinatown transformed it into a simulacrum, a pop-culture icon that ceased to refer to anything other than itself, which was not indicative of the heterogeneity of the Australian-Chinese community in Sydney.
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2 ibid, pp 67–68.
3 ibid, p 68.
4 The most recent of these studies is Shirley Fitzgerald’s Red Tape, Gold Scissors. Other texts include C Y Choi’s Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1975; and Eric Rolls’ Sojourners, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, 1992. These studies tend to focus more on the earlier history of Chinese migration and settlement in Australia.
6 ibid, p 93.
7 Fitzgerald, op cit, p 41.
11 ibid, pp 174–175.
14 ibid, pp 30–31.
17 City of Sydney Archives (COSA), Proceedings of Council (PC), 22 February 1971, p 66.
18 Interview with King Fong, 12 October 1999.
19 Interview with Henry Tsang, 6 October 1999.
20 ibid.
21 ibid.
23 COSA, PC, 9 April 1979, p 217.
26 Fitzgerald, op cit, p 3.
29 Interview with Henry Tsang, 6 October 1999.
30 Interview with King Fong, 12 October 1999.
32 Buzard, op cit, p 11.
34 Interview with Henry Tsang, 6 October 1999.
35 Insight, SBS broadcasting, 9 September 1999.
38 Anderson op cit, p 4.
40 ibid, p 138.
41 Lin, op cit, p 172.
42 ibid, pp 21–22, 172.
43 Yenken, op cit, p 23.
44 ibid, p 23.
45 ibid, p 23.
46 ibid, p 24.
48 ibid, p 12.
49 Insight, SBS broadcasting, 9 September 1999.
50 Interview with King Fong, 12 October 1999.
51 Collier, op cit, p 5.
52 Insight, SBS Broadcasting, 9 September 1999.
53 Interview with King Fong, 12 October 1999.